

**Diverse Voices in Crime Fiction: Expanding Creative  
Narratives with reference to the Absence of the Teen  
Voice in Adult Crime Fiction**

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## Acknowledgements

Who would have thought that a working class lassie from Scotland would submit her doctoral thesis at the age of 57?

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## Abstract

This practice-led creative writing PhD is in two parts. The creative element consists of the adult crime fiction (CF) novel *Unseen Evil*. This is the sixth book in my DI Gus McGuire police procedural series, set in contemporary Bradford. Through chapters of first person narration from teen characters' viewpoints, *Unseen Evil* uses the investigation into a boy's murder to give voice to diverse teen characters and illuminate issues pertaining to them, with particular reference to digital-age technology.

The exegesis contextualises the creative element by interrogating the publishing industry's commitment to expanding narratives amidst ongoing discussions around diversity and inclusion. Chapter 1 explores the writing process involved in creating *Unseen Evil*, with specific reference to the wide-ranging influences impacting on creative choices made.

Chapter 2 establishes why expansive narratives in the creative industries contribute to a wider understanding of cultural and societal issues and illustrates that inclusion and diversity within the publishing industry is lacking, thus highlighting the importance of increased representation of disenfranchised groups. This chapter demonstrates that the CF genre performs no better than the wider industry in promoting diverse narratives from a diverse representation of authors, and identifies the need to:

- recruit employees and authors from diverse groups,
- ensure that published narratives are responsibly expansive,
- encourage authors, specifically CF authors, to represent within their narratives a diverse cast of characters.

Chapter 3 establishes CF as the genre which documents social history and gives voice to disenfranchised and marginalised communities by exploring issues affecting them and giving voice to their lived experiences. However, this chapter also illuminates the absence of teen lived experiences within CF narratives and demonstrates the importance of increasing

representation of issues pertaining to teen mental health, criminality, use/misuse of digital technology, and more, within the genre.

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## Abbreviations

BAME	Black Asian Minority Ethnic
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CF	Crime Fiction
CW	Creative Writing
DCMS	Department of Digital Culture Media and Sport
D&I	Diversity and Inclusion
DT	Digital Technology
DW	Dark Web
HO	Home Office
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender, Queer plus
Loc	Location (equivalent of page number for ebook reference)
LTU	Leeds Trinity University
MH	Mental Health
MOJ	Ministry of Justice
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PIWDIS	Publishing Industry Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Survey
POV	Point of View
PRH	Penguin Random House
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SM	Social Media
UK	United Kingdom
YA	Young Adult
YJB	Youth Justice Board

**Part One: Unseen Evil, an adult crime fiction novel**

# **UNSEEN EVIL**

*Social Media can be the death of you ...*

*DI Gus McGuire Book 6*

**BY**

**LIZ MISTRY**

## *PROLOGUE*

### *MARCH*

#### *The Zodiac Club*

**W**e had to have a place to meet. Somewhere we wouldn't be noticed and just by luck, while I was exploring, I found it. An old grocer's store on a side road. No *For Sale* sign, no indication anyone was interested in it... Nothing. It was easy to get in.

The shop faced a busy side street, but the windows were covered by a metal shutter with 'Bradford City' spray painted in black. Some smart-ass had crossed out the 'C' of City and replaced it with a 'T'. How funny. There was no way in from the front, so I wandered around the back. It looked promising, so I waited until dark before returning. The shop had an enclosed yard at the rear with a heavy gate hanging half off its hinges, but still gave enough cover, so I could sneak inside without being seen. But, more importantly, the properties behind it were also empty... apart from the druggies and tramps I'd spotted when I did my recce. The gate was easy to fix. A sturdy lock and another on the door to the property and we were sorted. Our own private indoor space.

I love it. It's quiet enough to be discreet, but not too difficult to get to. The headquarters we call it... HQ. We've taken time to make the inside comfortable with what my mum calls 'soft furnishings'. Hmph, raggedy cushions and an old mat. But we like it. It'd been pretty scuzzy, but after a while you get used to the dried piss smell and the mould. We swept up the crap that the mingers left behind, but kept a few wooden crates handy for tables. Nobody sees us coming and going because we're invisible. Today is important. This is the day we complete our manifesto.

'Neck it! Neck it! Neck it!'

They're like nobs at a football match, yelling and lolling about on the rug, sprawling over the cushions, intent on getting lathered. In the light from our torches and the candles we nicked from home, their faces are eerie and pale. Leo is the most pissed – dark eyes all sparkly, cheeks flushed, hands clapping in time with the chants. Pisces is less so. Picking those oozing pussy spots and licking cracked lips – yuk. Makes me want to barf, but I cover it up... for now.

Instead, I move my phone, taking in our handiwork... all this will go down in history... saved for posterity. I smile. I remember when I used to muddle that word with posterior... but that was a while ago.

We'd selected the middle room, the storage area, for our HQ. No windows, so our lights can't be seen from the back or the front of the shop, and we can make a bit of noise. It's big enough for us and we bolt it shut when we leave.

The things pinned to the wall show the progress we've made. A timeline of charts, newspaper clippings, photos... Each one evidence. Each one a piece of the plan. I leave them to their drunken silliness and strolling round the room, I zoom in on my favourites. It might be clichéd to have a crime wall like in those crappy detective shows, but I like it. And after all, what I say goes. Besides, I need to document their part in all of this. No fun if I don't set the others up, is it? When everything is over, *my* recordings, my notes and the bodies will show how clever I am.

I zoom in on the list:

<del>Sumaira Begum</del>
<del>Shannon Oyando</del>
<del>Billy Clark Thompson</del>
<del>Becky Easton</del>
<del>Imran Sajid</del>
<del>Suki Singh</del>

The pissheads giggling behind me don't realise what I'm doing. My stomach flips with excitement. It's so satisfying to see the names all crossed out. Beside the list I've attached the first lot of evidence... the photos. Sumaira Begum, when she found the bacon in her locker... that was brilliant. She was crying and yelling as if someone was stuffing the rasher down her throat. It served her right telling Ms Copley about me smoking in the bogs. The one of Shannon Oyando with her tits out – 'cept they weren't hers – we'd photoshopped over hers, printed them out, and stuck them up in the school loos... makes me laugh!

The other two are still necking the voddy. Leo's flushed now and Pisces, all bleeding pox and nervous eyes, is getting there too. I'll call the meeting to order in a bit, but for now, I record the last few items... the newspaper clippings... Fame! I love the way we've moved on... how we've developed. Progress... you can't whack it.

November

**Local Teacher Convicted of Grooming Students.**

Craig Borthwick, a teacher at a local secondary school, pictured here entering court, today received a ten-year sentence after images showing him booking into a low budget hotel with a fourteen-year-old student were anonymously uploaded to the Internet.

We did that! We made that happen. That snooty little bitch got what she deserved when that picture of her snogging Mr Borthwick went viral. That taught her. The way she dumped Leo, like a sack of hot potatoes, all the time on her phone sexting that dirty old perv. Served her right... served him right, too.

January

An unnamed Bradford teenager has been found dead in his bedroom in a suspected suicide. The fifteen-year-old's parents claim their son was being bullied on social media... a police investigation is ongoing.

Stupid bloody Billy Clark – Tossler. Couldn't take it. *Facebook* shut his page... it was so funny. We all saw the dick pics I sent from his profile. That taught him to make sure he logged out. Couldn't believe that he did that, though. Topped himself... what sort of sick shit is that?

I end the recording, after sweeping round the room, focussing on my drunken giggling friends. Got to make sure I have the evidence. Who knows how this'll pan out? Besides, I love replaying it all back at home – and it's good to keep the other two on their toes. A bit of a bargaining tool if I ever need it. Of course, when I upload this, the crap'll hit the fan. The world will know what we've done and see that I'm the leader. I'll be famous. Can't wait! Flopping down on the cushions between them, I grab the bottle. No point in letting them become too rat arsed. This is our tenth meeting and today we'll up the stakes.

I think back to the time I gave us all our code names. They giggled like the idiots they are, and I had to get stroppy with them before they kept to the rule about only using our code names in private. I'm *Zodiac*, of course. I chose that because of *The Zodiac Killer*. Not only one of the world's most famous serial killers, but one who has never been caught. I chose well. It suits me because I've no intention of being captured – no chance. I'll end this on my own terms – messy and full of rage!

Next came Leo. That one took a lot of research. Good old Google. My heart beats faster when I remember how many people like me are out there. But Nathan Leopold Jr was an excellent choice. Poor little rich kid, working with his mate and thinking he could escape justice... *how did that work out, Leo?* My Leo doesn't have the same brains, but, well, you gotta work with what you've got. I admit I had to push it a bit with Pisces, but I got there in the end. Albert Fish - a cannibal and grotesque serial killer. A bit sordid. I look at my friends. My Pisces doesn't have the same guts, but again, it's only a name. It makes me laugh that they don't understand it, though. The joke's on them... just like I planned. The joke will *always* be on them.

I look at them and wait. That's my strategy... let one of them take the lead for now. If either opens up the subject, it'll be easier. That's why I chose these two... gormless... impressionable... the exact opposite from me because I choose to make an impression.

Pisces keeps looking at the floor, head bowed, leg jittering. I wish the idea of a shower was higher on Pisces's list of priorities... that's why the other kids are always slagging off the dirty git. No one likes smelly kids with crappy clothes. I sidle a little further away, don't want to catch anything, do I?

The game was the easiest sell I had to make. Who doesn't love a game, after all? The beauty of it is... it wasn't my idea... or was it? Who knows? Will we ever know?

All I'm saying is that planting seeds is the simplest part, nurturing them? Now, that's hard. I crave to press my fingernails into Pisces' knee. Make the jittering stop. It's getting on my nerves big time. I want to yell, *'I've arranged everything, brought all the equipment, taken all the risks. What more do you want?'*

But, I don't. This has to work. I must play a blinder... one of my aces. Gotta keep the minions on-board... keep them in line. It's like that stupid game my mum used to watch... *The Weakest Link*. No points for guessing who's the weakest link here. Not rocket science, is it?

I recall when we upped the stakes last time and I sip some vodka. Not enough to get me pissed, just enough to smooth my edges...

We'd sat down, the three of us. We were all excited, but I kept my excitement hidden as I gave the envelopes to Leo. 'Lay them out.'

We'd played the game before, but this time it was going to be different. This time we were moving up a level. Only they didn't know it yet.

Leo took a swig of the fizzy plonk and handed the dregs to me. I passed it to Pisces. They'd already downed one bottle and were at that giddy phase where they'd do anything. I only needed to sow the seeds and let them take it from there. 'You finish it. I've had loads already.'

As Pisces swigged the last mouthful, Leo made a big show of shuffling the envelopes before laying them in a circle with a gap between each.

Arms spread, Leo grinned, all lopsided and stupid. ‘Ta dah’... and promptly burped, which of course set the two of them off giggling again. *Give me strength!*

There were five names. They’d chosen them, not me, but they didn’t get that. They were so willing to please me.

‘Leeeet’s get this party started.’ Pisces sang out of tune and out of rhythm... Story of their lives... and placed the empty bottle in the middle of the circle.

‘Go on then, Leo. Your turn to spin.’ Pisces leant forward, legs crossed, keen to discover who it would be.

Leo looked to me as if asking permission, and I nodded. ‘Go on, your turn. Make it a good one.’

Pisces, clearly well trolled, chanted, ‘Spin it! Spin it! Spin it!’

The bottle spun and ended up dead between two envelopes. ‘Oh, let me do it again. I didn’t spin it hard enough.’

Again, with the, ‘Spin it! Spin it! Spin it!’

Didn’t matter to me how many times they spun it as long as, by the end, we had a name... and we did.

Still grinning, I look at them. Leo’s buzzing, but Pisces looks all pukey and scared.

‘Don’t think we should do this anymore.’ Pisces picks at the craters again, leg going nineteen to the dozen.

For fuck’s sake! Time for a little brain mess!

‘*You* came up with this plan. *You* told us how much you needed to do this. It was your idea... you don’t regret it, do you? I mean, you got what you wanted. Remember you wrote it down? You spun the bottle, and it landed right there... *you* chose it. You made all the arrangements. All we did was be your friends...’ I avoid looking at either of them and keep my head angled to the floor, don’t want them to see the rage. I need to play this tight.

‘Weren’t my idea... it weren’t!’

My head jerks up. I glare straight at Pisces. ‘Well, it sure as fuck wasn’t mine *or* Leo’s. You wanted to punish them. You said so. That right, Leo?’

Always up for a bit of bullying, Leo grins. ‘Yip. You can’t wiggle out of it now.’

I love the way Pisces shudders, like Leo’s landed a punch or something. ‘Didn’t want him to die though.’

I snort. ‘Yeah, right, after what he did to you? Billy was a nob. And he was always picking on you.’

Leo chips in, ‘Yeah, Pisces, he was. Billy was a dick to you... and to everyone else too.’

Still with the fingers scraping over smears of blood, linking up the spots like a kid’s dot to dot.

‘What if someone else dies? What if it happens again?’

Leo glances at me, wanting to be my bestie and in a gruff, *I’m the big I am* voice says, ‘Well, maybe that’s what *will* happen. They deserve it. Look at the names. Think what they’ve done to us.’

And simple as that, we’re sorted... the stakes are raised... Game on!



## CHAPTER 1

*Summer*

*Sunday*

Gus rolled onto his back and stretched, enjoying the release of tension across his shoulders and up his spine. The biggest bonus of being in a steady relationship was making love as the sun rose, accompanied by tweeting birds, followed by the prospect of a mug of fresh coffee... and time with Patti. Despite the early hour, the oppressive temperature was almost overwhelming. Even with the windows open, not a single breath wafted the curtains. The fan, whirring at the bottom of the bed, was the only reprieve from the blanket of heat that pressed down on him. Sprawled out on the mattress, a thin cotton sheet pulled up to his waist, and with the tang of their lovemaking in the air, Gus' body tingled with a soft post-coital glow.

Through the bedroom door, the sounds of her pottering about downstairs, talking to Bingo, and singing along to the radio, made him smile. Patti was the worst singer imaginable. Totally tone deaf, yet addicted to karaoke. Gus loved watching her as she belted out classics like 'I Will Survive', with more enthusiasm than skill. The contrast with her usually reserved, dependable, head teacher image was only one of the many things he was growing to love about her. *Hell, there it is; the 'L' word.* He expelled a long, low breath. *Why is someone like her with someone like me?* Gus did what he always did and shoved the question away, ignoring the persistent thought that if Alice were around, she'd tell him to grow a pair and let Patti know how he felt. However, he wasn't ready for that... not yet.

With a pillow positioned comfortably behind his back, he sighed. He missed his detective sergeant's sass, her irreverent, bouncy, say-it-as-it-is attitude and, deep down, he acknowledged that the Alice he once knew, may never return. Last time he'd seen her, she'd looked decimated. Yep, that was the only way to describe her... decimated and damaged. But what had been worse was the emptiness in her eyes—as if her experiences had stripped all the vitality from her soul, leaving a black hole in its place. With an effort he pushed the maudlin thoughts from his mind; those were best explored from the safety of his psychiatrist's couch.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee drifted upstairs accompanied by another aroma—croissants? Warmed-up croissants? *Oh my God! How much more indulgence can a man take?* A whirlwind of white fur tornadoed through the door and dived onto the bed, all wagging tail

and excited yelps, landing south of Gus' groin. As he moved Bingo to a less dangerous position, Patti, wearing one of his old T-shirts, walked in, carrying a tray and headed straight for Gus. She held it under his nose, long enough for him to snatch a croissant, and with a mischievous grin on her face she said, 'Miss me?'

Gus snorted through a mouthful of pastry. 'Didn't miss your singing. Surprised the windows are still intact. Justin Bieber would kill you if he heard the way you murdered that.'

Patti laughed. 'You're just jealous... and it wasn't Bieber anyway, it was Paloma Faith's 'Make Your Own Kind of Music'.'

'Yeah, Patti, *music* being the operative word not a bloody racket.'

After placing the tray down next to the bed, she poked her elbow into his side. 'Cheeky.' She turned to the puppy, running her fingers through his fur, making his small body quiver in delight. 'Mummy's an excellent singer, isn't she, Bingo?'

Delighted with the attention, Bingo licked her skin with the same enthusiasm he reserved for Gus' mum, which allowed Gus enough time to recover from the 'Mummy' reference. The implication that he and Patti were Bingo's parents made them seem like a family, and Gus didn't know what to do with that idea. Somehow it gave him hope but, after Gabriella and then Sadia, he'd learned to be cautious.

He pulled Bingo away from her. 'Hmph, what does a guy have to do to get some coffee around here? Lick your face?'

Patti punched him none too lightly on the arm. 'Watch it! You're lucky I made breakfast in this heat, and, just so you know, any man worth his salt would stand by the headboard wafting a massive fan over their girlfriend, not make unnecessary demands.' She picked up something from the tray. 'Oh, nearly forgot, this was on the mat downstairs. Love letter?'

Gus stared at the envelope she held, and some of the morning's magic dissipated. The envelope was identical to the others; blue, similar size, no postmark this time though. He'd thought... hoped... he'd seen the last of them. There had been four, starting soon after the Izzie Dimou murder earlier in the year, but none for a month. After the second one, he'd found himself at odd moments looking into the shadows for signs of being watched. Don't say they've started up again? A coil of unease formed in his stomach, spreading across his chest. He could do without this crap—especially when things were becoming more settled.

His eyes drifted to Patti and snippets from the previous letters crashed in, piercing him. '*Your girlfriend's pretty... very pretty!*'

As he dragged his gaze away from Patti, Bingo rolled onto his back, revealing an expanse of white belly. ‘... *and your dog’s so sweet. Soooo tiny! I could squeeze and squeeze and squeeze him.*’

Sensing Gus’ mood, Bingo whined, his eyes full of concern as he looked at his master. In one fluid movement, the dog flipped over to his front and laid his snout on Gus’ thigh, following through with an enthusiastic lick. Gus exhaled and patted his head. There had been nothing overtly threatening in the previous letters... still his ‘fan mail’ was now being delivered direct to his home—*hand-delivered*. He squashed the urge to jump out of bed and scan the street through the bedroom window. Instead, he continued to look at the letter. His stalker had probably posted it overnight, yet uneasiness settled over Gus. His ‘admirer’ was getting too cocky for his liking.

A slight frown appeared on Patti’s forehead as she thrust the offending item closer to him. ‘Go on, take it, then. It won’t bite.’

‘Gimme a second...’ Gus turned, pulled open the top drawer of his bedside cabinet, and extracted an evidence bag. He kept his voice steady. ‘Pop it in there.’

Eyes wide, she did as he asked. ‘You going to tell me what that’s all about?’ With a nervous laugh she added, ‘Oh, and while you’re at it, why do you keep evidence bags in the bedroom?’

With a smile at her attempt to lighten the situation, Gus sealed the bag. ‘I’ve received other letters like this, but until now they’ve been delivered to my work. There’s never anything threatening in them, but the fact that this one landed on my doorstep on a Sunday without a postmark ups the stakes.’

He risked a quick grin. ‘As for the bags, I have them all over the house—copper’s habit, I suppose.’ He reached for her hand. ‘I’m sorry, Patti. Sorry to drag you into work stuff, but can you come down to The Fort to get printed, for elimination purposes?’

Patti tutted and pulled her fingers away, a frown spreading across her forehead. It was like a slap in the face, but Gus couldn’t blame her. Why should she have to put up with this invasion of privacy? If it freaked him out to imagine his stalker creeping about outside, possibly whilst he and Patti were making love, who knew how she must feel? It was this sort of thing that made it hard to be a copper’s partner and he and Patti were still in the early stages of their relationship.

But she wasn’t done. ‘Damned if I’m letting my drink go cold, because some idiot’s fixated on you. Fingerprints’ll have to wait. I’m having my breakfast first.’ She poured two mugs of coffee and offered Gus another pastry. ‘Eat up.’ Mug in hand, she lowered her tone. ‘You can tell me these things, you know? I don’t need protecting. If we’re together, then you have to share the shit with me, not block me out like you did with all the Alice and Gabriella stuff.’

A weight settled in his rib cage and expanded. This always happened when he reflected on his last big case. He recognised the sensation and, taking a deep breath, he pulled his shoulders back, forcing the feeling away. Patti was right. If they were to take things to the next level, then he had to share. The thing was, he wasn't very good at that. He studied her face. She was smiling, her brown eyes reassuring and calm.

The lingering tingle in his chest dissipated. Gus grabbed a croissant and munched. Just when he thought he'd got her sussed, Patti did something that made him love her even more. This time, he allowed the 'L' word to linger in his mind before grabbing his mug and drinking.

'What do they say?'

'Eh?'

Patti laughed. 'The letters, what else? What's in them?'

'I'll show you them when we get to The Fort. I'm not too worried about them, but they mention you... and Bingo.' His hand trailed to the dog's head as he spoke.

'What do you mean, they mention me?'

'Well... in one they ask me to pass on their regards.' Gus paused. 'He mentions your dress in another...'

'And you didn't think to tell me, that some sicko is *watching* me? You should have told me.'

She was right. Of course she was. Her lips were in a tight line. Now he couldn't say he didn't want to frighten her. Patti wasn't easily frightened and in her current mood, she'd challenge him on sexism. Shit, shit, and double shit. Yet again he was messing up an important romantic relationship.

'Sorry.'

Patti nibbled her croissant in silence, avoiding his gaze.

This was going to be it. She was about to break up with him. Tell him she couldn't put up with all the crap that came with being with him and he didn't blame her. He was an idiot. What had he been thinking, keeping this from her?

She wiped the crumbs off her fingers and turned to him. Here it was. The knock back. The big, 'It's over, we can't go on like this.' Jaw clenched, he braced himself for the body blow her words would deliver.

Yet... her eyes were sparkling, and a huge grin spread across her face. Gus thought she'd never looked more beautiful, and he relaxed as she spoke.

'Never been fingerprinted before. Wait 'til I tell them at school tomorrow... they'll be so jealous.'

Gus could've hugged her. Instead, he smothered his own smile as she continued.

‘I have to say, it’s a shame you don’t have the same security here as you do at your mum’s house. If your admirer had delivered the letter there, they’d have been recorded. Here?’ She wafted her hand in the air. ‘... not a damn thing.’

She was right. They were reliant on the odd bit of home CCTV or perhaps a super vigilant neighbour... if they were lucky. Gus glanced at the clock. Not even seven o’clock. Nobody would be out and about so early on a Sunday morning. The most they could hope for was someone with an ‘I’m a Stalker’ sign entering Marriners Drive from either Emm Lane or from the snicket near the Sainsbury’s, otherwise they’d no chance of identifying their unofficial postie. Wishing he didn’t sound quite so defensive, he said, ‘If I’d known I was going to be stalked I’d have got some security.’

‘Yeah, right? You’re the typical, *I’ll do it tomorrow* sort of guy, until somebody you love gets threatened and then whatever needs doing gets done yesterday. Remember, I saw how you were with Alice.’

He sighed. His first thought on seeing the letter without its postmark was of Patti and Bingo, and he made a promise there and then that nothing would happen to them. He’d make sure of it. He considered his next actions for a moment and then, remembering who was on duty, he picked up his phone and hit speed dial. ‘Taffy, I need your help.’

Gus had no trouble imagining the lad standing to attention, his expression excited, his face flushed. It was one Taffy wore at least twice most days. He’d already be sitting in the incident room at The Fort, trawling through paperwork as if it was Origami Day at school. Must insist he take some time off. Taffy had been an eager beaver since his permanent promotion to the team. However, being greeted by his over-zealous smile every morning drained Gus’ limited enthusiasm. Hell, he wasn’t that much older than Taffy, so why did Gus always feel like the boy’s granddad?

‘I got another one of those letters, Taff. Delivered to the house this time. I’ll be there in a bit with Patti and I need you to print her.’

There was silence from the phone. Then Taffy cleared his throat. ‘You think Patti sent them?’

*For fuck’s sake!* ‘No, of course I don’t think Patti sent them.’ The words ‘you idiot’ hung in the air as he rolled his eyes at his girlfriend. A heart-stopping grin spread across her face as she put a hand over her mouth to stop her giggle. Gus winked at her and continued. ‘She picked it up off the doormat.’

Taffy and Compo's faces lit up when Gus and Patti walked through the incident room doors and they were on their feet in seconds. *Good to be popular!* But, before Gus had managed even two steps, Compo slapped Taffy on the back. 'You owe me a fiver, Taffy boy. Told you they'd be here before nine.'

'Should have known better than to expect respect from these two. Too lenient with them, that's my trouble.' Gus spoke to Patti before turning to the two detectives, his tone mock stern. 'Making bets on your boss? That's taking liberties, that is. You best have a pot of coffee on the go to redeem yourselves.'

Compo, in khaki cargo trousers topped by a faded *Game of Thrones* T-shirt, with various stains on the chest and sweat pools under his armpits, grinned and gestured to Gus' desk like an usher at a wedding. 'Let's see it, Boss.'

Gus switched the fan off so as not to send the letter flying and placed the bagged blue envelope with his name and title typed on the front onto the table. If the other letters were anything to go by, the font was Verdana, size fourteen. He put on a pair of gloves and opened the pouch.

Compo sniffed and Gus agreed. 'Smells the same, doesn't it? Same weird perfume.'

With two mugs of coffee, Taffy joined them and handed one to Patti. Gus nodded towards the desk and Taffy deposited his there. Gus had learned to take possession of his drink as soon as it appeared because more than once, the lad had forgotten the drink wasn't his and had drunk it himself.

Gus teased the missive out of the bag, using his index finger and thumb. The earlier letters had each had different postmarks on them; Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield, Huddersfield... *Wonder what prompted the change?* Seemed like his anonymous fan was mobile. If you called being at most an hour's train ride from Bradford mobile... and seemingly more confident too. Forensics on the previous letters had revealed zilch of importance. The envelopes were self-sealing, ex-Hallmark stock available at any car boot sale in the district. The paper was bog-standard A4 used by businesses all over. Nothing unusual about the ink either. There were fingerprints on both paper and envelopes. None, however, that were in the IDENT1 files and, according to the technician, they most likely belonged to innocent handlers at the factories,

sorting offices and post office. None of the prints retrieved from the envelope matched those found on the paper.

It was frustrating. The only real lead left was the content of the letters themselves. Gus decided that with the ‘home delivery’, it was now time to consult the eccentric psychologist, Professor Sebastian Carlton, from Leeds Trinity University. With any luck, he’d be able to point him in the right direction.

With a wooden letter opener, gifted by his mother at Christmas... *who the hell, bar his mum, would use a letter opener these days...?* he slit the envelope across the top fold. This would save any possible forensic evidence caught on the seal. Sid, the CSI manager, had reprimanded him for ripping the first one open—like he’d known it was going to be a bloody anonymous note. The scent was stronger now he’d opened it... just like the others.

Patti moved forward and sniffed. ‘Smells familiar. Give me a moment.’

She leaned down, holding her hair away from her face, and inhaled again. ‘Obsession! I’m almost sure it’s Obsession.’

Somehow the word ‘Obsession’ seemed ominous. The scent was too strong to have been co-incidental. *Not good! Not good at all!*

‘Get the lab to test for that. We’ll no doubt have some perfume data base. Hopefully, that’ll narrow things down a bit.’

With a tutting sound, Patti shook her head. ‘God’s sake, Gus, you clearly don’t buy perfume much. If it is Obsession, that won’t narrow it down. It’s a popular brand. Millions of women wear it.’ She tilted her head to one side, her lips scrunched up. ‘I suppose if it’s a knock-off, the recipe might be a little different. It might throw something up, but I bet there’re loads of knock-off brands doing the rounds in Bradford too.’

Taffy got up a picture of the scent bottle on his phone and showed it to Gus. ‘My sister likes that brand. I bought her some for Christmas.’

Gus threw him a dirty look. Trust the kid to be more up on women’s scents than he was. He made a mental note to find out what perfume Patti preferred. *Perhaps he could buy her some for her birthday.* He shook the contents from the envelope. When the single sheet, folded in half, landed on Gus’ desk, the silence in the room was as oppressive as the building heat outside. Even Compo’s computers seemed to hold their breath. A swift glance at the other three told Gus they were on tenterhooks. Patti bit her lip, her eyes glued to the sheet. Taffy was executing a rocking movement on his feet, his hands behind his back as if to prevent him from grabbing it and ripping it open.

Compo glared at the letter as if it had just eaten his bacon butty until, with a quick smile, he nodded. ‘Come on, Gus. What’ya waiting for. It’s already written... not like you can change owt, is it?’

Taffy rocked some more. ‘Maybe the bastard’ll have slipped up this time.’

Gus snorted. ‘Yeah, we might be lucky and they’ll have typed their name and address in the top right-hand corner.’

Compo clicked his fingers, making Gus and Taffy jump. ‘Good one, Gus. Open it up and see.’

Assuming that Compo too, was being sarcastic, Gus unfolded the letter... and there it was...

My Dearest Detective Inspector Angus McGuire,  
It’s been a long time, hasn’t it? Miss me?  
Poor Bingo! This heat really doesn’t agree with him, does it?  
Good job that tree in your garden gives him a little shade in the afternoon. I’ve had to refill his water a couple of times when your mum’s been late picking him up. She should really be on time, you know?  
You must tell Patti that I love that blue dress she’s been wearing. Stunning. And of course, I like your bandana—very cool and practical for this weather. You sure your bosses approve? Maybe a bit too casual for their liking?  
Anyway, you’re probably wondering why I’m writing and, much as I adore chatting with you, there is a reason. I’ve been working hard on a surprise for you. Just remember though, things are never quite what they seem.  
Watch this space!



## CHAPTER 2

### Zodiac

‘You all set for tonight? Excited? This will be so brill. Better than anything we could ever have imagined.’ I’m buzzing. But... what the fuck? I expect more interest... you know...?’

A bit of excitement, a little *enthusiasm*. Talking to Pisces is like trying to light a fucking firework in a snowstorm. Wish we could have some snow. Get away from this damn heat, just for a minute. Shit, I’d welcome a second of snow. Me... naked outside. I laugh at the thought of snowflakes landing on my skin... sizzling and evaporating soon as they touch. I lift a handful of ice cubes and ram them down the back of my T-shirt. Picking up my iPhone, I pout and take a selfie.

The voice on the phone’s wittering on again. I stifle a yawn. *Yada yada yada... Boring as shit!* Dumbass, stupid, juvenile crap! Like I give a toss about emotions and family and stuff. All I want is to get the job done, like we agreed. I add some doggie ears and a lolling tongue to my selfie and post it to *Instagram* with the caption ‘panting in the heat.’

‘Look.’ Sharp enough to slice through the stupidity spouting down the line. ‘It’s decided. We’ve planned it and it’s happening. Now get with the action! We’re *not* delaying. You’re *not* putting this off. It’s tonight. You *know* what you need to bring. *Don’t* let me down.’

As more nonsense spews out, I flick the phone onto speaker and lay it down, letting the div’s crap wash over me. I know what’s coming... what all this shit is leading up to. Next, it’ll be the moany tone... the pleading whinge... the *I’m not strong like you...* the *I don’t think I can do this...* the *Are you positive it’ll be all right...?* the *We won’t get caught, will we...?* and, sure enough... here we goooo... I lie back on the couch, happy to break the house rules regarding feet on furniture and roll my eyes. Talk about fucking drama. I grab my drink. Half the ice is melted already, and the vodka tastes like shit. Cheap, warm vodka and coke—yuk. I drag long and hard on the straw, draining the glass before shoving it down next to my mobile. Lying back down, wishing I wasn’t so hot, but too bloody lazy to get more ice cubes, I stretch out a finger and smudge the liquid that’s soaking into the shiny wood, leaving a dark ring where my glass stood. *I’ve left a mark on the coffee table... oops...*

I snort to break through the fucking neediness that crackles down the line. ‘I’m relying on you. We’ve been through this time and time again.

It. Is. Necessary.

It's the only way, and you *know* this. They're all liars and hypocrites. They deserve this and it's our duty to show everyone... to expose this to the world.'

*Dramatic Pause...* This next part of my delivery is important... crucial even. This will seal the deal.

'Are you with me?'

When Pisces responds, it's with a shaky voice 'Yes.'

Glad that I'm home alone, I raise my voice to almost a shout. 'Are You With Me?'

'Yes.'

I stand up and little shards of ice trickle down my spine and fall out from the bottom of my T-shirt, landing on the carpet. I draw my shoulders backward and stare at my reflection in the wall mirror opposite. My eyes are sparkling, my cheeks flushed. I draw myself to my full height and glare at my image. I pull my mouth into a sneer, chin up. 'ARE YOU WITH ME?'

For a nano-second there's silence. *Probably shitting it.* I swallow the urge to giggle and school my face into its stern expression once more. Just when I'm about to let rip, the reply comes.

'Yes!'

'AGAIN!'

'YES!'

'All right then, text me when you've set off. Use the throwaway. No selfies or anything on that burner phone, yeah?'

As I smile and slump back down on the couch, the front door clatters open. She's back! I hang up, slip the phone in my pocket and, grabbing my empty glass, I slip off to my room.

With the door locked behind me, I throw myself on my bed and make bets on how long it'll take until she yells up from downstairs. Does my fucking head in! Why can't she leave me alone...? Stop breathing down my neck? It makes my skin crawl... she makes my fucking skin crawl. I know she can't help being needy, but sometimes I need a break from it. I swallow the urge to bellow, I HATE YOU, into the air and instead, slip my earbuds in and crank up the music. Now, if the bitch shouts up, I won't hear her. I've got things to do, plans to finesse, and I don't need her chewing my ear off. She can find something to do without me holding her hand.

In some ways, I'm still pinching myself. A year ago, who'd have thought I'd be here now? That was a close call... everything could've gone tits up... but hey, it didn't. Like always, I got myself out of it... easy when you're as clever as me... even easier when they're so stupid.

That's all in the past and I have new puppets to control.

The first thing I do, wherever I am, is identify the weakest. Those with baggage or vulnerabilities. And of course, there're the losers... the lonely... the outcasts. This part of the process can be time consuming, but it's well worth the wait. One of my many skills is blending into the crowd. What folk don't realise is that they carry their problems with them on their person. These may be invisible to most people, but I pride myself on my ability to see what others can't. Perhaps it's because I've been invisible all my life... or have I? Could be a lie to confuse things, to put you off the scent... whatever... you'll never know, will you? Not unless I choose to tell you, and even then, you'll be wondering. Every word I utter might be a lie. Then again, it could be the truth. Who was it said that the 'definition of stupid is knowing the truth, seeing the truth, but still believing the lies.'? Amazing how they do that... believe the lies... believe my lies.

I've found myself a worthy adversary though. Nearly one hundred per cent sure... we'll see. So far, I've nothing to back that up, except my gut instinct and... let's face it, I'm rarely wrong there... time will tell.

My body is light... as if I'm floating. All the tension's gone, and I snuggle further down in the bed. Relaxed. Happy. Confident that everything will go to plan. I go through every little segment of the evening. Minute by minute, I dissect what will happen, anticipate each reaction, every response... There is nothing I haven't thought of... nothing I've not accounted for.

With delicious precision, I home in on the best bits... and my groin tingles... my heartbeat speeds up, my face flushes I can hardly wait... but first... I pull the zip of my shorts down just enough to insert my hand... something a bit more important to deal with.

### CHAPTER 3

*... Ice cream, splash pools, and picnics with Capital Radio here at Ilkley Lido as the weekend draws to a close in a record heatwave as temperatures reach highs of...*

‘Fucking unbearable sauna-like proportions...’

‘Eh?’ Taffy looked up, startled, as the words exploded from Gus’ mouth. ‘Eh?’ he repeated.

Gus tightened the bandana round his head and pulled the fan closer to him. He’d sent the anonymous letter off to the lab and Patti had kissed Gus goodbye, waving off suggestions he get a uniformed officer to escort her to her own home.

A combination of the heat and the thought that his stalker had somehow gained access to his garden had left Gus angry and anxious. Bingo, with his dog flap allowing him into the house when he needed it, was free to roam while Gus was at work and Gus had always considered him safe. Not anymore! The reference to the three people he loved most in the world was an implied threat and, regardless of how firmly Gus tried to clamp down on thoughts of his mum being mugged on entering his garden or some sinister figure slipping poison into Bingo’s water, or some dangerous monster stalking Patti, he found it hard to focus. Although the perfume on the letter hinted at the sender being female, Gus kept an open mind. It could be anyone. Over the years he’d made more friends than enemies... of all sexes. He’d left Patti with strict instructions to lock her doors, set her home alarm, and keep in touch. He’d also tasked her with making a list of when and where she’d worn the vibrant blue dress mentioned in the letter. It was newish, and she’d only worn it a few times. It would be useful to catalogue when and where his stalker could have seen her wearing it.

Gus’ next-door neighbours on either side had cameras front and back. They were motion-activated and covered some of his drive and part of the steps leading to his front door, so he’d asked if Compo could have access to their most recent recordings. Compo, accompanied by Stevie Wonder’s ‘You Are the Sunshine of My Life’, was doing his thing with them. Gus’s dad was to collect Bingo and take him to his house for the foreseeable future. Security made his parents’ house on Shay Lane almost impenetrable, and Bingo would be safe there. In fact, it was his second home and the dog would see it as a holiday. It was Gus who’d miss being greeted by his pet’s wagging tail.

*...Factor to minimise the risk of contracting skin cancer...*

Gus reached over and switched the radio off. If today had panned out as planned, he and Patti would have taken Mo and Naila's four youngest daughters to the lido. But because of this, he had to let them down. It wasn't just that the girls were gutted, he'd hoped that taking the kids off their hands would give Mo and Naila the chance to spend some uninterrupted time with their eldest daughter. Zarqa was playing up big time, and Gus hated to see his friend's family in such pain. They'd been through months of hell with Zarqa, finding it hard to adjust to the fact that the man she'd always thought was her father was in fact not. Worse still, she'd discovered that Mo had been responsible for her biological father's death. Mo and Naila were struggling.

'Results back in yet, Taff?'

It didn't surprise Gus when the younger detective shook his head. It was a Sunday, and it wasn't urgent. Still, Gus had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Rather than petering out as he'd hoped, his stalker had become more audacious by turning up at his door. The thing was, much as he wanted to investigate it himself, Gus knew he shouldn't. 'Okay, gather everything we've got, make copies for me, and then give the originals to C team.'

He could almost feel the relief rolling off Taffy, and he ignored the conspiratorial nod his two officers shared. They'd wanted to pass it along when the first letter arrived, but Gus had dug his heels in. Now, even he knew it was time. Not that he wouldn't monitor things, but someone else would be in charge.

Before he could say anything, Compo spoke. 'I'll send them copies of this footage, Gus, but I'm gonna look at it myself. It's quiet today.'

Dialling the number for a home security company, Gus nodded. 'Thanks, Comp. Appreciated.'

Within seconds he was arranging for a technician to come and give a quote. He'd have to pay through the nose for a Sunday consultation, but he wanted an expedited service. This wasn't just about him anymore. As he hung up, his phone rang; 'The Bitch is Back' blared out against the sound of the whirring desk fan. Both Taffy and Compo's heads jerked up at the same time. Gus took a deep breath and dismissed the call.

He was in no mood to deal with his argumentative ex-wife today.

## CHAPTER 4

It's getting dark. Gloaming, that's what Gus' old man calls it. Last year, when we were at Robin Hood's Bay, he kept singing that stupid song about *roaming in the gloaming wi a lassie by his side*. Never mind, I like him. At least he's not always on my case, not like Mo, anyway.

I have to get away from the house. Mum wants to feed me out of all this. 'Zarqa have some food.' 'Zarqa, I made this for you, beti.' Phuh! If I smell another kebab or see another fucking samosa, I'll scream. Makes my hair stink. That's the trouble with long hair, any bit of frying sticks to it. Mo always stinks of oil. Fucking 'samosa man.' Must have been thick at school if that's the only job he can get. Don't know what she sees in him, I really don't. He's pure uggers. And that was another thing. How he went on when he saw my tattoo... at least that stopped them moaning as much when I got my hair dip-dyed. Still, you'd think I'd shaved it off and converted to Buddhism the way they went on. She's the social worker, does she *actually* think food's the answer?

It's so hot and I can't escape them. Mum and Mo are always there, looking at me like I'm gonna slit my wrists or swallow a handful of paracetamol. Can't they just leave me alone? Just leave me a-fuckin' lone?

Can't stand this place. Bradford... Bradistan! Full of bloody Pakis with their thobes and prayer hats and hijabs and niqabs, thinking they're all that. Like wearing that sort of shit makes them better people, when all it does is hide their nasty sins. The shit they get up to underneath it all. The shit they cover up and ignore, the stuff happening right under their noses.

I slam out of the house.

'Zarqa! Come back here, right this minute!'

*Yeah right, watch me.* I ignore the twinge of guilt at the thought of my mum begging me to stay, to stop arguing. I head off down the path and as I open the gate, I see *he's* at the door, with my mum holding him back. She's crying again. But so what? I'm crying too, just not out front, like her. It's not her who hears all the whispers. She's not the one The Young Jihadists laugh about. Idiots the lot of them. But I'll show them. I'll show them, all right.

I turn left and head down to the park to meet Jo Jo. Hope he's got the goods. I jog along North Park Road. The last of the sun makes me want to take my hoodie off, but the first beep from a car full of Asian lads with the windows down and the whiff of weed drifting out, has me pulling the hood up over my hair, making sure it's all tucked in. I stick my elbows out,

bulking myself out and walk like a lad. Mind you, with shorts on, it's hard to look masculine. Bloody dickwads! You'd think I was walking about in the scud, the way they heckle and jeer. As they drive past, I glance in. I recognise three of them from mosque. Like butter wouldn't melt - all goodie two shoes and shit when they're doing namaz and telling their sisters to cover-up. Then off they go kerb crawling round Manningham looking to hassle anybody not wearing a hijab. How's that right? If I had a knife, I'd slash their tyres. Next time they're at mosque I'll do that. Hit the bastards where it hurts.

Ping!

Text! Can't she just leave me alone? I shove my phone back in my pocket and keep moving. Lister Park's still busy. Used to enjoy coming here with my mum and the kids and Mo. Can't call him 'Dad'... not anymore. How can I call the man who killed my biological father, Dad? A scorpion uncurls in my chest, ready to sting... ready to make me cry. I swallow and let the anger smother it. Then again, how can I call the man who raped my mum, 'Dad' either? Truth is they're right. All of them are fucking right. The leering old bastards at the mosque are right. The gossiping hijabis at school are right, the pious Darth Vaders in their burkas looking down at me in Kanna Peena are right, and the dirty little Pakistani boys, trying to cop a feel in the dinner queue at school, are right too. I'm nowt but a bastard. A dirty fucking bastard without a dad. A dirty fucking bastard with a mum who's got a whole load of other kids who're not bastards. A dirty fucking bastard who doesn't belong, who doesn't have real sisters and whose grandparents would rather live in Pakistan than see her.

I'm running hard now, trying to dislodge the scorpion before it stings. I'm fed up of crying. Won't think about Mo playing bowls, or the time he capsized the pedalo in the lake because he stood up to do a Titanic impression. Or us all with ice creams, the kids' faces all sticky and smiling. I was always the outsider, just didn't know it then.

Like I told Jo Jo, I'm finished crying, done being weak. I don't fit in here... don't belong. They all know it. So, from now on, I'm going to be *me*. No more Mo's daughter, Zarqa. No more the girl from the samosa shop. From now on I'm just me and they'll soon know all about it.

When I get to the bandstand, the park's quiet. Just shadowy figures and cigarettes lighting up near the trees and bushes. It's not dark yet, but it won't be long. I check my phone to see if he's texted. Nothing. Kids have scooted, the ice-cream van's gone. Just the no-gooders left... the drug dealers, the pimps, and the doggers. *Where the hell is Jo Jo?* I told him not to be late! I sit on the bottom step and check my phone again. Still nowt. He'll come up from the bottom of the park, up from Manningham Lane cos that's where his bus'll stop. There's a figure

walking up the hill towards Cartwright Hall, but I don't stand up yet. Not going to draw attention to myself until I'm sure it's him.

The figure raises an arm and waves. 'Zarqa?'

He's got his hoodie on too... and jeans. Must be sweltering. Best not to look too much like a white boy in this area. I jump to my feet and run towards him. Thank God! I thought he'd stood me up. When I reach him, I give him a hug. He's all tall and spindly, but he smells nice. Lynx or summat. 'You're bloody late.'

He just grins, and shrugs. 'Sunday service. Besides, you know my motto... treat 'em mean keep 'em keen.'

I swat his arm and tut. 'Yeah right, whatever.' We walk back to the bandstand. The silence is never awkward when I'm with Jo Jo. Might be cos he's gay, I don't know. One of those things, I suppose. Never feel I have to pretend with him. I'm just me, Zarqa, and that's enough for both of us. He doesn't talk all the time, only when he's got summat to say. Wish the rest of the kids our age were like him, instead of being dicks, giggling and yelling and slagging off folk all the time. 'Got a cig?'

He sighs and pulls a pack from his jean's pocket. 'You never used to smoke. It's not like you have to, you know? You could just be your own person.' He nudges me and grins. 'I'd still like you.'

But I can see he's got on that serious face. That's the thing with Jo Jo. He always wants to fix you. Well, he needs to learn that you can't fix everything. Some things are beyond repair. 'Just give me a fucking cig, yeah?'

We sit on the bottom step for a while, blowing smoke circles. I'm crap at it, but Jo Jo can do right big ones. I put my hand in my pocket and pull out a tenner. 'You got the stuff?'

He looks at me, his eyes all serious like he's my big brother or summat. 'You sure?'

'Give us a break. Course I'm sure. Why wouldn't I be?'

He shrugs. 'Just it's not really you, is it?'

'Course it is. It's the new me.'

He's still reluctant, so I nudge him again. 'You don't have to do it.'

'Yeah, right? And let you do it all on your own. Don't think so. Come on, if we're doing this, we're doing it together. That was the deal.' He rummages in his rucksack for a minute and then shows me the goods. 'Happy?'

A zing of adrenalin zaps through me. My heart's thumping like bongos. I've never done owt like this before, still, I'm ready. I leap to my feet, eager to get going now and Jo Jo follows me.



I link arms with him, and we walk up to North Park Road and out of the park. As we get closer our steps slow down. Now it's time, I'm nervous.

'You okay?' Jo Jo's giving me a get-out clause. He never wanted to do this. He's only here because he's my friend.

I almost say 'no let's leave it.' But then everything I've been feeling for the past months wells up inside me. All the misery, all the hate, all the rage, and I nod.

'Someone's got to pay. Let's do it.'

## CHAPTER 5

It was that time just before dreams faded into a deep sleep. The central heating was cooling and, barring the occasional vehicle rumbling past, or the random owl hooting as it flew by, its eyes no doubt zeroing in on its unsuspecting prey, there was near silence. Haider was uncomfortable. It was so damn hot... nobody else in the whole of Bradford would have their heating on but they had relatives over from Pakistan and his auntie was all shivery and moany; *It's freezing, put the heating up a little! How can you live here in this cold?*

As a result, everyone else was sweltering. *And* he'd been forced to give up his bed for his aunt and uncle. For the past week, he'd been unable to settle in the top bunk in the attic box room. He hated sharing with his brother, Adil. He snored like a pig and stank twice as bad. Haider couldn't wait for his aunt and uncle to move on to the next set of relatives. At least Adil's snoring had stopped. Maybe now he could get some rest. He'd a GCSE in the morning and maths wasn't his best subject.

With his tall frame in a more comfortable position, Haider tried to ignore the lumps in the mattress and the faint aroma of dirty socks that hung in the air as if Adil had strewn them across the room with the explicit purpose of annoying him. He was a repulsive little scrote. Feeling the bed wobble, Haider attempted to punch a dent into his washboard-stiff pillow and, when he failed, he gave up with a sigh. Of course, the best bedding had gone to the relatives. He wouldn't mind, but he didn't even like them. Neither did his mum. They were his dad's brother-and sister-in-law and they had *issues* with the fact that Haider's mum was a Gujarati Muslim and they were Pakistani. Bloody load of old rubbish. His cousins were all right though. Two girls, just a bit younger than him. As long as no-one got it into their heads that he'd be up for marrying either of them. No chance! He'd find his own wife when it was time, and if he had owt to do with it, that wouldn't be for at least a decade.

That thought in mind, he flung off his duvet and dangled his legs over the edge of the bed. Why was it so hot in here? Course he knew why. Bloody visitors. It felt that everything they'd done for the past few weeks had been dictated by the sodding relatives that nobody liked. They'd not been able to have their regular Friday night Raja's Pizza treat because his uncle could only eat curry and chapattis. When he'd suggested the kids have the pizza and the parents have the curry, his boring old uncle had put the kibosh on that. Said he didn't want his daughters being 'tempted into the ways of the West.' *Idiot!* Raja's pizzas were a Pakistani tradition in Bradford... part of the culture, just like Chicken Cottage.

As his body temperature cooled, Haider's eyes became heavy, and he was on the point of dropping off when Adil's snoring started up again. *Fuck's sake!* He pulled himself into a half-sitting position, to avoid banging his head on the room's sloping ceiling, Haider angled his bum closer to the bedrail where his feet still dangled and, not caring if he woke his brother, was about to jump to the floor, when his phone vibrated. *Who the hell was contacting him at this hour?* He groped under his pillow for the phone. When his fingers grabbed it, he edged his backside over the rail and lowered himself off the bed, jumping the last foot and a half. Adil, snorted, flapped his lips, and heaved himself onto his side. Haider glared at him and kicked the edge of the bedframe with his bare foot, but Adil merely began a rhythmic purring snore.

The floor was cool under Haider's feet. The cramped space was a junk room with only a threadbare rug covering the tatty old lino. Haider hopped onto the rug and looked around in the semi-darkness for his slippers and shorts. Adil, as usual, had left a trail of garments all over and it took Haider a minute to locate his single pile near the door. Cursing, he removed the underwear Adil had dumped on top of his clothing and sniffed the topmost T-shirt. He gritted his teeth. *Little shit!* His T-shirt stunk of pissy underpants now. After, rummaging under the bed, he yanked out a suitcase containing his clothes ration for the duration of his exile. Still no response from his brother who slept on regardless of the evil looks Haider flung his way at regular intervals. Unzipping the bag and extracting a clean top, Haider inhaled the scent of fabric conditioner as he pulled it on before sliding his feet into a pair of shorts. He'd sleep on the sofa. He stretched up, yanked his duvet down, and slung it over one shoulder and then, phone in pocket, he turned back. With clawed fingertips, he gripped his brother's skull and shook hard before leaving the room, ignoring the confused yelps that followed him.

Downstairs it was cooler, and the lingering aroma of incense made him quite lethargic as he snuggled under his thin duvet, positioning cushions beneath his head. He'd just got comfortable when he remembered the notification on his phone and groaned. Now he'd remembered it, he'd *have* to look. That's the thing with phones; somehow, they demanded an instant response... even in the middle of the night... even when you were dog fucking tired. He activated the screen and saw he had a *Snapchat*. He opened it and stared at the snap. *What the fuck?* It disappeared. Haider shook his head as if to clear the image from his thoughts. What was the knob playing at? This was *so* not funny. Not funny at all.

He replayed the chat. Why the hell would he send Haider an image of himself covered in blood with a fake knife sticking out his neck at this time of night? *Fucking gross!* With the duvet pulled over his shoulders, Haider's fingers flew over the phone and, just before he settled down for the night, he hit send. TOSSER!!!!

## CHAPTER 6

Half ten on a Sunday night and it was still fucking boiling. Karim Mirza welcomed the occasional whoosh of air from passing cars as he turned onto Smith Lane behind Bradford Royal Infirmary. When he licked his lips, they tasted of salt and his hair was all limp across his forehead. *Hope I don't bump into any of the lads... or Zarqa. Not when I look like a right div!*

Why's it so hot? He stuffed his hands in his pockets, Trixie-Belle's leash hooked over his wrist. And why did his mum have to sign him up for this? Bloody Lubna. 'Oh, Ami, I'm too busy—got my biology tomorrow—Karim can do it.'

It was *her* job, not his. His sister had been the one to agree to walking the dog for their neighbour, not him. Why did he have to get dragged into it? Bad enough that he had to deliver chapattis and curry lunchtime and teatime, every day. Stupid old bat kept chuntering on, 'Oh could you just make me a cold drink, Karim?' or 'Move the fan closer, Karim, there's a love.' Least she sometimes slipped him a note which he spent on a tenners bag on Scotchman Road.

With Trixie-Belle trotting ahead of him, he considered cutting their walk short. It was bloody humiliating. Imagine if his friends saw him with a pooper scooper bag? They'd slag him for weeks. Trixie-Belle doubled back on herself and looked up at him, her head tilted to one side, ears twitching as if to say 'let's get a move on?' *Poor sod's feeling the heat too.*

Karim mimicked her head movements then, grinning, reached down and scratched the between her ears. Trixie-Belle liked that. Her mouth fell open and her tongue lolled out from the side, all pink and rough looking. He took his phone out, checked his notifications, and shrugged. Nowt important. 'Poor Mrs Brown's hip op this, poor Mrs Brown's hip op that,' said Karim in a baby voice to the dog. Trixie-Belle looked up at him as if she understood every word. Karim laughed. His mother's words made him think of hip hop and Drake. He couldn't imagine Mrs Brown getting down with a bit of Drake or 50 Cent. Specially not with her 'hip op'. He sniggered and tugged Trixie-Belle's leash. 'You get it, Trixie-B! Hip Hop, Hip op.' He was still laughing when he dropped her leash to the pavement so he could search his shorts' pocket for his Clipper.

He'd just shoved the bent spliff between his lips and flicked the lighter to light it when Trixie-Belle made her bid for freedom. She was off, lead dragging behind her, straight up Smith Lane, past the Maternity Unit car park, and then she disappeared to the left. Karim cursed and took off after her, the light from the street lamps casting a white glow as he went. His heart

pounded, unlit joint hanging from his mouth as he panted after the dog. As he ran, he chanted, ‘Please not the Haunted House, Trixie-B. Please not the Haunted House.’

When he reached the point where he’d last seen her, he stopped, ran his fingers through his sweaty hair and spun in a complete circle, before kicking a nearby lamp post. ‘Aaaaaaargh!’ He snatched the spliff from his lips, shoved it in his tin case beside his grinder, and rammed it in his pocket.

The Haunted House was right there, and he bet that was where the stupid dog had gone. Away from the road, behind a line of overgrown bushes, the upper floor of the dilapidated building was visible. Its smashed windows, covered on the inside by bits of wood hanging loose as if a ghostly figure had tried to break out, glinted in the headlights of cars rounding the bend. ‘Damn Haunted House.’

Two enormous boulders at each end of the hedges restricted access to the premises. Karim looked along the street in both directions, hoping for some human presence in the distance. But there was none. *What am I going to do?* No way could he leave the dog out here on her own. Hip or not, Mrs Brown would skin him alive if owt happened to Trixie-Belle. The trouble was, he couldn’t bring himself to go in after her. Brought up on a recipe of djinns, demons, and angels from his parents, and spooks, ghosts, and poltergeists from his friends, Karim’s heart thudded. He’d never admit it to his mates, but the stories of the Grey Lady who floated round the grounds of the Haunted House looking for naughty kids to eat still gave him nightmares. Then there was Smiling Jack. *Aw no, why did I have to think of Smiling Jack right now?*

He approached the nearest boulder and squinted into the darkness beyond. There were large looming shapes at the back – trees. ‘Why does there have to be trees? Trees and fucking Smiling Jack.’

He peered into the distance then, when that didn’t help him see any clearer, he got out his mobile and used the torch function. Now the trees looked even more ghostly. Was that a body hanging in that tree? Had Smiling Jack grabbed Trixie-Belle, stapled her mouth into a smile, and hung her from a branch? *Fuck, I hope not!*

Karim waved his light over the ground, his hand shaking, his voice tremulous as he called into the darkness beyond. ‘Trixie-B. Trixie-Belle? Come on, girl. Please, come on.’

An answering bark from beyond the rocks confirmed his fears. Trixie-Belle was in the grounds of the Haunted House, but at least she was alive. Smiling Jack hadn’t got her. He shook himself. *Aw, come on, Karim, don’t be such a pussy. Smiling Jack’s a myth, not real.*

He took a deep breath and squeezed between the boulders, bouncing his torch around him as he went. Up close, the building looked even scarier. The broken gutters cast weird shadows

over the weeds that sprouted from between the pebbles on the floor. A dark outline of a plant growing up the walls to the smashed windows made them look like they were crying blood. He directed his spotlight towards the side of the house where the trees were, and, taking baby steps, moved forward, glad of the vibration of the occasional car passing on the road behind. ‘Trixie-B, Trixie.’ *Why the fuck am I whispering?* ‘Trixie-Belle – come on, girl. Come to Karim.’ Again, the same answering bark, but no sight or sound of Trixie rushing back to him. He groaned. *What if she’s injured? Oh, fuck no!* Mrs Brown would have him for that. No more tenners for bud if the dog got hurt.

He drew level with the building and risked moving his phone over the walls to make sure the Grey Lady wasn’t there waiting to jump out on him. There was a door at the side, with a half porch. *Just the place for Smiling Jack to hide!* Karim edged forward, giving that area a wide berth, conscious of his trainers dislodging pebbles as he walked and making too much noise. He tried to walk on tiptoes and that was a little quieter, but awkward. If he had to run, he’d not bother about the noise. He risked a glance towards the porch, but apart from the dark shadows, nothing. *Thank fuck.*

As he moved on, Karim passed the end of the house. A few more steps and he’d be in the grassy area at the back of the property. ‘Trixie-Belle? Trixie-B, come on, girl.’

Again, an excited yelp - closer this time. Using every ounce of his courage, Karim continued, peering to his right where he’d heard the dog and avoiding looking at the trees. Trixie-Belle wriggled on her haunches, the leash lying on the ground behind her. ‘Thank God, Trixie. Why didn’t you come when I called?’

She turned to greet him, her mouth wide in a canine grin, not a staple in sight, her tongue a Scooby Doo loll. Karim grinned and bent to pick up the lead, *No way are you getting away from me now.* As he straightened, his torch landed on something lying on the grass. Karim yelped. Fingers frantic, he grabbed the lead and, dragging Trixie-Belle, legged it back round the Haunted House, between the boulders and onto Smith Lane before stopping. A quick glance behind him reassured him he hadn’t been followed. He bent over and, bracing his hands on his knees, he struggled to catch his breath. ‘Fuck, oh fuck. What was that?’ Tears streamed down his cheeks, his heart thundered, and he thought he would have to slide down onto the kerbside.

A low growl rumbled in Trixie-Belle’s throat. Through the dark, something gripped his shoulder. He jumped and spun round, arms raised, shining the torch in the eyes of the person who’d grabbed him. His sudden movement dislodged his baccy tin from his pocket. It crashed to the ground and Karim groaned. He swung his torch to the tin. *Aw fuck!* There it was, open

on the pavement, lid to one side, joint and weed grinder on the other. He met the gaze of the police officer, who looked pointedly at the spliff.

Her partner, a big fucker, grinning like he'd won the lottery, rocked on his feet, a sarcy grin on his face. 'Been spending our pocket money on naughties, have we?'

## CHAPTER 7

*...And tomorrow's set to be another scorcher throughout Yorkshire, with temperatures reaching highs of 24 degrees. Watch out for thundery showers over the Dales overnight and increased humidity...*

Detective Inspector Gus McGuire switched Capital Radio off and peeled himself out of the police pool vehicle. Taffy had picked him up from home, and as soon as he'd got outside, he'd started to sweat. A kid's body wasn't his idea of a fun end to the weekend. For the umpteenth time in the last five months, he wished it was Alice with him. Taffy was a great lad and was displaying the makings of an excellent officer. His main failing was that he wasn't Alice. He'd heard nothing from her in all that time. His DCI, Nancy Chalmers, had agreed to give Alice more time after all she'd been through. However, their new Detective Chief Superintendent Gazala Bashir wasn't so patient. Now that her feet were under the table, she was flexing her muscles and hinting that Alice should decide about her future.

Even after eleven at night, it was still sweltering. The build-up of heat and humidity throughout the day hung like stagnant piss in a spit-and-sawdust pub's urinal, making breathing difficult. Gus, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, sweated like a pig at a barbecue. He'd taken to wearing a bandana to create a bit of air between his short dreads and his neck and to stop the sweat from running into his eyes. All day he'd been wishing for a thunderstorm to clear the air and, now that one was imminent, he hoped it would hold off until they'd processed the area. *Sod's bloody law*. The mere thought of scrambling into crime scene overalls in this heat prickled his skin.

There were two entrances to the Haunted House. Both were cordoned off with yellow and black tape attached to the gateposts and stretched over the boulders that someone had deposited at each entrance years ago. *This took him back*. Last time he'd passed by, the hedge had been white with snow and hadn't looked as unkempt. Now it almost sealed off the entire length of the property with elongated leafy shoots branching out in all directions. He couldn't remember a hedge at all when he'd been a kid living on Wheatland's Drive. He, Mo, and Greg had spent many joyful hours playing here, building dens and having picnics and making up imaginary worlds.

Everything seemed less grand now. Planks of wood, each hanging on by a single nail, shuttered the windows. They'd been bothered a few years ago with rough sleepers and junkies



taking over the building, but detailing special constables to the area had sorted this out. Since then, they'd secured the house with chains and heavy-duty bars across the downstairs windows. To Gus, vacant properties like this were a scandal. And, according to the statistics that landed on his desk, there were three thousand homeless folk in Bradford, so why didn't they do something with some of these abandoned properties?

A uniformed officer stood guard by each of the entrances, and Gus and Taffy approached the nearest, signed in, and ducked under the tape. Gus ignored the officer's far too cheery, 'Hot tonight, sir.'

The crime scene investigators had set up spotlights which illuminated the entire property. Closer up, the house looked even sadder. Roof tiles missing, with triflids growing out of the gaps, as if the peripheral hedge had somehow sent roots into the basement with the express purpose of escaping from the roof. The once yellow sandstone, now pitted in places, was crying out for a good clean. Half the pebbles had disappeared from the swooping semi-circular drive, leaving potholes and bare patches where once more Mother Nature had erupted as spindly wildflowers and less attractive weeds. The front area had become a refuge for empty beer cans, spent cigarette packets, and the detritus left behind by drug users – bent spoons, empty lighters, syringes, and a flurry of empty bud bags.

Gus turned to Taffy. 'Used to play here when we were kids. Me, Mo, and Greg.'

'I'd be shit scared to play here when I were a kid. It's too creepy, like it's haunted or summat. Like some sort of unseen evil's lurking in the shadows.' The younger officer looked around him, hands stuffed into his shorts' pockets, his brow furrowed. Taffy had spent too much time in the sun as his brown skin had reddened across his nose and cheeks and was peeling. 'It's not really haunted, is it?'

'Yeah, well, it's got a reputation.' Gus laughed. 'But then again – you *are* a wuss, Taff.'

'Damn right – hate ghost stories and stuff. Rather face a serial killer any day.'

Taffy, unlike Gus, had never had to take on a serial killer. Gus reckoned that his perceptions might have to change one day. There had been too many serial killers already in Bradford. Christ, he'd heard that some bright spark was researching whether the Bradford water was a factor in the high ratio of serial killers in the district.

Gus surveyed the dilapidated grounds. 'Mo made up this story to frighten the other kids away.' He looked around. 'What was it now? Ah, that's it – Smiling Jack. Mo told them Smiling Jack was a bogeyman who caught kids and stapled smiles on their faces before killing them and hanging them over there.' He pointed to where the corner of the crime scene tent was visible among the trees. 'It worked too. The other kids steered clear, and me, Greg, and Mo

spent our summers being explorers and pirates and what not. It was an orchard then – full of pear and apple trees.’

He sighed - reminiscing about Greg always stirred feelings he’d rather only face in the privacy of his own home. It might have been over two years since he’d stabbed Greg to death, but the emotions were still raw. He inhaled and released his breath, just like Dr Mahmood, his psychiatrist, had taught him. ‘Well, that’s one sicko we can cross off our suspect list,’ he said, slapping Taffy on the back.

‘Eh?’

‘Whoever did this, it wasn’t Smiling Jack, now, was it?’

The crime scene crew were still placing the metal treads that provided a direct pathway between the tent and the entrance, to avoid contaminating potential evidence. With the threat of thundery showers, they’d want to crack on. Gus, deciding to give them space, looked around to see which officers were at his disposal. A kid in shorts and a T-shirt, gripping a dog leash for grim life, leaned against a boulder. *Must be the boy who found the body.* Someone had draped a blanket round his shoulders and Gus assumed the lad had been in shock – either that or he was a damn reptile, for Gus was sweating buckets and Taffy had a sheen of sweat across his forehead. A uniformed officer stood beside him – a big bloke with a baby face. He crossed his arms over his chest as if he was about to arrest the kid. Sometimes, these uniforms were a bit too damn officious. The lad would already be in a sorry state and would respond better to kindness. As Gus and Taffy walked towards them, the cheery officer approached, eagerness rolling off him in spades.

‘Too hot in’t it, sir?’

Gus scowled and tutted. Course it was bloody hot. Especially for the uniforms with all the tactical shit they had to carry. No need to be so damn jovial about it, though, was there?

The officer continued regardless. ‘Before you speak to him, sir, you have to see this.’ He rummaged in his pocket and came out with two evidence bags which he handed to Gus. Inside one was an unsmoked, rather amateurishly rolled spliff and the remnants of a weed bag and, in the other, a tin and a bud grinder. ‘Took it from him while he was fleeing the scene.’

Taffy snorted and turned it into a cough as Gus replied, ‘You think this kid is implicated in the murder, then?’

The bulky man frowned, his jowls wobbling as he shook his head. ‘No, no. Reckon he just discovered the body, like.’

‘Okaaay.’ Gus stretched the word out before continuing, ‘So, he’s a witness – a traumatised witness?’

‘Eh well, yes, s’pose so. Got all shaky and that when we brought him back here.’

‘Look, Constable...?’

‘Sayed, sir.’

‘So, Constable Sayed. This lad’s what, fifteen? Sixteen?’

‘Sixteen, sir – Karim Mirza’s his name.’

‘Okay, so Karim is sixteen. He’s just found a dead body, and he’s shitting it. Is that a pretty fair assessment of the situation?’

Sayed shifted on his feet. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Right, so perhaps, we could cut him a bit of slack on the weed front – not like he’s carrying enough to supply the district, is it? Perhaps focus on getting his statement without traumatising him any more, eh?’

Sayed nodded once, blinking, face red. Gus took pity on him. ‘Look, you’re new to the job, yeah?’

Again, the nod and blinking eyes.

‘Well, learn from this. It’s good to frighten the kids up if you catch them with stuff but you also need to look at the bigger picture – murder and finding a dead body trumps possession of weed for personal use, right?’

Sayed looked deflated, and Gus felt like a dick. Just because he was overheated didn’t mean he should take it out on the uniforms. ‘Don’t worry about it. Check if any of the houses opposite have cameras. See if you can catch anything suspicious. I suspect they’re too far off to have caught anything, but you never know.’

As Sayed walked away, Taffy muttered, ‘Tosser,’ under his breath. Gus nudged him.

‘Don’t be so damn hard on him. He’s learning, that’s all.’

Taffy shrugged. ‘Wasn’t talking about him, Boss.’

Gus threw his head back and laughed. ‘Cheeky sod!’ and, still laughing, he strode past Taffy and approached the young lad.

Mirza’s eyes were swollen and red and, as Gus neared, his bottom lip trembled. The dog growled deep in its throat and Gus stopped short of him. ‘I’m DI Gus McGuire – you can call me Gus. Nice dog, Karim. She yours?’

His feet scuffing over the pebbles, Karim shushed the dog. ‘Nah, Mrs Brown’s – she’s had a hip op.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Not sure – think she’s called Felicity or summat.’

Gus risked a glance at Taffy, who was biting his lip to stop himself from laughing. ‘I meant the dog’s name, Karim. Not Mrs Brown’s.’

‘Oh, eh, right – Trixie-Belle.’

Gus stared at him. ‘You kidding me? Trixie-Belle? She’s a bloody Rottweiler, for God’s sake! She must weigh a hundred pounds. I was expecting Titan or Rocky or something. Why the hell would anyone name her Trixie-Belle?’

As he spoke, Gus had moved closer, his hand out for the dog to sniff. All his instincts told him to run. The scars on his leg and arm from last time he’d encountered a Rottweiler itched. He swallowed his fear and tried not to flinch when the dog’s mouth opened, revealing razor-sharp teeth and a pink tongue. *How ferocious could a mutt called Trixie-Belle be?*

Karim grinned. ‘I know. It’s embarrassing when I take her out.’ He looked down at his trainers and then met Gus’ eye. ‘Sometimes, if people ask her name, I lie and tell them it’s Tyson.’

Gus laughed. ‘Don’t blame you.’ He let the dog lick him for a bit longer, then brought his hand up to scratch Trixie-Belle’s head. ‘Now, about this bud.’

Karim glanced round as if someone might swoop in to rescue him. ‘I...’

Gus stopped him. ‘No excuses. We’re going to overlook it this time, okay? We’re more interested in what you saw and how you discovered the body.’

The lad’s shoulders relaxed, and a small grin twitched his lips. He held his palm out to retrieve the bags from Gus.

Gus snatched them back ‘Eh, said we’d overlook it. Didn’t say you’re getting it back. I’ll dispose of it in the normal way at The Fort.’

The smile faded from Karim’s face, making Gus smile. *Dozy kid*. Maybe he’d learn a lesson from this, though Gus doubted that. He remembered too well what it was to be young. ‘So, walk me through what happened.’

Karim kicked the ground and, in little more than a whisper, explained about being forced to walk Trixie-Belle, stopping to light his cig, and the dog escaping. His voice shook when he described how he’d entered the grounds and heard Trixie-Belle’s barks coming from the corner. ‘When I saw the body, I freaked, like. Didn’t stop – just ran.’ He sniffed and shrugged, trying to look nonchalant, but he didn’t fool Gus.

He squeezed the lad’s shoulder. ‘I’d have done the same, Karim. Most folk would.’

Karim wiggled his nose, head ducked towards the ground. ‘Thing is, I think I recognised him. He goes to City Academy. I’m sure of it. He’s in my sister’s year. She knows him, but I don’t know his name.’

*Fuck's sake!* It was always harder when it was a kid. The City Academy link meant Patti would have to be involved. *Why do our paths always have to cross both professionally and romantically?* He turned to Taffy. 'Take the lad home, explain to his parents what's happened, minus the weed, and take a statement. See if you can get the dead boy's name from his sister. I'm going to see what Hissing Sid and his crew have for me in the tent.'

## CHAPTER 8

The sweltering night air catches in my throat, all clammy and cloying. My breath's a series of gasps, keeping time to my feet pounding the damp pavement as I jog. Adrenalin's still pumping. Just want to get home now... need to think... get my head right.

*What the fuck happened?* My stomach lurches, acid hits the back of my throat, and I gob it out into the gutter. It's like that releases something and I stop, my soles slipping on the concrete. As I bend over the kerb, hands on knees, a spatter of bile surges up and into my mouth before spurting out. It splatters onto the road where it lies, caught in the light from the nearby street lamp.

'Ho', Jo Jo. Can't hold your drink, eh? Ya pussy.'

*Fuck's sake!* Of all the little scrotes I could have bumped into, why did it have to be Hamid, fucking, Farooqi? Hammerhead to his friends and *Fucking* Hammerhead to his enemies. Reluctant to stand upright in case I'm sick again, I turn my head and see four pairs of identical trainers attached to four pairs of legs in skinny jeans. They're standing in a semi-circle, crowding me, ready to move in if they feel like it. Like a huge fucking upright spider with me in the web. Hamid and his sidekicks are as toxic as a fucking tarantula too – and as ugly. Last thing I need is to have a convo with these wankers. I straighten and step back. Always wise to keep your distance from Hamid the Hammerhead. The knob's always looking for trouble and I could do without any – especially right now. I send a quick glance to my left to check my escape route and brace my shoulders.

'What'd you want? Bit past your bedtime, innit?' My heart thuds, but I snarl the words at them. Best not to show any chinks. Best to put on a front. It's the only way.

Hamid takes a step towards me, and I don't react. Show weakness and the bastard'll have me.

His drongos step forward too, flanking their chief, two to the right, one to the left. Beer cans in one hand, spliffs in the other, each of them carries the glazed eyes of the stoner.

'You back-chatting me, Jo Jo?' Hammerhead grins like it's all a big joke. Head tilts to the side, displaying the love bite on his neck.

I hold my hands out, palms up. 'Course not, wouldn't dick you about or owt, would I? Just heading home now.'

He gets in my face, his breath a combination of weed and beer with a side of KFC. His tone changes, all jokiness gone. ‘You need to get wise, Jo Jo. You know? Like my boys here.’ He gestures to his slack-faced zombies. ‘Need to sign up with either us or Razor’s lot. Make your choice. Can’t keep sitting on the fence forever. After all, you want to keep your mum and sister safe, don’t you?’

He reaches over and grips my head - pressing hard into my scalp. He shakes it, and then lets go before slapping my forehead with the heel of his hand. I’m still recovering from that when his knee hits me in the balls. The drongos laugh like idiots as I bend over, clutching my crotch. The vomit’s out of my mouth before I can even groan. Thank fuck the weed and alcohol combo seems to have weakened him because I’m not seeing stars or anything like I did last time.

He’s not finished yet though. He grabs my hair and yanks hard. ‘Decision soon, right?’

Then he’s off, sauntering towards the park, zombies in tow, laughing.

I take a moment to regroup, then straighten and head up the road towards home.

Ping!

Zarqa: You all right?

Fucking hell! Leave me alone! I fire off a reply and hope she gets the message.

Me: Yep. Speak tomoz.

Can’t think about Zarqa right now. Can’t think about what we done, and I definitely can’t think about Hammerhead either. Too much else to crack on with, and it’s too late now. I try to shove it out of my mind. Tomorrow will be soon enough to rake over everything I did tonight, and Hammerhead’s ultimatum.

When I reach my house, it’s in darkness. The gate creaks when you open it so, despite my shakiness, I climb over, the slap of my trainers loud, when I land on the concrete. The encounter with Hamid’s gang on top of what happened earlier has me on edge. Even the scrape of my key turning in the lock makes me cringe. I open the door and walk in and hesitate, listening.

Ping!

The sound startles me, and I jump, then look at the screen. Not again!

Zarqa: We cool?

Me: Yep! Tomoz, okay?

Zarqa: Later!

Fucking later? Her and her fucking stupid later. I put my phone to silent and breathe a sigh of relief. At least I can forget about her for now. I tune in again, hoping for no signs of movement. The only sound is next door's telly on too loud. That and the annoying buzz from the fridge showing that it's on its way out. Another fucking expense to consider. With my mobile on torch mode, I slip my trainers off at the bottom of the stairs. The beam lands on Jessie's school shoes. They're all tattered, the heel trodden down and the sole coming away at the front. I bite my lip and glance at the time on my phone. Fifteen minutes to go. Better be quick then. Got to get ready.

I creep upstairs, avoiding every creak, and reach my bedroom door without hassle. I unlock the door and, stepping in, heave a huge sigh. Sanctuary. Striding across the room, avoiding the mishmash of wires that snake from my PC, I flick on the bedside light and fling myself on the bed. Need to get my head together before work. Get into the zone. Twelve minutes to go!

A voice drifts along the corridor. 'That you, Jo Jo? You're late tonight. Help me to the loo, son. There's a doll.'

*Fuck!* I pull the pillow around my ears, blocking out her repeated call. Then a pang contracts my chest. How can I be so fucking tight? She must be starving. I made her scrambled eggs this morning and divided my share between her and Jessie, but that's all she'll have had to eat today. Benefits cheque's not due until tomorrow. Wonder if she's had her meds?

I rise, every muscle protesting. All I want is a few minutes to collect my thoughts, but I can't let her down. 'Coming, Mam.'

Her room smells of stale piss and roses. She looks so frail on the bed. Today's not been a good one for her. Lines trail out from the corners of her mouth and across her forehead, like those root diagrams on the biology classroom walls. Still, she smiles when she sees me, her eyes lighting up. I paste a smile on and move over to drop a kiss on her greasy hair. 'Home Help not help you shower today, Mam?'

'Cancelled again, Jo Jo. Jessie brought me a cup of tea and some toast earlier.' Her face flushes. 'She tried to empty the commode, bless her, but it was too heavy for her. She spilt a bit.'

I deal with the commode, making a mental note to get on the phone to the care agency. Don't want to complain too much, though, in case they decide to take Jessie away. Then I help her shuffle through to the main bathroom. I stand her next to the toilet and then wait outside,



giving her privacy. When I hear the flush, I go inside and help her do an all-over sponge-wash and brush her teeth. She hates it. Hates that I have to do it, but folk like us have no option. No fucking choice. Not like I enjoy it either. But I'm all she's got. When she's back in bed, I nip downstairs and make her a tea. Only then do I sneak a glance at the time. Running well late. Three minutes to go.

'Got to go, Mam. Homework to do.'

She grips my hand and squeezes it. 'You're a good boy, Jo Jo. Don't know what I'd do without you.'

I shrug and give her the TV controls and pretend not to notice the glimmer of tears, or that her grip is less firm than usual. Tomorrow will be a better day. It couldn't be any effing worse.

I smile and kiss her forehead. 'Night, Mam.'

So much for getting in the zone. Just have to force myself... need the dosh. Wishing I didn't have to do this, I push open my bedroom door and stop. *Shit!* Anger surges from my toes right up to my head in a red-hot flame. I close the door, so I don't disturb Mam and try to keep my voice calm. 'What you doing in here, Jessie? You know you're not allowed.'

In her too-short PJs, her ginger hair mussed, My Little Pony toy under her arm, nipple clamps in one hand and a butt plug in the other, Jessie blinks at me. 'Couldn't sleep, Jo Jo. Wanted a cuddle.' Her bottom lip trembles as she shifts her weight from one foot to the other. 'What are these, Jo Jo?'

'They're nowt, Jessie. Just some stuff for my machines. You've not to touch them again, okay?' She's so little. Still, her PJs slide up her arm and barely cover her knees. *How the hell did I forget to lock the door?* I never forget and now she's standing there holding fucking sex toys.

I stride across the room, remove the clamps and butt plug from her tiny hands and throw them on the bed. I head for the door, swinging her onto my hip, as I wonder what else she's touched, what else she's seen. Fucking idiot, should've locked the damn door. Need to get a grip on things. Can't let what happened earlier distract me. Got to hold things together for Jessie and me mam.

'You cross, Jo Jo?'

Her scrunched up nose and the downward tip of her lips tells me she's near to tears. I nuzzle my forehead into her hair and force a smile. 'No, Jessie. Course not. Now back to bed for you. It's a school day tomorrow.'

As I carry her from the room, the insistent flashing light on my laptop taunts me, reminding me I've got work to do. Nearly show time and I'm still not oiled up. Just hope to God tonight's

client dun't want owt too kinky. After everything that's happened this evening, I'm so *not* in the mood.

## CHAPTER 9

Sweat pooled under Gus' armpits as he made his way towards the Haunted House which was lit by harsh white light blasting from the spotlights. Still eerie, the savage lighting lent an almost ethereal glow to proceedings, conjuring up images in his mind of elves and fairies and goblins rather than the much scarier Smiling Jack that Karim had spoken about earlier. The house still loomed, silent and brooding, but its edges looked smoother, less abrasively threatening. Gus smiled and shrugged off the lingering fear he'd experienced as a child when dusk had crept up on him and his friends unexpectedly.

Near the front door, he turned around to judge both the distance and the view to the road. As expected, visibility was poor. There was no chance of a passer-by noticing anything out of the ordinary unless they entered the grounds. What had enticed this young lad into the shrubbery? A dare gone wrong? Drug deal? Illicit meeting with a girlfriend... or boyfriend... or prostitute?

As he moved closer the mumbled voices of the crime scene officers became louder. He dreaded putting on his crime scene suit – never had the term 'boiler suit' seemed more apt. He admired the fortitude of the crime scene techs who, without complaint, worked in them despite the heat. Hissing Sid's team had already erected a crime scene tent around the body and Gus was keen to view it in situ before they moved it to the morgue. When he reached the inner crime scene cordon, Gus signed himself in, before struggling into the suit he'd grabbed from a plastic box, abandoned on the parched grass.

His father's voice drifted through from inside, his Scottish brogue calming and for once, Gus had no energy to be irked that his dad was the pathologist on call. Keeping to the metal treads, he approached a cluster of CSIs in white coveralls who were busy processing the scene. His dad insisted on seeing the body where it lay. It was part of the deal his old man had signed with himself years ago when he first became a pathologist. Gus had signed a similar deal with himself when he became a detective. The weight that had settled in the pit of his stomach made him expect the worst. No way would a teenager be lying dead in the shrubbery of this derelict house in unsuspecting circumstances. Taffy's notion of unseen evil didn't seem so far-fetched. Gus shuddered and peered into the shadows, trying to dispel the feeling that just out of sight a monster was lurking. *Get a grip, Gus!* He thrust those thoughts away and concentrated on the death he was investigating. Suicide, murder, or a grotesque accident, it made no difference to

Gus. A family out there somewhere would be wakened in the middle of the night to learn that they'd lost a loved one and it was Gus' job to get to the bottom of it for them.

The two officers who'd called it in had referred to it as a murder scene and, although he hadn't said so, the lad, Karim, clearly thought that too. Fully covered and with damp dreads tucked inside his hood to avoid cross contamination of the area, Gus popped his head through the flap. 'Okay to come in, Sid?'

A man of smaller stature turned and grinned at him. 'Well if it isn't Gussy boy, late to the party but welcome, nonetheless. Come on in. Your dad's just about finished doing his magic.'

Used to Hissing Sid's blasé humour, Gus ignored the other man's tone and stepped through the flap into a wall of heat that made him want to strip down to his shorts and T-shirt. A quick glance at his dad told him he was suffering too. His round face, ruddier than usual, was dappled with droplets of sweat and his beard had become a cluster of tight curls in the humidity. If Gus was struggling, his dad would be at the end of his tether – a big man who carried a sizeable amount of excess weight, this weather was torture to him, especially when wrapped in a crime scene suit in the narrow confines of a sweltering tent.

Gus cleared his mind of any thoughts and approached the body, which was hidden by his father's enormous frame. Dr McGuire moved to the side in silence. His gaze remained on the boy sprawled on his back on the brown weeds as he allowed his son time to take in the scene.

The lad looked younger than sixteen. If it hadn't been for the knife protruding from his neck and the pool of coagulating blood on the grass beneath him, he could have been enjoying a doze. From the head's position - face upwards, eyes closed - Gus could tell that he'd been placed like that. If he'd fallen, his head would naturally have angled to the opposite side from the entry wound. The way the lad's legs stretched straight out like tram lines, his toes pointing to the sky corroborated this observation. Skinny legs stuck out from his denim shorts with a pair of newish looking Nike trainers on his feet. His arms had been brought forward and his hands clasped together on his abdomen, rather like he was in a coffin. Grasped in his fingers was an iPhone.

Gus' gaze trailed up to the lad's face. A spattering of acne across his forehead and faint stubble on his chin seemed to emphasise the waste of life. His clothes were fashionable although not ostentatiously so. If the phone belonged to the lad, Gus was sure they'd get an ID soon enough. He turned to Sid. 'When you've done photographing here get that phone off to the lab. I want to ID the kid asap.' Crouching for a closer look, Gus spoke to the uniformed officer who'd accompanied him into the tent. 'No missing person's reports tonight?'

'No, sir. I've asked them to alert us if any come in fitting the lad's description.'

Satisfied, Gus nodded. ‘Right, Sid, if Dr McGuire has finished and you’ve done your bit, can we check for other ID?’

‘Done it just before you arrived. The lad’s got nothing on him – nowt in his pockets. Maybe whoever did this to him swiped it.’

The weapon looked like any bog-standard kitchen knife, but they’d be able to get a brand after they removed it at the post mortem. Gus leaned in closer to the lad and sniffed. Apart from the coppery blood smell which he was desperately trying to ignore, he could detect something else. ‘Alcohol?’

Sid clapped his gloved hands, making a slappy seal type of sound. ‘Well done. Yep. I thought there was some booze consumed, so I got them,’ he gestured to his team, ‘to bag up all the bottles they find for printing. Might get lucky and find our killer’s prints.’ He kicked the ground. ‘We’re fortunate it’s been so dry. Almost perfect crime scene for us. No deterioration of evidence. Hopefully we’ll get summat.’ He paused, and an elongated squeaky sound rent the air.

For a second, Gus looked round to identify the source of the noise before jumping to his feet, gagging. ‘For fuck’s sake, Sid. As if it’s not bad enough in here without your pollution. Get the fuck away from me if all you can contribute is toxic farts.’

Sid looked at him, his smile clear even behind his mask. ‘Summat’s got to lighten the atmosphere, Gus.’

A quick glance at his dad told Gus that he was unamused too. ‘Not the time nor the place. Just get out of here and let me talk to the doc. You need to quit this shit, Sid. Nobody is amused – nobody!’

A ripple of approval went around the tent and one of the CSIs who’d observed the disagreement nodded. Sid looked at them, then at Gus, before leaving the tent.

With a sigh, Gus looked at his dad, who slapped a hand on his son’s shoulder. ‘Och, he needs to know, laddie. It’s getting beyond a joke and he does it on purpose. Ye did right telling him.’

Gus wasn’t so sure his pulling rank on the CSI officer wouldn’t come back to bite him on the arse. He’d argued with Hissing Sid before and things were only just beginning to mend. Now he’d felt compelled to pull him up yet again for disrespectful behaviour. Truth was, Gus had been on edge, trying to control his reaction to the blood, otherwise he’d have pulled Sid to the side and admonished him privately rather than in public. On second thoughts, he’d given Sid ample warnings, and he’d chosen to ignore them. Perhaps a short sharp shock was necessary. He pulled his thoughts back to the boy lying before them and focussed. ‘Jugular?’

Doc McGuire, with effort, lowered himself onto one knee and inspected the wound. ‘Aye, a forceful, vicious stab wound delivered by a right-handed person standing in front o’ him. However,’ he leaned forward and turned the boy’s wrists, ‘these striations indicate to me that the victim was tied up. The cuts are deep into the skin.’

Gus studied the cuts. ‘Looks like cable tie marks to me.’

One of the CSIs stepped forward holding out a bag containing a cable tie that had been sliced open. ‘Funny you should say that. Just found this over in the shrubbery at the back. There’s blood trace on this.’

Gus smiled a thank you before looking at an area to the side of the boy’s head where his dad was pointing. A series of faint bruises at either side of his skull fanned out with five distinct pressure points ranging from his forehead down to his jawline.

‘Fingerprints?’

Dr McGuire nodded. ‘Looks like someone held his head steady wi’ a vice-like grip.’ He struggled back to his feet, indicated that Gus should turn around and then positioned his hands on Gus’ head. His father’s spread fingers touched Gus’ forehead and temple and his thumb rested at his lower jaw an inch below his ear.

Being so close to his dad, especially at a crime scene felt odd. It took him back to the rough and tumble they’d enjoyed when he was a kid. It was an eternity ago and his dad had added a substantial amount of weight in the interim which was why he was breathing so hard in Gus’ ear now. He’d have a word with his mum about putting him on a diet. Last thing he wanted was for the old bugger to keel over from a heart attack. ‘So, there were two of them?’

‘Aye, looks like it. As usual, ah’ll be able to tell ye mair after the PM, but ah think the bruising on his head happened at around the same time... no I’m pretty certain o’ that.’

Gus bit his lip and took a few minutes to study the boy. Kids’ deaths were hard. He wondered what this lad’s aspirations had been. Did he play sports? Was he arty? Who were his friends? His relatives? It didn’t matter to Gus whether he’d been clever, or talented... he was a kid whose life had been snuffed out violently and that meant that Gus was committed to finding whoever had done it. He waited for his dad to give instructions about the removal of the body and together they left the tent, retracing their steps over the metal treads.

Gus’ limbs felt heavy and trickles of sweat rolled down his back, soaking into the T-shirt he wore under the suit. A minuscule breeze had picked up. Not enough to cool the air but enough to send gentle wafts of his dad’s body odour in Gus’ direction. The oppressive heat combined with The Fort’s wonky air conditioning meant that the past few weeks had been filled with an

array of BO, with top notes of different perfumes and deodorants designed to disguise the smell. The weather couldn't break soon enough for Gus, yet the forecast showed no signs of a change.

As they moved closer to the road, Gus' phone rang, startling him. It was a ringtone he rarely heard any more - 'The Bitch is Back' - and yet this was the third time today. Seemingly his dad also recognised it. 'You and Gabriella speaking again?'

Gus and his ex-wife had avoided each other for the past few months. Partly because she blamed him for her brother's death and partly because Gus couldn't stand the conflict she brought to his life. He flicked the phone to dismiss her call and shrugged. 'I've spoken to Katie, but not Gabriella. She's phoned a few times today, but I just can't handle her.'

'Ye'll hae tae speak to her sometime, laddie. She's living wi' yer sister, ye cannae just pretend she doesnae exist forever, you know? Besides...'

Besides nothing. Gus had suffered enough of his ex-wife's machinations to last a lifetime. Silently cursing, Gus smiled a tight smile and remained silent. Trust Gabriella to ring when he was with his dad. He'd put up with his parents trying to smooth things over between them 'for Katie's sake'. Despite feeling bad for his sister, he couldn't summon up the energy to give a shit about Gabriella. He had more important relationships to nurture – like the one with Patti and the one with his team... thinking of his team made him think of Alice and another wave of tiredness rolled over him.

'... maybe they need ye right now.'

*Really?* Gus looked at his dad, hurt that he'd play the guilt card and without responding, he raised a hand in farewell and strode towards Taffy who was waiting for him by the car. 'I'll send Taffy to the PM tomorrow, Dad. Let me know when it is.'

He could feel his father's eyes on his back as he walked away, but he couldn't bring himself to look back. This was the first PM he had delegated to a subordinate officer, yet for once, he carried no guilt. Taffy enjoyed the PMs, while Gus struggled with them. The work with his psychiatrist on delegating stuff was paying off.

## CHAPTER 10

**H**ear hammering, I run past the BRI, through the Duckworth Lane Roundabout, down Lilycroft Road, past The Fort and onto Oak Lane. Downhill all the way. My throat's raw through breathing in the warm night air. My hoodie sticks to me, damp and uncomfortable. As I pass Mo's Samosas, I slow down, wishing for even a small gasp of air to cool me down. Fucking café. No way I'll be helping there ever again. On cue, my phone vibrates... it's him... Mo. Why can't he just leave me alone?

Mo: You okay, Zarqa? It's late. Mum and I are worried about you. Let us know you're safe, love Dad xxx.

I shove it back in my pocket, wishing I could throw it on the road and jump on it. Better still, I wish it was Mo's head. Then I'd *really* enjoy stamping on it. My hair's tangled and sweat pours down my cheeks, dripping off my chin. Impatient, I wipe my face with the sleeve of my hoodie. Then, gasping for air, I fold forward, resting my hands on my knees and try to draw breath. Apart from my raw pants, noises fill the night. Cars slow down as they reach the traffic lights at Manningham Lane. Distant sirens compete with souped-up lad racers. Over by the bank, two homeless blokes are arguing. The sounds roll over me, soothing me, and at last my breathing slows and my lungs stop hurting quite so much.

What the fuck have we done, Jo Jo and me? What the fuck did we do? I pushed him into it... forced him, really. He wasn't keen, had his reservations... but I wouldn't let go. Wouldn't give up. My breath hitches in my throat and I snort back a sob. Too bloody late to get upset now. Way too late.

I notice the group of lads behind me. They're still a distance away, but I can hear their voices; loud and full of swag. They're probably all right, but I can't be arsed with the hassle, so I straighten up, flip my hood over my head, tuck my hair inside, and bulk up my frame before turning into my street. When I reach my house, the lights shine through the curtains. That's the last thing I want – another yelling match. I turn on my heels, ready to retrace my steps – I'd rather take my chances with the Oak Lane lads than face Mo and my mum. I step forward and falter.

Ping!



Mum: Zarqa, please come home. You need your sleep, beti. Remember you've got an exam tomorrow? We're not cross. Love Mum, xxx.

Aw shit! My knees buckle as a wave of exhaustion rolls over me. I've enough sense to realise it's because of the adrenalin rush... that and guilt. I close my eyes for a second and then hear the chirrup chirrup of a car lock further down the street. That makes my mind up for me. Instead of heading back, I turn and squeeze myself through the hedge that borders our property and practically fall in a heap on the grass in the corner of the back yard. This area is out of reach of the security sensor, so unless a fox or something strolls across the middle of the garden or up the main path, the dark will hide me.

I pull my hoodie off, peeling it off my arms like shedding a layer of flesh. The warm air feels good on my skin. It doesn't cool me, but quickly dries my sweat. I scrunch forward and spread the hoodie under my bum before pulling my knees up under my chin and hugging them close to my chest. For ages, I watch the shadows cast by the street lighting and the moon flicker before me. Each one is familiar to me, yet right now, none seem real. It's as if they're dissociated from me – part of another life, another time. The garden shed where I used to play with my dolls, the playhouse that my sisters use, the washing whirligig, permanently open now it's summer, the store where we keep the logs for winter... it all seems alien... like it was never mine.

I roll my head, trying to ease the crick in my neck and exhale. Now, I'm here, the night closing in around me, the sounds from the road muted, I can concentrate. I need to focus. What Jo Jo and I did tonight was bad... really bad. My mind keeps flashing to the last act, but I can't allow it to linger there. I've got to be smart. What does my godfather, Gus, always say? Yep that's it: 'It's the forensics that let them down every time, Zarqa.'

Right, so, have we left forensic evidence behind, Jo Jo and me? We covered up; we wore gloves. Jo Jo made sure no-one saw us. As near as I could make out, we're okay – in the clear. So why do I feel like crap?

It'll be all over the news tomorrow. They'll all be chatting shit about it at school – I could skip school – get Jo Jo to bunk off too. Couldn't care less about my exams, couldn't care less about anything. Shit, Zarqa, don't be soft. Course you can't bunk off school with Jo Jo – that'd be a sure way of drawing attention to yourself. Get a fucking grip! Got to act normal. Like nowt's happened.

I pull my knees tighter under my chin and try to breathe slowly. There's nothing pointing to us. They'll put it down to another hate crime, that's all. Jo Jo and I need to brazen it out and

not crack. So what if it's on the news? So what if everybody's talking about it? It's nowt to do with us. We'll keep our heads down until it all blows over. I mean how long can it all last?

I rock on my bum. My eyes fill with tears, and I open my mouth and bite my knee to stop the sobs that want to break out from escaping. What we did was bad, but it's done now. There's nothing we can do about it, except stay schtum.

## CHAPTER 11

**B**y the time Gus and Taffy returned to The Fort, they knew the victim's identity. When he hadn't returned home by eleven, Pratab Patel's parents had turned up at The Fort to report him missing. It took only a glance at the photos on Mrs Patel's phone to wrench their fragile hope away.

Bereaved parents shouldn't be interviewed in a police station, yet Gus had no choice. They needed as much information as they could extract, and grieving would have to come second to expediency for now. Although he hated it, this was one job Gus couldn't delegate, so he escorted Pratab's parents into the coolest, most comfortable room they had. Like it mattered which room you were in when your heart breaks into a trillion pieces. As if they'd ever be comfortable again.

Mrs Patel, hair bundled up in a loose top knot sat tearless, clasping and unclasping her hands while Gus made drinks which would remain untouched. By the time Gus sat opposite them, her hands were still, and she sat, straight shouldered, looking at him. She was the strong one, maintaining her composure, although her lips were tight and tell-tale lines furrowed her brow. On entering the room, Mr Patel had collapsed in a heap on the couch and remained scrunched in on himself, a low keening sound his only response to Gus' questions.

As his wife soothed him, speaking in Gujarati, holding his head to her chest, patting his hair as he sobbed, Gus felt like an intruder. He sipped tea he didn't want and waited until Mr Patel's blinding grief turned to numbness before speaking. 'Where was Pratab supposed to be this evening?'

Mrs Patel, gripping her husband's fingers so tightly that her knuckles turned white, spoke, her voice shaking over every word. 'Pratab said he was going to study at his friend Haider's house because they have...' realising her mistake she inhaled. 'I mean *had* a maths exam tomorrow. When he hadn't returned by nine, we phoned round, but he hadn't been at his friend's, had never had an arrangement to study there. He lied to us and now...'

Tears trickled down her face and releasing her husband's hand she brushed them away. Gus suspected that Pratab's lie would haunt her for a long time... that and the '*what ifs*' that always accompanied a violent death. There was nothing he could do to soothe her, but he wished that even just for a few seconds, Mr Patel would respond to his wife's grief instead of allowing his own to swallow him up.

As if sensing Gus' thoughts, Mrs Patel sniffed and gripped her husband's hand again. 'Manoj is unwell. He suffers from anxiety and depression. This is too difficult for him to deal with. I must take him home. I need to tell my other children about their brother... how will I do that, Detective McGuire?'

Helpless and ineffectual, Gus could offer little comfort. 'All you can do is tell them the truth and then be there for each other.'

He waited before adding, 'There are a few more questions. Will you be all right?'

A gentle smile crossed her lips, and she nodded. 'I just want to find out who did this to my boy. Ask anything you like.'

'Has Pratab seemed different recently? Anything out of the ordinary? Erratic behaviour? Worried, anxious... anything?'

'Maybe a little anxious. We put it down to the stress of his GCSEs. He's been a bit distant. Skipping meals and things... but nothing major. Nothing that made us feel he was at risk. He's a good boy is Pratab. Set to get A\*s in his exams.'

'You have other children?'

'Yes. Kiran is seventeen, almost eighteen, and Mita is fifteen. We wanted to have them close together. Wanted them to be close growing up.'

*Those poor kids to lose a brother like that.*

'I have to ask a few more things. Was Pratab happy at school? Any new friends? No staying out later than normal? Playing up? A girlfriend?'

As expected, those questions had Mrs Patel bristling. No parent likes the hint that their child might misbehave, and no grieving parent wants to address their dead child's imperfections. Her lips tightened and a pulse at the side of her face twitched.

'My son is dead and you're hinting that he's to blame?'

No matter how prepared he was for this reaction, Gus hated having to ask the questions. He took a steadying breath and maintained eye contact with Mrs Patel. 'I'm not suggesting this is Pratab's fault. The only person responsible is whoever did this to him... and we'll do our best to find out who that is. However, if there is anything, even something insignificant that sticks in your mind, it could help us find his killer. I know this is hard and you're doing so well. Think about it overnight and if you remember anything at all, just get in touch.'

'Can we leave, now? We need to go... Kiran and Mita... you know?'

Gus nodded. 'I'll allocate a Family Liaison Officer. Her role will be to liaise between you and the investigation team, but I will come to see you tomorrow. I want to talk to your other children and get more of a sense of who Pratab was.'

She nodded and stood up, cajoling her husband to his feet. Mr Patel wobbled and looked like he might collapse. Gus stepped forward and took his other arm. 'Will you be okay? I can get a patrol car to take you.'

'If you can help me to the car, Kiran will help us when we get home. It's not far. I can drive. I'd rather have the car with me... just in case.'

Escorting them to their vehicle, Gus walked with his hand under Mr Patel's elbow, Gus could feel the grief wracking the man's body. He swore that whoever had destroyed this family's happiness would be brought to justice.

## CHAPTER 12

*Monday*

Every stride was like slicing through a brick wall with a butter knife and Gus wasn't sure why he was putting himself through it. Not five minutes away from his front door, he'd entered Lister Park through the Emm Lane entrance and already his face was oozing sweat, and his T-shirt was clinging to him. Even the traffic seemed lethargic along Bradford Road, as if it was expecting a storm. Hell, they'd been waiting for one to break for days and nothing had materialised.

It had been a long route to recovery since his stabbing in February and, even now, he felt an acute stab of pain when he jogged; a pulling sensation from his upper thigh to his groin as the scar tissue mended. Still, this was *his* time. The chance for him to think and, after the anonymous note and the murdered boy, he'd plenty to think about.

Of course, there was Gabriella too. What the hell was she playing at, phoning him after so many months? He'd almost fired off a text to his sister telling her to make Gaby stop hassling him, but he'd reconsidered. Last thing he needed was to get drawn into their dramas... not when he'd landed a murder case. He could wring Gaby's bloody neck for the way she'd behaved at her brother's funeral... the things she'd said to him. Did she want him to turn a blind eye to her murdering brother's misdeeds? His pace increased making his chest tighten and his muscles pull. His anxiety was because he was thinking about Gaby and so he slowed a little. Just a damn pity the oppressive heat made his jog so much harder. Determined not to let the heat beat him, he added an extra circuit of the boating lake before heading up and past Cartwright Hall to work.

He swerved right and, seconds later, groaned as he felt the slight incline pull his leg muscles again. With gritted teeth, he pushed through the burn and soon he was on the level, heading past the ducks and swans that had gathered at the top end of the pond near the islands. Warmth filled the air with a mulchy smell which, combined with the ammonia from the generous deposits created by the geese, had Gus breathing through his mouth. Dodging the excrement was hazardous, and he slipped a couple of times, wrenching his scar. The park was busy, although mainly with power walkers who had slowed their pace in deference to the heat. Most were going in the opposite direction from Gus, so he waved and nodded at the few regulars he

encountered. A few school kids sauntered around or sat, phones in hand, on the wooden seats, some in uniform and some, on exam leave, wearing shorts and T-shirts.

He'd nearly completed his self-enforced circle of the pond, when he noticed a couple of familiar forms, their sleeping bags rolled up and tied with string on the floor at their feet sitting on a bench. Gus slowed as he approached. He'd not seen Dave and Jerry for a few weeks and was keen to check up on them. During the Beast from the East, things had hit crisis point for Dave and he'd ended up in Lynfield Mount for a while. He looked chubbier and rosier than when Gus had last seen him. 'Hi, you two. Sunbathing?'

Jerry chortled, deep and low, his eyes sparkling as he replied. 'Sun gods, that's what we are, in't we, Dave?'

Gus turned his attention to Dave who gave an abrupt nod. For Dave, that was gregarious, and Gus nodded back. The homeless man's eyes were clear today, and it was fair to assume that Jerry was keeping on top of his mate's meds. Gus had enlisted Mo's help in ensuring that the two old men had a regular supply of food and hot drinks during the winter. Now that the weather was so hot though, Gus was concerned that they'd dehydrate. He slipped off the small backpack he carried when jogging and extracted two bottles of water before offering one to each man. It pleased him to see no hesitancy from Dave when he accepted it. 'Keep your fluids up, yeah?'

With a grin, Jerry opened the bottle, and took a hearty swig. Dave, after a peek at his friend, did likewise. 'Wanted to talk to you, Gus.' Jerry had lowered his voice and began kicking the ground in front of the bench. The toe of his plimsoll flapped as his foot moved, prompting Gus to make a mental note to check if his old man had any spare shoes. He reckoned Jerry's feet were about the same size as his dad's. 'Yeah? Is something up?'

Jerry exchanged a glance with Dave, who nodded once before folding his arms over his chest and staring into the distance.

This was odd. 'You two okay?'

Jerry sighed and raised his head to look straight at Gus. 'It's sensitive like, Gus.'

Sensitive? Okay. 'You can tell me anything, Jerry. You know that. We're mates, aren't we?'

'Well yeah, course I know that. You and Mo and me and Dave... we're all mates together. Thing is, I don't want to get her into bother.'

Now Gus was puzzled. 'Get who into bother?'

'That young lass of his. His oldest. The one who helps in the café sometimes. Zarqa.'

'Zarqa?' *What the hell's she done now?* Had Jerry and Dave seen her with a lad or something? They were always protective of Mo and Gus' families.

Jerry sniffed. ‘Saw her last night, jogging down from Lilycroft Road like she was being chased by the hounds of hell. Not right that. Young lass like her should be home before it gets dark.’

Dave emitted a growl from the depths of his chest and judging by the succession of quick nods that accompanied the rumble of sound, he was in complete agreement with his friend.

Jerry continued, a worried frown creasing his tanned forehead, ‘Looked frightened she did.’

That wasn’t like Mo to let Zarqa stay out late on her own, but then that was before she’d decided to act out. ‘You sure it was her?’

‘Yep, that oldest daughter of his. It was after dark and you know what Oak Lane’s like after closing time.’

Dark? After closing time? Why the hell had Zarqa been out so late? Wasn’t it GCSE time? And did Mo even know about it? ‘Was it that late then?’

Jerry shrugged, and it was Dave who answered. ‘After eleven... too late.’

Seeing that it was preying on both men’s minds, Gus smiled. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll speak to Mo about it. Teenagers, huh? They’re always playing up.’

‘You talk to Mo today, Gus. He’s worried about her. I can tell. She’s not been in the café recently. I think summat’s up.’

Jerry was right. Something was up and he was glad that Jerry had shared this information with him. ‘I’m on it. Now, are you two sleeping in a hostel?’

A smirk flashed across Jerry’s face and he nudged his friend, giggling a little. ‘Nope. Why would we do that? We like to sleep with the stars above us and in this weather that’s no hardship, is it?’

The man’s smile was contagious, and Gus responded with a grin of his own. ‘No, I suppose not. Just be safe, won’t you? You still have that phone?’

Jerry tapped his coat pocket. ‘Yes, sir!’ And he did a mock salute, before relenting and adding, ‘Mo lets us charge it up in his café and I make sure I keep it on at least two bars.’

Gus had tried to keep moving while talking to the men, but he could feel his legs stiffening. ‘All right then, I’m off. Got work to do. Don’t want to get sacked, do I?’

As he headed up through the Botanic Gardens and past the bandstand, he made a mental note to speak to Zarqa first. Maybe he should take this godfather job more seriously. When it had all kicked off at Mo’s house, he’d thought that things would sort themselves out. Mo and Naila had always had a close relationship with their kids... sometimes though, events could put an almost unbearable strain on them. Maybe this was the perfect time for an intervention, before Zarqa did something stupid.



## CHAPTER 13

### *Zodiac*

**A**drenalin kept me up all night. Going over and over it. Reliving every second. Each time, I remembered something new. I've covered my tracks, so I'm not worried about that. No clues left behind, I'm sure of it. Don't know how careful the others were. But that's all part of the plan. What we did was so bad... but sooo good too. The heat... the excitement... the pressure... I thought I was going to explode. Well, I did *that* when I got home... exploded, that is... twice.

Teamwork, that's what it was... but every team needs a leader and thank fuck, I was up to it.

Feel flat now... deflated, so I sneak out early. I creep downstairs while it's all quiet. Nobody will notice I'm gone... why would they? The only time I'm noticed is when I've done something wrong. With any luck, I'll be back before breakfast.

Ping!

Pisces: You awake? Need to talk! Feel crap.

What a div! Can't be doing with Pisces' shit right now. Dumbass. Anyway, I've stuff to do... lots of stuff! I check in my bag to make sure I've got everything. Shoes on, I grab a couple of croissants and an energy drink and, careful not to bang the door behind me, I step into the street. Fucking boiling again. Suits me though. I like the sun. Gives me an excuse to be outside. To loiter, so I can see what's going down.

Doesn't take long for me to get there. The café's not open yet, but I've brought my own breakfast. I sit down on a bench and share my croissants with the ducks.

Ping!

Pisces: Can you answer, Zodiac? I'm losing it. Like big time. Need to talk to you. Talk to someone.

*Fuck's sake! Can you believe this shit?* I think about ignoring the text, then reconsider. What if the idiot falls apart?

Me: Hold tight. You did well last night. Really good. I'm so impressed. You were better than Leo. No doubt about it. You just gotta hang in there, okay? I'll see you at school, right?

Needy, dumbass, div. I grin. What I love more than anything is setting them off against each other... playing favourites. They're both so needy, but in different ways. That's why I chose them.

Headphones in, I check my social media. *Instagram* first. Boy, do I have some pictures I could share! I laugh. Even the thought of everyone's reaction makes me grin. But, no. I'm not gonna indulge... not yet, anyway. I'll save that image and use it for maximum effect, when the time's right.

If you rush and do something too early, you mess up. Timing is everything. Get the timing right and you've nailed it – maximum effect – maximum chaos – maximum satisfaction for me. I move over to *Facebook* and scroll down.

Shit... shit...

Like...

Crap...

Like...

Smiley Face...

Rubbish... shit... shit...

Love Heart...

Tedious... boring... shit!

Then it gets interesting. It's leaked on *Facebook* and the vacuous comments start. Love that word vac-you-us... it was the 'word of the day' in school and sums this up perfectly. Vacuous comments for a vacuous piece of shit!

You'll be missed my bestest friend, from Declan  
RIP, Pratab. Love you, Meena and Kamal xx :-( :-(  
You're loving angels instead! Missing you already, Love Betsy Freeman  
xxxxxxx

Really? I mean *really*? Barf!

Yuk... some of them are even posting pictures with them and the dumbass. Ones with love hearts round them or with flower haloes. What the fuck? Maybe they deserve to join him. What are they like? It's getting hotter and I wonder how much longer I'll have to wait.

It's then I see him. He's jogging round the lake, so I snap a few photos on zoom. Then he stops, talking to some mucky old tramps, and I fire off another couple. Before he heads in my direction, I backtrack down to the lower path and circle back. I've got something to do before I head home and I don't want to be seen. Not here... not right now.

## CHAPTER 14

Gus nearly choked when he entered the investigation room after his shower. Compo had been a bit liberal with the Lynx. He got why Compo had done it... it was stifling in there. The windows only opened a couple of inches, presumably in case Gus decided to throw one of the team out. With broken air conditioning and the fans dotted around the room, unable to waft a crisp packet, never mind cool the area, it was unbearable. The mix of busy, sweaty bodies, in a confined space for hours on end, in the middle of a heat wave, had resulted in a less than palatable undertone.

Taffy and Compo between them were setting up the new, all singing, all dancing crime board that linked all their computers to an interactive board at the front. He'd seen a Tom Cruise film with something similar in it. Was it wrong to wish they'd spent the money on the air con rather than equipment Gus could never master without Compo's presence?

'Soooo, we're up and running with that, are we?' His tone was petulant, and he wished he could snatch the words back. It wasn't Compo's fault he was a dinosaur and deep down; he knew he should learn this tech stuff. He relied on Compo for even the most basic of things.

Oblivious to his boss' mood, Compo grinned, his shiny cheeks wobbling as he nodded. 'It's brilliant, Gus. Don't you worry though, I'll have you trained up in no time.'

Gus snorted. It wasn't that he was worried exactly, more irritated. He was always so busy that finding space to learn about a system that had been foisted on him was way down his list of priorities. Watching with grudging admiration as Compo and Taffy operated the system, he sighed. 'We'll see. But for now, we've a killer to catch, yeah?'

When he had both officers' attention, Gus began. 'Right, Compo, you have the victim's phone – do your magic with that. I need to know everything he was up to for the last six months. Who he spoke to, who his friends were, where he went, what his social media can tell us... the lot.'

He turned to Taffy. 'Although Dr McGuire didn't detect any sexual activity on site, this won't be confirmed until the PM, so check out any perverts, paedophiles etc. in the area. Get to grips with drug activity and see if you can establish a link there.' Teen deaths were often gang and/or drug related and although there was no indication this was the case here; Gus would ensure his team explored all avenues. 'Also, check for any similar crimes in the region.'

As he'd been speaking, Compo had input his *actions*, and they were now on the screen next to two images of Pratab Patel. Gus looked at the lad. In death, he looked pitifully young. In life he had a big grin, sparkling eyes, and a handsome face... *what a damn waste!*

'Pratab's one of Patti's pupils at City Academy, so we'll head up there later. I'll address the older kids... see if we can drum up some information from them.'

'Poor Patti.' Compo's tone was morose, and was reflected in his doleful expression and heavy sigh.

'Eh, why poor Patti?'

'Well, City Academy's had more than its fair share of press attention, hasn't it?'

Gus groaned. *What an idiot!* Of course, this would be crap for Patti. Journalists had laid siege at the school gates off and on for months now. Jez Hopkins had been persistent after one of her pupils was arrested last year. Gus still hadn't forgiven him for his irresponsible reporting before that and then the man had compounded his idiocy by exploiting the parents of a boy who'd committed suicide after online bullying and argued that City Academy should have had tighter policies on digital usage. Like a school could monitor kids' social media activity twenty-four/seven. 'Almost forgot about Jez Hopkins' Suicide Watch articles.'

'Not to mention the way he behaved when that teacher was convicted,' added Taffy. 'Hope he's not a dick about this.'

Gus hoped so too, although he suspected being an ass was unavoidable for Hopkins. 'We'll have to get this solved quickly before he can be a dick. That's all there is to it.'

He walked over to the screen and looked at Pratab's picture from the crime scene. Was he posed like that? His dad seemed to think so, and Gus agreed. Pratab clasped the phone in his hands like an homage to 4G and technology. Like rosary beads or something? Why did it smack of ritual? He had no real indication that it was a ritualistic kill... only experience, and he'd experienced more than his fair share of rituals and evil and death. Yep, he'd speak to Nancy. No point in risking things spiralling out of control because he hadn't acted on his well-honed instincts. Not this time.

## CHAPTER 15

**Y**ou can cut the atmosphere with a knife. Mum's doing the whole 'everything's normal' thing... the special breakfast to mark a special event... spicy scrambled eggs and paratha. It's just a fucking exam. The important thing happened before I was even born. The thing they don't want to talk about. The thing they haven't wanted to talk about since I was conceived. My acne's flared up again and I have to stop myself picking at it, especially the big one right on my chin. Instead, I play with my cutlery, head down, aware that he's watching me, all sad eyed, making me feel guilty. He's the one who should feel fucking guilty. The silence is too much for Mum. I reckon that's why she switches on the radio.

*...have identified the youth found dead in Heaton last night. A police spokesperson says that the boy found at a property on Smith Lane was sixteen-year-old Pratab Patel. They are treating his death as suspicious and ask anyone in the Bradford Royal Infirmary area last evening between nine and eleven p.m. to contact them on this number...*

'Zarqa, that's my T-shirt you're wearing. Give it back... Mum?'

'Sssh, Sabah. I'm listening to the news.'

*...paint attack on a Bradford mosque in Manningham has prompted representatives from the Muslim community to call for a full investigation...*

*And now on yet another scorching Monday morning, here at Capital Radio, we wish GCSE students all the best as they start their exams...*

My heart hammers. It's out there... on the news. Police are involved. Fuck. I hadn't thought it would hit the news so soon and then she's there, frowning at me, her face full of concern. 'Did you know the young boy? Pratab?'

My knee judders up and down and I think I'm going to pass out as she puts a plate in front of me. I feel sick. She rests her hand on my shoulder and I have a sudden urge to lean against her, let her hug me tight... but I can't do that. I shrug her hand off and pretend I don't hear her sigh.

'He might have been in my year at school – don't know.'

But goodie fucking two shoes, Sabah, is sticking her nose in. ‘You know him, Zarqa. You sometimes hung out with him at lunchtime, I saw you.’

Why’s her voice so sly? Why’s she always stirring it? I open my mouth to reply, but Mo jumps in first, touching her arm and telling her to, ‘Shush.’

I scowl at him. Don’t need him jumping to my defence, sticking up for me, looking all sad and stupid. I pick up my fork and shuffle egg around on my plate. My stomach’s gurgling and I feel faint. The smell of the Masala chai makes me want to barf, but I make myself roll up my paratha and dip it in the tea. I force myself to bite off a chunk and chew. Despite the tea, it’s like cardboard in my mouth. I want to throw the mug and the eggs at the wall, shout at the top of my voice and run from the kitchen. I need to think about what we did last night, and with this fucking family around, I can’t concentrate. It’s only my sisters... no, correction... my *half*-sisters, being round the table that stops me. Sabah’s already finished her egg and slurped her chai, like the greedy little shit she is.

‘Come on, Zarqa, don’t want to be late, and you better not be. You’re the one with the exam.’

I take another sip of tea. It lands in my belly like a brick, and I swallow hard to keep it there. My head’s thumping as I stand up. When Mum comes over to give me a hug, I pull away from her. If she knew what I’d done, she’d cast me out, just like her parents did to her. I scowl as I pass him and don’t acknowledge my mum’s strained voice when she says, ‘Good luck, Zarqa. You can only do your best.’

Tears spring to my eyes. No, I don’t have to do my best... I can do my very, very worst.

## CHAPTER 16

It was early, yet Gus knew he'd find DCI Nancy Chalmers at her desk and he was right. Her door was open, so he walked straight in, noticing her sandals kicked off near the entrance and the lingering aroma of her perfume that was a sharp contrast to the sour smell in the investigation room two floors down.

She glanced up and took her glasses off, flinging them on top of her paperwork like his visit had come just in time. 'Can't catch up with this damn in-tray, no matter how early I get here. And half of it's shite! So much for going paperless... seems I'm the only one got *that* damn memo.'

Aware that she hated the admin side of her job, Gus walked over and sat down, allowing her the time to vent. She looked tired – bags under her eyes, crows' feet spreading from the edges - and her normally perfect hair looked floppy, which Gus put down to the heat more than anything else. He noted that the air con on this floor was working and savoured the coolness as Nancy ranted. When she ground to a halt, ending with an abrupt, 'Update!' Gus leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees.

'You've read the preliminary report?'

When she nodded, he continued, 'We've got an ID, and I spoke to the parents last night. Thing is, this was staged. The lad who found him must have come along shortly after the killers left the scene.'

'Killers?' Nancy stood up and walked over to her coffee machine, her floral dress catching the slight air con breeze as she went. 'You sure about that?'

Gus noticed her hem was half undone and one button near her neck was missing. Nancy loved her feminine clothes, and bought upmarket – the trouble was, she never could quite carry it off. He nodded when she held the pot up, asking if he wanted a drink. 'We'll know more after the PM results come through, but that's where the evidence points so far. Definitely wasn't suicide. Looks like someone held him in place while the actual killer stabbed him.'

'So, what are you saying, Gus?'

He took his time before replying, going over everything he'd seen at the crime scene, checking if his gut instincts from the previous night remained. Nancy walked over, handed him his coffee and leaned on her desk, sipping her own drink, bare feet crossed in front of her, toenails painted a startling red. She tilted her head to one side and waited.



‘I think we need to call in Sebastian.’ Gus held her gaze. He was certain this was the right thing to do. Sebastian Carlton, the ex-FBI behavioural analyst, who now lectured as a Professor in the Forensic Psychology Department at Leeds Trinity University, had worked with them before on cases with multiple victims. This was the first time Gus had requested his attendance after a single victim.

‘We can’t afford to be caught on the back foot with this, Nancy. This kid’s death isn’t a one-off... no way.’

To give Nancy her due, she nodded her acceptance of his words. They’d worked together for years and Gus hoped she realised he wouldn’t ask for Carlton’s involvement unless he was certain it was necessary. ‘Budget’s well and truly fucked as it is, Gus, you know that.’

Gus waited. Of course he knew their budget was tight – it was always spent almost before it came in. But this was a kid... and it was soon after the murder of those other teens. He lowered his tone. ‘We can’t afford the bad press for this, Nance. Not after those kids last year. They’d slaughter us.’

Nancy, none too gently, set her mug on the table, ignoring the coffee which slopped all over her paperwork. She rubbed her fingers into her eyes and then exhaled. ‘You get hold of Carlton and leave the budget with me.’

She stood up and began soaking up the liquid with some tissues. ‘Now piss off, looks like I’ve got some books to cook to keep She Who Must Be Obeyed off my back.’

Gus grinned. Nancy hadn’t taken to their new Chief Superintendent, and he suspected she’d rather enjoy thwarting her boss.

## CHAPTER 17

‘That’s it, Mam, just one more pill.’ My arm’s round her, holding her up against the pillow until she swallows her meds. She’s a dead weight in my arms this morning... lifeless. I hate pumping her full of meds and leaving her lying there, but I’ve no choice.

‘Look, Mam, there’re some beans here on the table. You’ll eat them, won’t you? In half an hour, yeah?’

She looks up at me, her eyes glazed, and her hand shakes as she tries to touch my cheek. ‘You’re a good lad, Jo Jo.’

I sigh and lower her onto the bed. The food will still be there when I get home tonight. She’s getting weaker and weaker. I kiss her forehead, but her eyes are already closed, her chest heaving under her nightie. What the hell will we do if she dies? At the door I turn back and whisper, ‘Bye, Mam, have a good day.’

Pelting down the stairs, I grab Jessie’s book bag. ‘Come on, Jessie. Get a wriggle on. We’re gonna be late if you don’t hurry.’ My skull’s pounding like some bastard’s playing basketball in there, my shoulders ache, and I’ve got a crick in my neck. Last night was grim... totally mad. Shit! What did we do? Haven’t thought about that yet either. Shit! What am I gonna say to her today?

Yesterday was nasty, what with me mam and then Jessie followed by the webcamming. Nah, that’s not true... not really. I could’ve thought about it... just didn’t want to. Can’t get my head round that. That was some big fucking shit we did. Then, that other bloke wanted the usual... said he’d pay extra. I need the money. Need it right now, but I’ll have to wait. I’ll go to the food bank again after school. Jessie needs to eat and so does me mam. Where the hell is she?

‘Come on, Jess.’

The gas and leccy are due this week and Mum’s benefit cheque will barely cover it. Maybe I should give in and choose a side. Not like I’d be able to leave my mum and Jess to go to university, anyway. Might as well resign myself to selling E to scrotes in clubs to keep the gangs off my back.

‘Jessie! Right now.’

I open the front door and the sweltering heat hits me in the face, nearly knocking me backwards. *Aw for fuck's sake, Jess, come on!* Today, of all days, I can't be late. 'Jess, you're making me late and I've got my exam. You don't want me disqualified, do you?'

What the hell is she doing? I turn and march into the kitchen and stop. Jess stands there, her little red and white school dress smeared with tomato sauce, her hair knotty and tangled, her face streaming with tears. I take a deep breath and bundle her into my arms. 'Aw, Jessie babes. Don't cry. Look, I'll sort it.'

Poor kid. She's got two school dresses and the other one is in a pile near the washing machine because I had no detergent to wash it. I lift her onto a chair in front of the sink and try to wipe off as much as I can. Her dress is sodden now, but the sauce has gone. 'It'll dry by the time you get to school.'

After rinsing the cloth, I wipe away her tears, before lifting her back down to the floor. 'I'll do your hair. Won't be as good as Mum, but it'll be all right. But then we need to scoot, right?'

Her bottom lip still trembles, but she nods, and my heart breaks a little as she obediently turns around so I can brush her hair. I hate doing this. How the hell can I make robots and drones and stuff with all their little fiddly components, but put a hairbrush in my hands and they turn into big fat sausage fingers. Although I'm yanking her hair, pulling the tugs until they're smooth, Jess doesn't so much as yelp. I could kiss her. She's a tough kid and I'm right proud of her.

As I flip the band into her hair and twist it over again, I hear a noise. When I glance up, my fingers tighten on Jess' shoulders before she turns away with an, 'Ouch, Jo Jo, that hurt.'

But I've seen who's come into the house.

'What d'you want?' My voice is level and calm, but inside my stomach's flipping like it's Pancake Tuesday.

Razor, as smooth and articulate as Hammerhead is dumb, looks at me, a knowing grin all over his face. He's holding a fag in one hand and, as if sensing my annoyance that he's smoking indoors, he takes a slow drag and blows the smoke towards me. Over his shoulder, his two enforcers are there, waiting for him to direct them. What the hell is it with puny dudes leading the gangs in Bradford? I should have slammed the door behind me when I came looking for Jess. No point in beating myself up, though. This was going to happen sooner or later... just wish it was later. Time's cracking on and I need to get to school – get to my exam.

'Hey, Jess.' Razor ignores my question and bends down to make eye contact with my sister. 'Did you forget to tell Jo Jo I called last night?'

*He called last night?* My stomach clenches. But before that information sinks in, he's speaking again.

'D'int you tell him you read your reading book to me? Watched a bit of telly together, didn't we?'

Jessie's smiling as if Razor's her best friend in the whole world and, right then, I want to sink a fist in his stomach. Although I'm about a foot and a half taller than the shit, I can't do it. Not with his thugs there. Who am I kidding? Not at all. As if he can read my mind, the larger of his two mates pushes himself away from the wall and bulks out his arms, like he's the Hulk or summat.

Although he's looking at me, Razor's hand extends to Jess, five one-pound coins in the palm. It's Jess he speaks to. 'Treat yourself to some chocolate on your way to school, Jess... or an ice cream. You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

The excitement's rolling off her. Can't remember the last time she had a treat. She looks at me, her tear-swollen eyes pleading, and I can't resist. I give a taut smile and nod. Her mouth breaks into a wide grin and my heart fractures a little more as Razor, holding my gaze, drops the coins into her small hands. I swallow the thought that I could buy milk and tea bags and bread with that. I don't grudge Jess her treat, I just know that nothing comes free in this world.

'Thanks, Razor.' Jess's voice is all sweet and innocent and something curdles in my gut.

Razor glances towards the ceiling, and his smirk widens. My heart's doing that pounding thing again... did it ever stop? He was in the house last night with Jess, and for the life of me, I can't remember when I left my bedroom door unlocked. Was it *after* I came home after meeting Zarqa or *before* I went out? Either way, Razor thinks he's got summat on me.

'You not thanking me, Jo Jo?'

His tone's all smooth and friendly, but I know that in a second it can turn and he'll slice off my hand if it suits him. I've heard the stories, and that's why I've always steered clear of Razor McCarthy... until now.

The voice that leaves my mouth doesn't belong to me. 'Thanks, Razor. Jess likes ice cream.'

He turns sideways and beckons to his mates. As they approach, blocking the sunlight flooding through the door with their bulk, I wonder if this is it... if I'm going to die here in this room... if I won't get to sit my first exam... and worse... I can't decide if I'm bothered or not. As they squeeze past their boss, I notice they're both carrying Aldi bags.

'Unpack the stuff and let them see what we've got for them. Treats for you, Jess, eh?' Razor reaches out and ruffles Jess' hair and she all but dances towards the table where Razor's boys are unpacking Frosties and Cheerios and milk and stuff.

‘Put the fridge items away, lads. Jo Jo can unpack everything else when he gets back from school.’ He reaches over and punches me on the arm. ‘Manners, lad?’

My gaze moves from Jessie to the ever-increasing pile of goodies to Razor and, as I say ‘Thanks,’ I wonder what the *actual* cost of these few groceries will be.

## CHAPTER 18

*Leo*

I'm leaning out my bedroom window smoking. Wishing I could be outside. Instead, I've got to keep an ear open for any of them coming near. I don't usually do this when there's anyone at home, but I deserve it. A ciggie to calm my nerves. I exhale, blowing a half-hearted smoke ring. Wish I had some bud, but even I can't risk that.

Shit! What did we do last night?

I brought the drugs; Zodiac brought the booze... Pisces brought fucking attitude... Moaning on, being a right bell end. We'd already decided... that was the rules... so there was no need for Pisces to be such an asshole. Spoiling it for us.

My heart's clapping in my chest and it won't stop. I hadn't thought it'd be like this. Now it's sinking in and I'm shitting it. What if they find out what we did? What will my parents say?

When we were hammered last night, it was like we were gods... nothing mattered except paying *him* back for all the shit. Just because he's dead doesn't stop him being a bell end, does it? Being dead doesn't make you an angel, that's what Zodiac says.

I blow another furl of smoke into the garden. Soon as I sneaked in, I'd rushed upstairs and thrown my load all over the floor and had to clean it up quick, before the parents started asking awkward questions. The barf stank of booze and they're not daft... mind you, they had other things on their minds, didn't even notice the disinfectant smell. Think I overdid it a little with the bleach.

I can't stay here much longer. They'll be on my case, dragging me downstairs to get ready, so I stub my cig out on the brick below my window and fold the stub into a tissue before tossing it in my bin. I get a body spray and skoosh it round the room... there, sorted.

Zodiac said not to phone, to keep a low profile, and make sure we hide the phones, but I can't help it. I pick it up and shoot off a text.

Me: You all right? Think Pisces will keep schtum?

It's ages before I feel it vibrate in my pocket and all the while, they're yelling upstairs for me to come down. Just fuck right off!

Zodiac: Pisces won't tell. Don't worry, I'll sort it. You do what you need to do. We did the right thing.

Me: Later!

Zodiac: Yeah, see ya!

They're yelling up the stairs again. I slip the phone under my mattress and walk over to study my face in the mirror. All good. Bit pale, eyes red behind my specs... but otherwise, okay. Give me a break, yeah!

'I'm coming.'

Ignoring the pukey feeling in my gut, I open the door and head downstairs. Life has to go on.

## CHAPTER 19

The lad's eyes flitted round the room, yet he wasn't taking in the décor. His mum kept trying to comfort him – putting her arms round him, but he kept pulling away from her. Gus got it. He had an over-effusive mother himself and he'd been the same at that age... hell, he still was! He'd lost count of the times his mother had embarrassed him. Now, though, he gave in to her hugs... you never knew when you could lose them.

He'd no sooner left Nancy, when the duty officer grabbed him, telling him he had a witness who might have some bearing on Pratab Patel's death. It was the lad that Pratab was supposed to be with the previous evening.

Gesturing towards the sofa that Pratab Patel's parents had sat on a couple of hours earlier and failing to shift the image of Mrs Patel's measured stoicism or Mr Patel's complete breakdown from his mind, Gus swallowed hard. 'Sit down, Haider, Dr and Mrs Ayyub.'

Haider glared at the sofa and with an exaggerated sigh, side-stepped his mother and flung himself onto one of the two comfy chairs that sat opposite. Gus couldn't blame him. Mrs Ayyub's concern was understandable, yet even Gus thought it was too cloying. Mr Ayyub, on the other hand, looked stern and distant from the proceedings.

As the parents settled themselves down, Gus assessed the family group; a concerned mother and father, out of their depth and each trying to cope with an alien situation as best they could. From the duty officer's initial statement, Gus learned that Dr Ayyub was an anaesthetist at BRI, while Mrs Ayyub was in the process of setting up her own bespoke halal cakes business.

Dr Ayyub was the first to break the silence. 'We need to do this fast, Inspector. Haider has an exam soon and he can't afford to miss it. It's a GCSE.'

A quick glance at Haider told him the lad would be more than happy to miss the exam, and he couldn't blame him. It wasn't every day you realised the 'hoax' *Snapchat* message of your best mate lying in a pool of blood with a knife sticking out of his jugular was real.

'Look, Haider, I won't keep you hanging around here. You gave a statement this morning to DC Singh, and it covers most things. I just need to ask a couple more questions.'

He waited until Haider nodded before continuing. 'Who was Pratab meeting last night? He told his parents he was studying with you, but that wasn't true, was it?'

Haider's shrug was one Gus had seen a thousand times. The 'I'm buying myself time here' sort of shrug, the 'I don't know what to share with you' sort of shrug. He leaned towards Haider. 'Pratab's gone, Haider. Any secret you and Pratab shared might be the clue we need. If you



have any idea who he was meeting or where he was going last night, you should tell me. You know that, don't you?'

Gaze averted, Haider repeated the shrug and then took a moment before replying, 'I don't know who he was meeting. He *was* meeting someone – don't know who, though.' After a quick glance at his parents, the whiteness of their knuckles on their linked hands, the only outward sign of their anguish, Haider lowered his voice as if he thought they might not hear his words. 'He said I was too pussy to know.'

Gus let the words hang there for a moment until Haider continued.

'We'd fallen out. He were being a dick.' Again, a glance at his parents. 'Sorry, Mum...' then back to Gus. 'He was hanging out with another group.' He held up his hand as though to ward off Gus' next question, 'And before you ask, I've no idea who. None of his regular mates knew. We were all pissed off with him. Truth is, that *Snapchat* was the first he'd sent me in weeks.' *It'll be the last*, remained unsaid.

Compo had Pratab's phone, so hopefully that would tell them who the lad had been hanging out with recently. Strange though that their killer had sent a *Snapchat* message to Haider. Did that mean the killer didn't realise the friends were estranged? Or did they want to punish Haider? The whole idea of sending a photograph message of the person you'd just killed left Gus cold. This, he was becoming more and more convinced, was not your average killer.

The lad picked at an imaginary piece of fluff on his fingers, before continuing, 'Reckon he was taking drugs too.' He glanced at Gus. 'Don't mean just bud either... coke... MDMA – who knows? But he were different, skiving school... cheeking the teachers... getting pissed, blazed, you name it, Pratab was doing it.'

Gus made a mental note to ask Patti if her staff could shed any light on this new friendship group Pratab was a part of. He'd have to broach the subject with the lad's parents and siblings too. See if they'd noticed anything amiss. The trouble was, in situations like these, family sometimes tried to keep these sorts of things quiet, but it was that sort of information that offered vital clues. He'd speak to their Family Liaison Officer and see what she reckoned. The FLO usually got a handle on the family dynamics pretty quickly. Perhaps she'd built up enough of a relationship with them to ask.

'You remember the actual *Snapchat*... the one that came from Pratab's phone?'

Haider nodded, his lips tightening.

'Well, I want you to do something for me. I want you to close your eyes and focus on it for a minute. Don't talk – just try to remember it. I know this is difficult and I wouldn't ask if it

wasn't necessary. We need to find who did this to your friend. The more you can tell us the more it'll help.'

Mrs Ayyub opened her mouth, but her husband shook his head and she bit her lip. All she wanted was to protect her son, and Gus sympathised, but this was important. He nodded his appreciation to Dr Ayyub who returned the gesture with a tight smile.

'You up for this, Haider?'

Haider looked anything but up for it. His foot was still jangling and now his fingers were clenched against his thighs.

'It's hard, I know it's hard, but please... for Pratab's sake.'

With an abrupt nod that was the carbon copy of his dad's earlier one, Haider inhaled, leaned back in the chair, and closed his eyes. Now that no one was talking, the ticking clock seemed loud and ominous. The sound of traffic drifted up, muted but insistent in the near silence and, all the while, Haider's parents' gazes scoured their son's face. Frown lines furrowed Haider's brow, his eyes, although shut, moved under his lids, his mouth was a thin line and his cheeks flushed, whether because of the heat or anxiety Gus couldn't tell.

'Okay, Haider. Think about that *Snapchat* image and tell me what you see. If you need to stop you can, it's your call.'

When he spoke, Haider's voice was steadier than Gus had expected. 'Pratab's lying on the ground – grass, I think. There's a knife sticking out his neck and blood all around his head. I thought it were fake. I thought he were winding me up.'

'You're doing good, Haider. Can you tell me the position of his head?'

Haider opened his eyes and blinked a few times. 'Look, I'll answer owt you want, but I'm not keeping my eyes shut.'

'That's fine, this is all your call – we stop whenever you've had enough, okay?'

Haider picked up a bottle of water from the table, unscrewed the lid and gulped half of it in one go. 'His head was to the side – that's why I could see the knife so clear. Blood were trickling down his neck.'

'What about his hands, can you remember anything about them?'

Haider drank some more water before replying, 'They were tied together in front of him... looked like plastic ties or something. It wasn't rope.'

So, the *Snapchat* was taken before the body was fully positioned and before they'd removed the cable ties.

'What about the knife, Haider? What does it look like?'

The lad scowled in a 'what the fuck' way. 'A knife's a knife, innit?'

Gus smothered his smile. It was good that Haider was showing a bit of attitude. It might be just what he needed to get himself through this traumatic experience. ‘Just wondered about the handle, Haider. What did it look like?’

He scraped his fingers along his jawline, his slight stubble making a scratching sound as he did so. ‘It were just a kitchen knife. A bit like that long thin one you use for cutting the chicken, Dad.’

Dr Ayyub nodded. ‘A carving knife.’

‘Yeah. I think the handle was black – not sure though.’ Haider made to stand up. ‘I’ve had enough now. I don’t want to think about this anymore.’

Gus was unsurprised, Haider had done better than he’d expected. ‘Only one more thing. I need to ask you for your phone, so we can try to retrieve the *Snapchat* image.’

Haider’s eyes widened and his foot began tapping the floor. ‘You can’t take my phone. I need it. It’s mine. Anyway, the Chat’s gone... long gone. It deletes after you’ve seen it.’

Earlier, Compo had given Gus a crash course on how *Snapchat* operated and although he wasn’t one hundred per cent up to speed, Gus knew that the Chat had ‘disappeared’ after a few seconds from Haider’s phone. However, Compo had also gone on about how things never disappeared completely. ‘We’ve got experts who can analyse your phone – digital forensic experts. You never know, the image might provide additional information... clues that might help us find out who did this to Pratab.’

Haider swiped a hand over his face and sniffed, his tapping foot increased its tempo, but it wasn’t until the lad cast a sideways glance at his parents that Gus realised the real reason behind his reluctance. The lad probably had pornography or some dodgy messages on his phone that he wanted to keep from his parents. The question was, how, without his parents realising, did Gus make it clear to the lad, that unless they found evidence of criminal activity on the phone, they were only interested in his communications with Pratab. Feeling like a piece of shit, yet determined to gain possession of the lad’s phone quickly so Haider could make his exam in time, Gus sharpened his tone. ‘Hand over your phone right now, Haider.’

Haider, in a last-ditch attempt to buy some time, glanced at his parents and then, head down, mumbled, ‘I’ll drop it off later. In all the rush this morning, I left it at home.’

Not a bad deflection, Gus conceded, but it wouldn’t wash. Before the words were out of his mouth both parents turned to him. ‘Haider!’

Mrs Ayyub muttered something under her breath and tapped his knee while Dr Ayyub extended his hand. ‘Don’t lie, Haider. You were using the phone on the way over here. You’ve

always got that phone in your hand. Hand it over. Like the inspector said, this is crucial evidence. Pratab was *murdered*.'

As if saying the words out loud had loosened something in his wife, Mrs Ayyub began to sob. 'Hand the phone over. I won't feel safe with you or your brother out of my sight until they catch this monster.'

While his dad's stern words had resulted in a tightening of Haider's lips, his mother's tears had him sliding the phone from his pocket. He handed it to Gus before jumping to his feet and slinging his backpack over one shoulder. 'Right, gotta go, come on.'

Gus waited until Haider's parents left the room before calling the boy back with a, 'You need to sign this.'

Haider shuffled back to Gus and, despite his affected swag, he avoided meeting Gus' eyes as he grabbed the pen and bent over the table to sign the form.

With a glance to make sure his parents were out of earshot, Gus lowered his voice. 'As long as you have nothing illegal or incriminating on your phone, your parents will never learn of anything else we find. We're not looking for pornography – as long as it's legal, nor stupid texts about weed use – for example.'

Haider's head jerked up and for the first time since he'd handed over his phone, he met Gus' eyes and nodded. A small smile lifted his lips for a moment and then disappeared. 'Pratab won't be sitting in the hall doing his exam this morning.'

Gus put a hand on the lad's shoulder and squeezed. The empty desk would be a distraction for all of Pratab's friends. 'Just do your best, Haider. It's all you can do.'

Sniffing, Haider handed the paperwork back. 'Just find the bastard who did this.'

Gus waited until the lad joined his parents and then said, 'You know the information you've shared is important?'

All three of them nodded.

'Well, you need to keep this to yourself, all right? You can't share it with anyone – not your friends, no one. You could get in trouble if you do. It could be critical to finding out what happened to your friend.'

Dr Ayyub put an arm round his son's shoulder. 'We won't repeat this. The last thing we want is to interfere with your investigation.'

Gus hoped that was true. However, he suspected that once the initial shock had worn off, Haider might be tempted to share his knowledge with his friends and then it would, without doubt, grace the front pages of the tabloids.

## CHAPTER 20

### *Pisces*

I never slept a wink. How could I? How am I supposed to go to school after this? Act normal? Zodiac will be there and that's the last thing I need. I can't get up. I need a shower, but I can't have another one so soon. I had to have one last night. It was like I had blood all over me. Like it was everywhere. It wasn't, really. I *knew* that, but I still needed to wash it off. I used the last of the shampoo and the water was freezing but I deserved it.

How can they not care? Specially Leo? We all just do what Zodiac says. But do we? *We're* the ones what came up with the names. Came up with the game. *We're* the bad ones. It's all on us. Zodiac just eggs us on. When we started, it was a laugh. Getting folk in trouble, getting our own back. We only chose the ones who deserved it. Then it got worse. Mr Borthwick ending up in prison was okay. He deserved it but posting the photos of Becky online... outing her as Mr Borthwick's tart, that wasn't nice. Yeah, she'd dumped Leo, said some bad things, done some worse things, but that was bad. She were off school for months after, then she only came back for a few weeks before moving to another school.

Ping!

Ping!

Ping!

Fucking *Instagram!* They're all over it. Posting photos of Pratab with stupid love hearts round them.

RIP Pratab I'll miss you! Tom :-( Best mate in the world. Miss you! Jamie Grieves :-( You'll always be in my heart, xxxxxxxxxxxx! Play with the Angles! Sally
--

Twat can't even spell angels right.

Maybe I'll add her to the Zodiac Club hit list. Fuck, what am I thinking?

I'm a knobhead, I am. I'm not adding no one else to the list. Soon as we finish these, I'm done.

Billy though? Billy was *all* my fault. He'd made my life hell. Calling me names. I really wanted to hurt him. I wanted him dead, I really did... but then... he was dead and all I could think was that I wished he were back at school being a wanker. That would be better than him being gone. I visit his grave sometimes after school. Hard to believe he's down there with all the worms and shit. There'll be nowt left of him. I looked it up one day in the library. Just his bones and a few scraps of skin and his hair.

I scroll through *Facebook*. Fuck's sake. They're all posting to his timeline too. Fucking tossers. Half of them don't even know him, I bet!

Heaven will be a better place with you in it! Love Holly xxx Can't believe I'll never see your face again. Miss you forever! Love Sonal xxx :-(- :-(- Miss you mate, Haider :-(- The Angels will protect you, Love Krishna and Trupti xxx
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Could've done with the effing angels last night, couldn't you, Pratab? I realise I'm laughing at nothing and shove my fist in my mouth. Shut up! Get a grip! Get an effing grip!

What am I going to do? If I don't go to school, Zodiac will kill me... not literally. Well, maybe not literally. The flashbacks keep coming... me putting the pills in the voddy. Leo giving the weed and the bottle. He was being a knobhead, as usual. I was shit scared. He was such a wanker though... such a dick!

Leo jumping about like it was a bloody rave or summat. All hyped up like we were there to party... downed a couple of pills beforehand, I reckon. When it was time, I thought one of us would *stop it*. I waited. Looked at Leo. Looked at Zodiac... but no.

When the knife went in, it hardly made a sound. Still can't believe it. The *Snapchat*... can't remember whose idea that was. Part of the plan... part of the fucking plan. Did I suggest that? Was it me? It could've been. I just can't remember now. Then it's spurting out, over the handle, over the hand... blood... fucking blood everywhere. And they're laughing... we're laughing. Pratab's dead... lying there dead, with his hands tied up and we're moving his body, cutting the ties off, making him just right and taking fucking *Snapchats* on his phone.

I get up. I've got to get sorted. Got to get ready for school. Got to do it... it's all part of the plan and we can't deviate from the fucking plan.

## CHAPTER 21

‘Boss wants to see you, Gus – asap.’

Gus paused, coffee pot mid-pour. ‘Nancy?’ His heart skipped a beat. Had she sorted out Professor Carlton? No, too soon. Some news on Alice, then? Perhaps Alice was coming back, but Compo’s next words dashed those hopes.

‘Nah, the DCS.’

It wasn’t even half eight, and she was on his case. Gus poured his drink, then sat behind his computer. He hadn’t had breakfast yet. After jogging up to work, he’d showered, then met with Nancy before going straight into the interview with Haider. He was starving, and now the DCS had summoned him to her office. Well, she could wait ten minutes, couldn’t she? His stomach growled, so he grabbed a cereal bar from his drawer and, ripping it open, leaned back in his chair. With his feet on the desk, he savoured his coffee and used the time to absorb everything Haider had told him about Pratab. Changes in teen boys’ behaviour were something to consider, but in this instance suicide wasn’t an option. It seemed like Pratab had fallen into the wrong crowd... got in too deep? Or was it a chance encounter? A predator?

Gus shook his head and took a bite of his breakfast bar. No, that didn’t sit right with him. The location was too remote for a random encounter. Besides, the CSIs had discovered no evidence to indicate the killer had dragged Pratab from the main road to the back of the house. If it wasn’t a predator who attacked him, then who? It didn’t seem random, but why would a young lad visit such a creepy place voluntarily? Gus pushed that thought aside and considered another. Was it a drug deal gone wrong? Again, that didn’t explain the positioning of the body post-mortem. Nor did it tally with Haider’s recollections, implying that the killer had sent the *Snapchat* and then re-positioned the body. That was another thing. Why send *one* at all? Nobody even realised Pratab was missing yet, so why risk alerting someone. If it was for the shock value, sending *it* to a family member would have been more sensational.

His phone rang, interrupting Gus’ train of thought. He swung his legs down and grabbed the receiver. ‘DI Gus McGuire. How can I help?’

‘Well, perhaps answering your mobile would be a start.’

With the sarcastic tones ringing in his ear, Gus glared at the phone. DCS Gazala Bashir sounded irked. Which wasn’t unusual. Still, her snarky tone put Gus on edge. Truth was, he’d switched his mobile on vibrate the previous evening after he left the crime scene because he didn’t want to hear ‘The Bitch is Back’ blaring from it. He’d known the DCS was trying to

contact him but had deferred replying. ‘I’ve been in an interview. Seems that whoever killed Pratab Patel sent a *Snapchat* of the body to the victim’s friend last night.’

‘Hmm, DS Compton mentioned you were in interview...’

For a moment Gus wondered who the hell DS Compton was, then he realised... Compo. Why couldn’t she just call him Compo like everyone else did?

‘... seems strange that the boy only came in this morning. Is he a suspect?’

‘Well, we can’t rule him out completely, but he has an alibi – dinner with his extended family – and the reason he didn’t report it earlier is because he thought it was a prank. With *Snapchat*, the sender decides how long you view the live ‘Snap’ for, and you can only see it twice before it’s deleted automatically. Lad says it was only on screen for a second and he didn’t think of screenshotting it.’

‘Well, that’s as may be, but you need to double check his alibi. We need to be on the ball with this.’

And there it was... The real reason for her call. Bashir was a micromanager, like he’d never encountered before, and it rankled. Gus was used to being trusted to do his job. Nancy trusted his judgement, and he had a track record to back it up. Yet ever since she’d arrived, DCS Bashir had been at great pains to second guess him, question his actions, and make him justify his decisions. That pissed him off. He’d no time to be filling in reports, then heading up two floors to her office to repeat the written report verbally. Nancy had spoken with her, but Bashir was insistent that she have her ear to the ground.

Gus rolled his chair further under his desk, sat up straighter, and shook his mouse to activate his screen. He wanted to respond with a breathy sort of ‘... OMG! I didn’t think of that! God! I see why you’re sat up there in the ivory tower and I’m boiling my arse off in an overheated, smelly investigation room with no air con.’

Instead, he took a deep breath before replying, every word sticking in his throat. ‘Yes, Ma’am, I’ve actioned a check on that already. Uniforms are taking statements at Haider’s home.’

‘And you’ve kept him here, haven’t you?’

Bloody hell, can’t she just give it a break. Gus bristled and ignored the thought that she’d caught him out. ‘Actually, no. I’ve allowed him to go into school so he can sit his maths GCSE. No point in him missing it.’

For a moment there was silence and he could imagine the wheels turning in Gazala Bashir’s head before she said, her tone grudging, ‘Right. Good call. You have this under control and I’ve got my work cut out with public relations after the mosque graffiti incident.’



Gus took that as a dismissal and went to hang up when...

‘Come to my office... there’s something I need to discuss with you. Shall we say...’ The sound of her shuffling papers on her desk drifted down the line... ‘five minutes?’ And without waiting for his reply, she hung up.

‘You all right, Boss – it’s just, you’ve gone all red in the face.’

Gus frowned at his colleague. He didn’t need Compo telling him how he looked. He could feel the steam coming from his ears. As Compo popped his ear buds back, the lad grinned and Gus relaxed. Cheeky sod was teasing him.

‘Gotta go upstairs, Comps, you crack on with those phones, will you? Tell Taff you and I are going to interview the Patel family, before heading to City Academy. He can join us there before starting on the CCTV footage when he gets back from the PM.’

Coffee mug drained, Gus stood, then hesitated for a moment. Should he remove his bandana before his meeting with the DCS? He snorted. When she got the damn air con working, then he’d take off his bandana. Until then, tough shit.

He took the lift to the DCS’ floor and strode along the carpeted corridor to her office, noting the distinct waft of cool air *and* distinct lack of BO... the perks of being top brass, eh?

From outside her open door, he could hear her speaking on the phone. He raised his hand, ready to rap on the frame, when she glanced up and saw him. She waved him in and gestured to a chair on the opposite side of her desk.

Gus sat and allowed the conversation she was having with her daughter to drift over him as he surveyed her office. A familiar perfume filled the room.

‘... well, where were you? All I ask is that you let me know...’ She tapped her pen on the desk, head tilted. ‘... Of course you’ll try your...’

Paperwork covered her wooden desk with folders piled up to one side and an in-tray that was overflowing... perhaps if she didn’t spend so much time micromanaging him, she’d be on top of her paperwork.

‘... I didn’t say that, and that’s not what I meant. I have no doubt you’ll do well... I just wish you’d studied more... you skipped breakfast.’

Gus’ eyes drifted over various awards framed in silver that lined up symmetrically on the wall next to her bookshelf. He wondered if she’d hold off framing one if it would unbalance the display. Everything he’d gleaned about Gazala Bashir in the months since she’d joined Bradford Met spoke of a regimented personality.

‘Mehmoona, I’m sure you won’t mess up again... why should you? We’ve moved on from that... It’s in the past.’

There was one picture of her with her daughter on the bookshelf alongside various well-thumbed policing manuals. Gus recognised the girl from when she'd come into the office earlier in the year. He smirked, remembering how he'd shared a smile with the daughter when his mum's dogs had jumped up at her mum, leaving a dark wet patch on her skirt.

'We'll talk tonight, ok? And you can tell me all about your exam. Good luck, Meh—'

She shrugged and threw her phone onto the desk before, with the first hint of a smile Gus had seen from her, saying, 'Kids, huh? Who'd have them?'

With a smile that he hoped implied sympathy rather than gloating, Gus shook his head but remained silent.

As if to gather her thoughts, she closed her eyes for a moment and tapped her fingers on the table. 'I hear you've received anonymous letters, and that they delivered the most recent to your home?'

Shit! Someone had spilled the beans to her. This was the last thing he wanted. DCS Bashir was meticulous in sticking to the rules. She was about to warn him off the case. He opened his mouth to insist on his involvement when she stuck a pin in his balloon. 'Do you think it's your ex-wife?'

Eh? Where had that come from? Gaby was a bitch, sure enough, but even she wouldn't stoop to sending him anonymous letters. If Gaby had something to say, she wouldn't hesitate. Which, of course, was the reason he was deflecting her calls. You couldn't predict how she would act, and he couldn't be arsed with her dramatics. 'No, no. It's not Gabriella. Not her style – Bitch, yes, anonymous stalker, most definitely no.'

Bashir steepled her hands at her mouth. 'You're sure?'

'Positive.'

She nodded. 'Okaaay... well, you've handed everything over to C team and DI Byrne is capable... still – they should involve you in an advisory role.'

To say it surprised him was an understatement. He'd expected to be warned off, and yet here she was involving him.

'You must have crossed paths with this person, therefore, you're best placed to discover their identity. It crossed my mind that the Soviets or Syrians might be involved. After all, you kyboshed their attempts to buy that bioweapon.'

Gus scratched his forehead. *Yeah right, I can really see the Russians and Syrians sending me scented letters.* He cleared his throat. 'Again, no, Ma'am. If I pissed them off, they'd be more direct and a hell of a lot more threatening. At the moment, these letters are more

conversational with mildly threatening observations. It's someone local... not a terrorist organisation.'

'I won't tolerate any sort of threat to one of my officers so I've arranged for extra drive-bys at your home, your parents' home, and your girlfriend's home, until we find out who is doing this. I expect you to take extra precautions in the meantime. Now, if you're happy to liaise with Byrne then...'

She grabbed a folder without finishing her sentence and Gus realised she'd dismissed him. As he made his way back downstairs, he wondered what had just happened. A DCS taking an extra interest in his welfare was surprising... but very refreshing. Perhaps she wasn't as bad as he imagined. That warm fuzzy sensation lasted until he got back to find his desk phone ringing. He snatched up the receiver.

'Turn your damn mobile on, McGuire!' And once more, she hung up before he had the chance to reply.

## CHAPTER 22

### *Zodiac*

**T**hey're all crowding past us. Some from the bus stop, the rest from grabbing their breakfast at Lidl. They're all laughing and joking. The thick smell of nicotine hangs in the air as they have their last fags before entering school property... banter, jokes, kids mucking around. Lynx, BO, perfume, weed...

I don't mind speaking about 'it' as we walk. 'It' being what we did last night. But the way Pisces is acting, you'd think I'm parading up and down outside the school with a loudhailer instead of whispering. After the texts earlier, I thought all we'd be doing is talking about it, but Pisces is scared people will hear. I keep saying, 'We're invisible, chillax.' But the div's too pussy.

Me? I'm keen to chat, desperate to relive every awesome moment. You'd think I'd set off a firework on the pavement right in front of us with Pisces' furtive glances. Mumbling like an idiot, head swivelling to see who's nearby. I want to laugh, but that'll knock the dumbass right over the edge. Today is all about containment... holding the boat steady, steering us out of the storm. It's about me keeping up the charade.

I try again, keeping my tone reassuring. 'Nobody gives a toss... not about us, not about what we've done... not about Pratab.'

'That's not what they're saying on *Facebook* and *Instagram*. Everyone's going on about it. Sending RIP messages.'

That's true. It is all over social media and I love it. They're all chatting shit, every one of them and none of them knows it's me... us.

Pisces looks at me, eyes all red, and my heart flutters. Idiot better not give in. I grab the idiot's arm, enjoying the wince and the way the twat cowers away from me. 'Remember I know about Billy?' I'm still whispering, but there's an edge now.

I see the fear flicker in the silly sod's eyes and I change tack. All smiles I let go my hold, rubbing the part I'd gripped twice to say sorry. Uncertainty lingers, and I enjoy the sense that Pisces can't work out if I'm being threatening or not. Gentle and soothing, I maintain eye contact. 'We got to stick together. Remember what they did. All of them! Not only that dick, Pratab... but *all* of them.'

Pisces smiles back and then glances round, scared that somebody will see us. I lean closer. 'We're invisible.'

Truth is, I've made us this way, and the beauty is that neither of them realises it. Among the crowds, we are the invisibles, the oddballs nobody sees, the ones they only notice when they want to act big in front of their mates. We *are* the outsiders. But soon they'll wake up and take notice. The very thought of it excites me. My entire body is buzzing like every synapse is firing double quick. It's as if I'm on speed... that's it... speed! Yet, nobody else can see that. Just me. I grin and nudge Pisces. 'Now, stop being a wuss. We got away with it... and we can again.'

I link arms with Pisces, who resists for a nano-second before giving in. Side by side we walk on, through the crowds... invisible. Pisces, not wanting to piss me off, stares straight ahead, but me, I keep my eyes down... I want to be more invisible than my friend... that's the plan. For now, anyway.

## CHAPTER 23

I spot Zarqa in the distance and slow down. I don't want to see her. Can't get my head straight. Not with all that Razor crap this morning. That and the other stuff.

Got another one of them weird texts last night, with a video attachment. I open it and it's me... in my bedroom covered in baby oil, doing what I get paid to do. It's the same message as before. *Do this or else*. I've no choice, so I'll do it. I'll collect what I need after school and do it tonight. But it makes me feel sick knowing that someone knows summat about me. If Razor saw the stuff in my room, he'll know what I do. It's bad enough that I'm already paying someone off. It could be anybody - a friend, a teacher, the guy from the corner shop. I don't know how they found out about the webcamming and that worries me. Sometimes all I want is to run away. And if it was just me, that's what I'd do. I can't leave Jessie. Zarqa's pissing me off big time. She needs to grow up. She's got her parents and her sisters and enough money. What does she have to worry about?

Fuck, she's *Snapchatting* me. Stupid fucking Gif with a bear and a thought bubble with maths equations scratching his head and then flopping onto the desk in front of him. If I was in a better mood, I'd find it funny, but it's all so trivial. I ignore it. Can't be arsed adding to her story. Like to see her struggling like me. Doing the shit I have to just to survive.

I'm being tight. She's all right is Zarqa. She's always had my back. Right now, though, she's doing my head in. Especially after what we did last night? Fuck!

Ping!

Ping!

Ping!

More of the fucking shit on *Facebook* about how wonderful Pratab was. Well, he wasn't so wonderful when he tricked me into giving him a blow job in the lads' toilets after school and posted an image of me leaving the bogs with a caption saying, 'when you get your d\*\*k out for a pee and this poof offers you a BJ'. I'd thought he liked me... *really* liked me. Course he didn't admit he let me do it... made out he'd pushed me away before we got down and dirty... prick didn't admit he'd enjoyed it. Didn't tell them he did me, too. Didn't stop him coming back for more a few weeks later. He thought he could just bat his long lashes at me, flash me a grin and say sorry and that would be it? So, am I sorry he's dead? Am I fuck? He deserved it!

Ping!

Ping!

Ping!

I can't help myself; I scroll through the posts to his timeline.

RIP Mate! Bash The Angels will take care of you xxxx
---

Yeah right, so they will. I'm not sure he's up there. It might be even hotter in hell than here. I shove my phone in my bag. No phones allowed in the exam.

She's looking around now. Jumping up and down to see over everyone's heads. I crouch over, trying to make myself smaller. Can't believe we did that. Why did I help her? What was I thinking? That was some heavy, nasty shit. What happens if we get caught? Shit, what would Jessie and my mam do if I end up in jail? Jessie would end up in some bloody home or other and my mum...? Shit... she'd just give up and die.

She's seen me. I try to avoid her, make out I don't see her, but she darts up and blocks the door.

'Did you hear it on the radio this morning?'

Fuck, it's on the news already? Course it is. They found out what we did. I glance round, half expecting to see two plods approaching, rattling their handcuffs. But it's only that Mehmoona and Claire. Couple of weirdos. I keep my head down. They're always trying to talk to me, but I can't be arsed.

I grab Zarqa's arm and pull her away. 'We can't do this again, Zarqa... we can't.' But there's something in her eye. She's all edgy. She was in a panic yesterday, but not today. Today her eyes are all flashy and dark. I can tell she wants to do it again.

'Jo Jo, last night was scary as shit... it sooo was. I ran all the way home, my heart thumping and I thought it would never stop... but, you know what?'

A prickle goes up my spine as she raises her chin and looks right at me. 'It was great. We did the right thing. Now they're taking notice. We're making a mark. Next time it'll be even better.'

I should say 'No', but I've got no fight left. It's not even half eight and I'm cream cracked. I could climb in a hole, cover myself up and stay there till I'm fifty and all this crap is behind me.

The buzzer goes, reminding me we've still got an exam to sit. 'Later, Zarqa. Come on. Can't be late.'

## CHAPTER 24

‘Don’t see why you couldn’t have brought one of the uniformed officers, Gus.’ Compo, arms crossed over his chest, slumped like a moody toddler in the passenger seat of Gus’ car. ‘I’m better in the office... almost had summat on them phones, you know? My programme could be throwing out crucial evidence as we speak.’

Driving towards Clayton, where the Patel family lived, Capital Radio blasting out a Little Mix song, Gus hid his smile. Compo had told him it would take a good couple of hours to retrieve everything off both the victim’s and Haider’s phones. He’d been content to leave the programme running on its own until Gus had suggested he accompany him. Much as Gus would have preferred to have his old DS, Alice Cooper, with him, he was determined to continue with Compo’s training. He wanted to ensure Compo was a well-rounded officer, not just a computer nerd so, he’d been coaxing him out of his comfort zone. Yes, there were plenty of other officers he could have asked, but Compo needed stretching. ‘Stop griping, Comps. You’ll be great. You only have to take notes on your tablet. Oh, and keep an eye out for anyone you think might be concealing information.’

Compo inhaled and Gus’ smile again twitched his lips. ‘Consider it training. All of this looks good on your professional development record.’

‘Hmph.’ Compo looked out the side window. The lad had no need to add words for Gus to understand his meaning - ‘sod my professional development record’, but the bosses were looking to cut back so every officer had to demonstrate versatility. He didn’t want to lose one of his team. Nancy was having enough trouble keeping Alice’s position open for now, and there were at least three Detective Sergeants with their eye on her job. Gus didn’t want anyone to say Compo had limited skills.

*... still no sign of a let-up and with temperatures soaring into the twenties, with highs of twenty-nine degrees in some areas, the Met office reports that this has been...*

The vinyl seat made Gus sweat through the short-sleeved shirt he’d changed into as a mark of respect for the family. As he wriggled, a dribble rolled down his back and he realised that, in this weather, it was near impossible to appear cool and collected. The pool car’s air conditioning was no more effective than The Fort’s.



He drove along Buckingham Crescent, past a row of new-built houses that would have looked out onto extensive farmland, had someone not bordered the road with hedges and trees. It didn't surprise Gus that this was where the Patels lived. A significant number of Bradford's Hindu community lived in this area, and he'd visited families here before. The Patels' home was identifiable by the number of cars outside, some spilling onto the neighbours' drives. He passed the house, took the first available space, and parked up. He turned to address Compo. 'Right, this is your first house call to a grieving family. It won't be pleasant, but remember that however unpleasant it is for us, the whole situation must be unbearable for Pratab's family.'

Worry lined Compo's cheerful face, his shoulders slumped as he glanced away and mumbled. 'Wish Alice were here.'

Gus removed the key from the ignition and opened the driver's door. 'So do I, Comps, so do I.'

As soon as they got out, the humidity suffocated them. A slight heat shimmer gurgled on the pavement like a stream on a summer's day. Gus peered through the hedges to the dry-looking fields beyond. The trees were starved of liquid - all brown and brittle, like frail old men. Not for the first time, Gus wished the sky would open up with a torrent of rain.

As they approached the house, Compo's steps slowed, and he trailed behind Gus. Hot and sticky, Gus held onto his irritation by a very thin thread. 'For God's sake, Compo. Pull yourself together. It's your job.'

Compo glared at him but straightened his shoulders and increased his pace to match that of his boss. 'Won't let you down, Gus. I got this.'

Gus suspected his last words were more for his own benefit than Gus', but he appreciated them nonetheless.

In front of a large double garage stood two upmarket cars and below the front room window was a landscaped paved area dotted with several small, contained flowerpots. On raised decking in the bottom corner of the garden stood a wooden bench with a couple of empty glasses left there. The blinds were half shut with shapes passing by the window every so often. The Family Liaison Officer, Amanjeet Kaur, opened the door and gestured them inside. As soon as he entered, Gus was impressed by the amount of support the family had. People of all ages moved around, carrying food, tea, or flowers.

'Everyone's in there. The Brahmin will arrive for prayers soon, so you timed this well. If you want to pay your respects, you need to remove your shoes.' Amanjeet, herself, was barefoot.

Gus slipped his shoes off, placed them near the door, and waited for Compo to do the same. As he followed Amanjeet into the living room, Gus gave Compo an encouraging smile.

They entered a spacious room, fragranced with incense. They'd pushed all the furniture against the walls and covered the carpet with a white cloth. Mrs Patel, wearing a sari as opposed to the jeans and T-shirt she'd worn the previous day, sat on a small pouffe beside a shrine. A large silver-framed photo of Pratab, hair spiked up with gel, stood in the centre. The boy was smiling, his eyes sparkling and mischievous, making it difficult to imagine him dead. A red chandlo, the Hindu mark of respect, was on his forehead, as a blessing. Flowers and a lit diva candle surrounded the picture.

Gus had visited Hindu homes before at such times and was familiar with the ceremonial rituals. However, this was new to Compo. The police presence was an intrusion into the family's grief, yet Gus had no choice. Following Amanjeet's lead, he approached first Mrs Patel and then Mr Patel, who, with his blank gaze, seemed barely aware of their presence. Gus, once more, expressed his condolences over the death of their son. With the same stoic composure she'd shown at The Fort, Mrs Patel, her eyes swollen, stood and with a graceful movement leaned down to help her husband to his feet. She gestured to an older boy and a bespectacled girl who looked younger than Pratab. 'Come on, we'll talk to the detectives in the dining room.'

The boy, wan looking, moved to his mother's side and taking his father's arm, guided him from the room. The girl approached Gus, her posture straight despite her red-rimmed eyes. 'Couldn't you just leave us alone for a bit? We're grieving. My mum and dad need time.'

Seems the Patel women were feistier than the men. He wondered if Pratab had taken after his mum or his dad. 'We can't. We need to find out who did this to Pratab. I understand it's intrusive, but we have a few questions... and, we'd like to look at Pratab's room too.'

'Mita! It's fine. Let them ask their questions.' With a taut smile Mrs Patel continued, 'We can grieve when they catch the person responsible for this.' She turned, sari swishing, and gestured for them to follow.

The dining room adjoined the kitchen and held a table large enough to seat at least ten people. A woman who was similar enough to Mrs Patel to assume she was her sister, popped her head in. 'Chai? Tea? Soft drink?'

Gus inclined his head. 'Chai would be nice.'

Compo following Gus' lead nodded and smiled. 'Yes, chai please.'

Whilst waiting for the chai to arrive, Gus took the time to glance round. A fan in the corner sent a welcome breeze into the air and Gus savoured its coolness each time the fan rotated in

his direction. Apart from the oversized table, there was a sideboard displaying a range of the finest whiskies and brandies and a well-stocked wine rack. Otherwise, the room, painted in soothing pastel green shades, was minimalist with no ornaments or other furniture. A couple of family portraits decked the walls, which Gus surmised had been taken at a studio. A family of five, reduced by one. In both the photos the entire family was laughing. When would they be able to do that again?

Mrs Patel moved to the sideboard and picked up a photo album. She handed it to Gus. ‘These are of my son. This is the child who has been taken from us. The boy we will never see grow up. Pratab won’t pass his exams, go to University, get married and have children. His future has been snatched away from all of us. I want you to see these photos and remember him as you hunt the monster who killed him.’

Gus took the album from her and positioned it between him and Compo and, taking his time, studied each picture. Most were of the three siblings together; at a farm, at Harry Potter World, the seaside, Alton Towers. Some were of the entire family having barbecues, family gatherings. It wasn’t until he sensed Mrs Patel moving over to hand Compo a tissue, that he realised his colleague was crying. A tear dropped onto the table in front of them and then Compo, making Gus proud, said, ‘You have a lovely family, Mrs Patel. DI McGuire and I will not stop until we catch who took your beautiful son away.’ And he wiped his eyes, blew his nose, and shoved the tissue in his pocket just as the chai arrived.

The grieving mother studied Compo for a moment and then nodded. Gus looked at her husband, but he was still gazing into space. ‘Has Mr Patel seen a doctor?’

‘Yes. The doctor prescribed medication but, for now, Manoj refuses to take it. He’ll come around in his own time.’ She patted her husband’s hand before placing his tea in front of him. ‘If we could get on with it. We have prayers to do soon and I don’t want to miss those.’

Gus nodded, making a mental note to get Amanjeet to keep him updated on Mr Patel’s condition. Though his condition would be worsened by grief and shock, Gus’s experience meant he couldn’t discount the possibility that Mr Patel had something to do with his son’s death. Neither affluence nor grief was a guarantee that everything was alright in a family. Gus had learned that first-hand only the previous year. He waited until Compo got his tablet out before starting. ‘Why would Pratab be in the Bradford Nine area? It’s quite a distance from here. Does he have friends there?’

As they considered his question, Gus paid particular attention to Pratab’s siblings. If anyone knew the boy’s secrets, it was more likely to be them than his parents.

While the brother, Kiran, shook his head, Gus thought he detected a slight hesitation from Pratab's sister, before she too shook her head. Another note for Amanjeet – get the sister on her own and find out her secrets. It was Mr Patel who spoke, his voice shaky and raw, as if he hadn't spoken for months. 'Pratab was being secretive. Not telling us where he was going, sometimes he'd be home late... he even shouted at us if we questioned him... he was being a typical teenager, rebelling against his parents...' And then, he switched off again, as if the effort of answering that one question was too much for him.

Gus waited, but none of the other three added anything. 'What about his friends?'

Mrs Patel smiled. 'He was popular, lots of friends, but his best friend was Haider. We thought Pratab was with him last night. He'll be devastated. He and Pratab were inseparable since they started secondary school.'

This was tricky. Pratab's parents seemed unaware of Haider and Pratab's falling out, but he had to probe. If Pratab had lied about his whereabouts, then it stood to reason that he was doing something iffy. He cleared his throat. 'We spoke to Haider this morning. He told us he and Pratab hadn't been friends for a while. He said Pratab had a new group of friends.' Gus turned to Mita and Kiran. 'Do either of you know who your brother was hanging out with these days?'

The siblings exchanged glances, and then Mita sighed. 'Don't know his new friends. But he was being a dick recently.'

'Mita!' But Mrs Patel's tone was flat, as if her daughter's language was way down her list of priorities right now, but that she was duty bound to make the effort. She caught Gus' eye and waved an apologetic hand, implying 'what can you do?'

'He was, Mum... wasn't he, Kiran? Pratab was being more of a di... idiot than usual.'

Kiran fidgeted in his chair, his cheeks flushing. He looked down but nodded.

'How was he being an idiot?' Gus's gaze encompassed both siblings.

Mita shrugged. 'Dunno. Just being arsey. A bit of a smart ass, acting like he was all that. Kiran and me thought he might have a girlfriend cos he was always on his phone... but if he did, he didn't tell us and I hope if he did, he treated her better than he treated us.'

'Was it someone from school?' Gus could work it out when Pratab's phone records were released, but for now he wanted to hear what the brother and sister thought.

'Hmph.' Mita's snort exploded across the table. 'Nobody at school would go out with him. Everyone thought he was a...' instead of the word 'dick' or 'idiot' Mita waved her hand in a circular motion.

'Mita!' This time it was Mr Patel. 'Your brother's dead. Show some respect.' His tone was like a bullet through the air and Mita flinched. Her eyes welled up, and she jumped up and ran

around the table to her father, hugging him tight. ‘I’m sorry, Dad. So sorry. I’m just so angry with him. If he’d just stayed in and studied like he was supposed to, he’d be sitting his maths exam right now... with Haider and everyone.’

Mr Patel patted her arm, ‘I know, beti, I know. It’s hard, sssh, sssh.’

Gus gave them a moment before continuing and although he offered the question to all of them, he paid particular attention to Mita. She seemed to have more of a handle on her brother than either her parents or Kiran. ‘Why did Pratab stop speaking to Haider?’

With an eye roll, Mita snorted. ‘Haider’s a goodie two shoes and Pratab was bored with him. Besides,’ she extended her hands in a ‘duh’ sort of action. ‘We’re Hindu and he’s Muslim. The folks didn’t like them mixing.’

For a second the room went silent then Mrs Patel, her cheeks flushed, gave a snort of her own. ‘Don’t be silly, Mita. Haider’s religion has never been an issue.’

Flouncing back round the table to her chair, Mita repeated her eye roll. ‘Then why did I hear you and dad saying you wished Pratab would be friends with the lads from the temple?’

‘Mita!’ Again, her dad said her name, but his earlier sharpness was missing. ‘You need to stop this, Mita. We are grieving.’ The older man turned to Gus and Compo, his eyes damp, his voice trembling. ‘You must forgive us. We can’t answer any more questions right now. We’ll speak with Amanjeet after the pujas, but...’

Gus drained his chai cup. ‘We’ll leave you for now, but can we see Pratab’s room before we go? Crime scene officers will remove his computer and stuff, but I’d like to look right now. I want to get a sense of your son. Then we’ll go.’

Mrs Patel sighed and nodded. ‘Whatever you need, Inspector. Kiran, take them upstairs.’

Kiran had been reluctant to leave them alone in his brother’s room which was one of two attic rooms, but Gus insisted that he go down and take care of his parents. A sign on the opposite door told them it belonged to Kiran. Despite the tasteful pastel blue paint on the walls, the room was like most teenage boys’ rooms... if you ignored the fact that it had an en suite and was as big as the master bedroom in Gus’ house. A double bed with a Bradford City duvet set combined with the burgundy and yellow scarf that was slung over the end of the bed declared Pratab’s football allegiances. The duvet was crumpled like someone had lain on top. A Bradford City T-shirt scrunched up next to the pillow and a faint floral perfume in the air suggested that Mrs Patel, in her grief, had wanted to get as close to her dead son as she could.

Gus put on gloves and stood for a minute inside the door. A huge pinboard, covered in revision notes with a study schedule pinned in the middle, hung above a computer desk with a state-of-the-art computer system that attracted Compo’s attention. Gus left Compo to ooh and

aah and focussed instead on the schedule. Until Easter Pratab had marked each study target off in fluorescent highlighter. From Easter onwards the list of study aims remained unhighlighted. What had made Pratab neglect his studies after the holiday? Gus took a photo and ignored Compo.

‘Can’t wait to get this back to The Fort. If there’s owt on there to help us, I’ll find it.’

Gus prowled round the room, looking in Pratab’s drawers and wardrobe. Apart from his school polo shirts, Pratab favoured brand names like Nike and Adidas. Two posters were on his walls; one of Wiz Khalifa the other of Eminem. His clothes hung ironed, each one in its place. There was a clothes basket in the corner, but it was empty.

At the bed, Gus lifted the mattress, inserted his hand and fumbled around. The first thing he found was a wad of notes. He withdrew the cash and counted it - £120 – not enough to be too suspicious, but interesting that Pratab had hidden it. He replaced the money and continued his search. Within seconds he pulled a plastic bag out.

‘Look, Compo. More than enough bud for home consumption... but not enough for distribution.’

Compo approached with an evidence bag and Gus put it in. ‘Haider told me he thought Pratab was on coke and MDMA. Is the weed under the mattress just a distraction?’

Compo shrugged. ‘Well, we know where most drugs are stored, don’t we...?’

Gus moved to the bathroom and lifted the cistern lid. ‘Right here for easy disposal if you get raided.’

Sure enough, wrapped in three plastic bags and sealed with parcel tape were two packets. He wiped the bags dry on the pristine hand towel that hung near the sink and he and Compo took them into the bedroom.

About to drop the drugs into evidence bags, Gus noticed movement by the door.

Mita leaned against the frame, hands shoved into her jeans. ‘You found his stash then?’

Gus finished bagging up the drugs before replying. ‘You knew they were here?’

The girl shrugged as she stepped into the room. ‘Didn’t *know*... suspected... I suppose.’ She glanced towards the bathroom door that Gus had left a little ajar and plopped herself onto her brother’s bed. ‘Can you keep this from them? Just for today, until the first lot of prayers are over with?’

Gus understood that by ‘them’ she meant her parents and now it was his turn to shrug. He needed to ask them about it... thing was, would a twenty-four-hour delay matter? He suspected not. How many parents had he met who were shocked to discover their perfect child was

dealing or even taking drugs? His phone ringing saved him from responding. That familiar tune again... Bloody Gaby. She chose her moments, didn't she?

## CHAPTER 25

I write my name at the top of the paper, Zarqa Siddique. The air con hums away in the background sending an occasional waft of cool air round the room. It's sort of easy and reassuring... what isn't easy and reassuring is the awareness that the empty seat just down from me belonged to a dead boy. I'd never liked him. He'd been a nob. Don't know why Haider hung out with him. Pratab Patel thought he was all that, but he wasn't. He was just a big-headed rich kid who was so spoilt he thought everybody owed him *summat*. Dick! Still, that empty chair is a bit distracting.

Before I'd even got off the bus, I'd heard them talking. News travels fast and Karim was giving it all that on the back seat, bigging himself up, like he was some sort of hero because he'd found Pratab. A lot of his swag was because of me. Karim didn't hide the fact that he liked me... and I made no secret of the fact that I wasn't into him. Still, it didn't deter him, and he could be a laugh when he wanted to.

'Hey, Zarqa. I found that dead kid last night, you know? Pratab Patel, he's in your year, in't he?'

Karim is a year older than me but, like most lads, acts like he's about twelve and he's one of the Young Jihadis too. I kept my head pointed toward the window and ignored him. I didn't want reminding of my Young Jihadi friends. It was still raw. Not that I didn't get what they were trying to do. They were right to try to work out how Muslim kids coped in today's society. Shit, I got how hard it was to be Muslim and British. Sometimes it was like walking a tightrope between two cultures. I'd always thought I was lucky because my parents, well Mo and Mum, had always been quite liberal. Encouraging me to make friends from all walks of life, no emphasis on arranged marriages, no pushing Islam down my throat. I'd always thought they were cool. I get it now, though. It was because of the things they were keeping from me... the secrets... the lies. The problem was me. I was the one rebelling... couldn't stomach the self-righteous shit and the hypocrisy any longer. All the rubbish they spouted about challenging the cultural stuff that wasn't part of the religion didn't sit well with me. Didn't make any difference... they still looked down on anybody who wasn't what they called a 'true Muslim'.

'Hey, Zarqa? You ignoring me?'

Well, duh? You think so? I glance round and see Claire Stevens in the seat behind. I roll my eyes at her, but she looks straight through me. Probably scared I'm going to pick on her. Always feel sorry for her. She always seems to be the butt of someone's jokes. It was a relief to grab



my backpack and hop off the bus before Karim and his loud-mouthed mates could catch-up. I looked around for Jo Jo wondering if he was thinking about what we'd done. The shit had already hit the fan.

I shake my head and glance round when I realise that I've been staring into space for the last fifteen minutes. Mehmoona's scribbling away like nobody's business. She's a smart-ass. She'll pass no sweat. Claire's three chairs down from me and she looks like she's struggling. Keeps fidgeting. Know how she feels. It's too damn hot to think. Jo Jo's sitting three rows along from me and two seats down. He's not doing much writing either. As I watch, he steals a peek at the empty chair. Everyone's doing that... sneaking glances at Pratab's seat. Wonder if the dick would enjoy being the elephant in the room. Seems like karma to me. He always was a bully.

The tip tap of the invigilator's heels on the floor behind me as she walks up and down the lines of students, makes me peek at the paper on my desk. Well, I've managed my name and I think that's right. She slows as she nears Pratab's place, maybe she's thinking about him too. But she speeds up again, clip clopping down the aisle. Fuck, it's hard enough to focus without that racket. Why is she not forced to wear soft soles like the rest of us? Then she's off tap, tap, tapping up the next row. You'd think in this heat she'd plonk her chair right in front of a fan and watch us from there, but no, Mrs Husseini takes her job seriously.

I push Pratab and Mrs Husseini out of my mind and try to concentrate, but I keep thinking about last night. At first it was all exciting, a big adventure. Yeah, my heart was pounding. But in a good way... not like it is now. Not like it's been doing since then. I pull my ponytail over my shoulder and study the ends. Some are split. It'll be the bleach. She told me not to dye it, but it's my hair, not hers.

Back to last night. At one point, the adrenaline kicked in so much, I thought my veins would burst. Thought I'd explode. My head was light, and my legs shook, but no way was I going to let Jo Jo back out then.

Now, though, everything's different. On the one hand it's kind of cool to hear everyone talking about what we've done, asking me my opinion and not knowing it was me... not suspecting that good little Zarqa Siddique could do something so shameful... so awful. Now that's a big turn on. It's like I matter, like I can make a difference, that I'm important.

I glance at the clock on the wall; twenty minutes to go. I smile and open my paper...

I hate maths.

## CHAPTER 26

Getting back into the car was like inflicting torture on himself. The leather seat scorched Gus' back and the steering wheel was almost too hot to touch. He left the door open and switched on the engine, activating the faulty air conditioning. When its warmth hit his face, he twisted it back off again.

'Windows down, Compo.'

As he drove off, he wondered about Pratab's sister. She'd known about the drugs in her brother's room, or at the very least was unsurprised that they'd found them. However, what intrigued him more was the heated discussion he'd witnessed between Mita and Kiran round the side of the house as they were leaving. He'd not been able to hear anything, but Mita's anger was clear in the way she prodded her brother hard in the shoulder, before storming off, her, 'I'll speak to you later, yeah?' ringing in the air. Kiran's expression had been of anger... anger and fear? Gus wasn't sure but as soon as the lad had seen Gus, he strode off towards the back garden after his sister. He'd texted the FLO asking her to look out for the two kids. If Gus wasn't mistaken, those two were keeping something secret. The big question was, had it anything to do with their investigation?

'What's your thoughts on it all, Comps?'

Compo leaned his head closer to the open window and wiped a trickle of sweat from his brow. The draught, causing his wavy brown hair to waft about his round face, made Gus realise he'd never seen Compo without a beanie or a bobble hat on before. The heat was proving too much even for him.

'It's so sad... How will they get through it? How do families cope with that? The loss of a kid with his whole life in front of him?'

His friend's words hit Gus in the solar plexus, because they betrayed Compo's lack of family... his inability to believe that he himself would be missed.

'Shit, Comps. Do you think if you died, we'd miss you any less than we did Sampson? Don't be daft. It would devastate my mum and dad and the entire team. We're your family.'

Compo turned to look out the window. Gus sensed he needed a moment, so he switched on the radio.

*... with temperatures showing no sign of dropping, local communities are being urged to drop in on vulnerable neighbours to ensure they are keeping hydrated. While in other news a*

*dog owner has been charged with animal cruelty after leaving their Japanese Akita locked in an unventilated car. The dog is expected...*

‘The kids are hiding summat, Gus. Mita, despite all her attitude, is definitely covering up.’ He paused before adding, ‘I’d get the CSIs to focus on printing the inside of that cistern... I reckon they’ll have wiped the outside clean, but they might have forgotten the ridge at the top.’

The exact same thought had occurred to Gus and the fact that Compo had picked up on the girl’s furtive glances towards her brother’s en suite, pleased him. He’d make an all-round detective out of his computer nerd yet. ‘Contact Hissing Sid, Compo, and be sure to tell him to check the underside of the cistern lid... hopefully the Patel kids aren’t fans of CSI.’

As Compo made the call, Gus considered his suspicions that Mita had already known where her brother’s drug stash was. Whether he’d confided in her or she’d nosed around on her own when he was out and found it was uncertain. Either way, the biggest question was why she hadn’t told her parents? Perhaps she’d told her other brother? Had Pratab shared his secret? It seemed unlikely that he’d confide in his younger sister. Wouldn’t he be more likely to share something like that with his brother?

His phone rang and Gus exhaled a relieved breath when he saw the caller ID said Taffy rather than Gaby. He answered the hands-free with a, ‘Whassup, Taff?’

‘PM toxicity came back with a right cocktail of shit... MDMA, coke... even a bit of Rohypnol and that’s before we consider the alcohol levels. The doc says he would have been nearly unconscious. Reckons using the cable ties was unnecessary.’

If it was unnecessary, why did the killers use them then remove them only to discard them feet away from the body? Had they just enjoyed cuffing the lad? In that case, why not leave them on? Gus suspected it was to do with the posing afterwards... perhaps the plastic ties offended the killer’s sense of how the crime scene should look when Pratab was discovered. ‘I take it the blood on the cable ties belongs to our victim?’

‘Yup. Cause of death was the knife wound to the jugular, but your da..., I mean the doc, reckons it would have been touch and go for the lad anyway, what with the drugs and alcohol combo. One other interesting thing about the ties though. The doc sees no evidence of a struggle. Says they didn’t appear to have tightened around Pratab’s wrists otherwise the wounds would have been wider and deeper if he’d struggled against them. He reckons the killer pulled them that tight and Pratab was either unconscious or too drugged to fight back. The bruising along the head was inflicted pre-mortem, and he suspects the killer used unnecessary

force then too. Pratab wouldn't have been able to struggle. Time of death wasn't long before the body was discovered. Dr McGuire will send the report over asap.'

'Has he had any luck lifting prints from the hand marks on his head?'

Gus could hear Taffy flicking over pages on his notebook. 'Oops, forgot that bit – yep. Doc says it looks like they wore gloves. We're still waiting for all the trace forensic analyses to come back.'

'Okay, Taff, thanks for that. Head up to City Academy. We'll meet you there.'

'Oh, wait a minute, Gus, your dad wants a word before you go.'

As Dr McGuire's booming voice filled the car, Gus scowled, irritated by Compo's, 'Hi, doc.' followed by his dad's 'Hi, Compo, Angus got you out and about today? Corrine always says he should make sure you get more sunshine, you often look a tad peaky. It's good to keep your vitamin D topped up.'

The Dr lowered his tone before continuing, 'She's just dropped off some brownies here and I believe she's heading up to The Fort to leave you some too.'

With Compo's, 'Brilliant, I love Mrs M's chocolate brownies,' ringing in his ears, Gus snorted. His mother's brownies would be inedible to all but Compo, but she didn't realise and continued to bring her burnt offerings into Gus' place of work for his team to share.

'I heard that, Angus.'

As they drew up at City Academy, Gus had a momentary pang of guilt which was dispelled when he saw a group of paparazzi gathered beside the gates. 'Windows up, Compo. Don't want any microphones stuck in my face. Dad, give me a sec, there's a load of journalists outside the school and I'm just pulling into the car park.'

'Oh, I won't take a minute, laddie. You need to speak to Gabriella. Poor thing's been trying to contact you for days now. You should make the effort... she's not going away, you know? And she's family after all.'

Gus searched for something to say, but came up blank. *Poor thing? Family?* Gus had a childish urge to say *What the fuck!* in the same tone he'd heard various teenagers using. Instead, he took a deep breath and glowered out his closed window at the journalists who were rapping their knuckles against the glass. His temptation to mouth the words 'eff off' to them was strong. 'I'm working, Dad. Now's not the time, as I thought you'd have realise, bearing in mind the post mortem you've just done.'

Except for Compo's exaggerated intake of breath there was silence in the car. Compo looked at Gus, his mouth a perfect 'O', his forehead puckered, and Gus flinched from the waves of disapproval adding to the temperature in the already overheated vehicle.

‘You know I haven’t forgotten the wee dead laddie, Angus. I’ve just been up to my elbows in his innards. I’ll not forget the waste of that young lad’s life in a hurry. Which is why it’s important that you patch up your differences with Gabriella. Life’s too short. Shorter than you know.’

*Was his dad getting maudlin?* Before he could ask what he was on about, Dr McGuire continued, back to his usual brusqueness, ‘Besides she has something important to ask you.’

Gus bit down on the retort that sprung to his lips. No point aggravating things by mentioning that Gaby was always after something. ‘I’m busy, Dad. Gotta go.’

He placed his warrant card in front of the camera and waited for the barrier to go up and drove past the media herd and into the nearest parking space. As they exited the vehicle, Gus heard a familiar voice yelling through the fence, ‘Could you comment on this *Snapchat Killer*, DI McGuire?’

*Shit! It had leaked already.* That was inevitable. Still, he’d hoped for longer before the likes of Jez Hopkins became involved and created a stupid tagline glorifying the killers. He turned and glared at Hopkins, who grinned at him from behind the gates. Gus would give a lot for that tosser to be behind bars for real. ‘Come on, ignore them.’

But Compo, shoulders hunched, scowled at Gus. ‘No need for that, was there?’

For a moment Gus thought Compo was defending the journalist.

‘No need at all. Your dad dun’t deserve that.’

*Ah, not the reporter, but his dad.* Gus had the grace to admit, if only to himself, that Compo was right. ‘Come on, we got other things to think about. Patti’s got all the senior year groups together, so we can talk to them.’

## CHAPTER 27

City Academy was a new building, with an additional annexe to the side. Its cold concrete dazzled in the sunlight, little sparks of colour glistening from the slabs. Gus ran up the steps and entered the building by the visitors' entrance, to find Patti waiting for him there. Being with Patti in the school building always made Gus feel awkward. Here at her place of work she presented a calm yet efficient aura, that masked the bouts of giggles she was prone to in his company. He was never sure how to greet her here either, so he took his cue from her as she said, 'Ah, DI McGuire and DC Compton, the students are waiting for you.'

Despite her smile, Gus recognised the tension in the way she held her body and the faint lines around her mouth. Although this would be difficult for her, Patti would hold things together for her staff and students. No head teacher wanted to deal with the death of their student, yet Patti had experienced this before. Once more her school was in the spotlight and journalists camped on the doorstep. He followed her along a corridor towards the theatre and past a display table covered in a velvet drape with a large photograph of Pratab hanging behind it. Beneath it were small offerings of soft toys and flowers and in centre place was an ornate glass bowl with a simple sign containing the words, 'Our thoughts for Pratab'. A supply of pens and multi-coloured Post-it notes lay scattered in front and already the vase was more than half full of the students' messages and thoughts.

Patti gestured at the shrine. 'Some students wanted to commemorate Pratab. It's all part of the grieving process.'

They passed the shrine and Patti opened the door leading into the theatre. At once the subdued tones of the waiting youngsters drifted into the corridor. Gus wished they were waiting for a normal assembly or a school play rather than to be asked for information about their deceased schoolmate. Although this wouldn't be easy, it was important to represent the face of the investigation to the pupils. They needed to view the police as approachable, despite the four uniformed officers lining the edge of the auditorium. Taffy was already there, standing next to them. Gus made a mental note to remind the lad about speeding.

Patti introduced Gus and his team to the assembled year group.

From where he stood in front of the rows of students, a welcome breeze from the massive fan that hung from the ceiling cooled him down, drying the sweat on his body, but leaving him sticky and uncomfortable. Gus cast his eyes along the rows of students and realised he

recognised a few. Zarqa sat halfway up, with Haider and Karim a few seats away. There were a couple of lads he'd interviewed the previous year when their friend had gone missing. In the third row sat some of Zarqa's friends whom he'd met at Mo's and another girl who nodded at him. Belatedly, he realised the girl who'd nodded was the DCS's daughter.

Before he spoke, Gus made sure he engaged in eye contact with as many students as he could. Then, projecting his voice so it hit the back wall, he began. 'I understand this has been a tough day for you. Exams, the unbearable heat, and most of all, the death of your school friend. I won't keep you here for long.' He paused and moved closer to the front row.

'It's never easy to come to terms with this sort of tragedy. But one thing that will help, is finding justice for Pratab. In order to do that, we need information. We need to know about Pratab's friends. The places he frequented and the things he liked to do. Who he spent time with both inside and outside of school. I expect some of you might have shared secrets with Pratab – things he perhaps didn't tell his siblings or parents. These sorts of things might be what helps us catch his killer. These officers,' Gus pointed towards his uniformed colleagues, 'will be available in the school at lunchtime, and before and after school. If you have any information, no matter how insignificant, we'd like you to share it with them.'

A few students cried, muffled sobs that were etched by grief and fear. 'I won't keep you much longer. These officers will interview those of you closest to Pratab. However, any of you can arrange a meeting with one of my team by texting this number.' Gus pointed to a number on the screen behind him.

'These meetings will be confidential. We want you to feel comfortable sharing any information you may have. I want you all to put that number into your phones.' He paused and waited.

A few kids took out their mobiles whilst others looked restlessly around them. Gus cleared his throat. 'I mean all of you... please. Everyone should take down this number.' He waited and more students took out their phones, some with obvious reluctance, a few in resignation, and most apparently happily. There was no guarantee that they were inputting the number, or that they'd contact them, but Gus wanted to make it as easy as possible for them. 'We will also post the number on walls around school. In my experience, sometimes things occur to people hours, even days after a traumatic event. Please use this function. If you don't want to meet up, you could text the information to us. We will take every piece of information seriously. Thank you.'

Gus left the theatre with Patti, leaving Taffy, Compo, and the uniformed officers available to chat to the students. Together they walked to Patti's office where Gus was glad to sit down

in front of a fan. Now that he'd conducted his 'official' police business for the day, he drew out his bandana and tied it round his hair, glad of the breeze between his neck and his dreads.

'So, what can you tell me about Pratab Patel?'

Patti slid behind her desk, taking advantage of the desk fan that whirred in a desultory fashion. 'Pratab Patel? Well, I knew you'd be asking, so I asked around. Seems he'd been a bit of an idiot over the past few months. Skiving school, his grades have gone down. He was a solid A and B student, but...' She shrugged and shook her head. 'None of that matters now. A couple of his teachers say he isn't friends with the lads he hung out with before. They've seen him on his own at lunch and break times, on his phone mainly. His parents came in a few times, but things weren't improving. Before that though he'd been great – studious, pleasant.'

That tallied with Haider's statement. 'What about the brother and sister? How have they been?'

'Ah, Mita and Kiran. Pratab was the middle child. Mita can be a handful. Spoilt, but bright.' She frowned. 'We had a few reports of Mita bullying one of the Polish girls and last year, she sent a couple of inappropriate texts to a girl she'd fallen out with. There was also talk that Mita shoved some ham in one of the Muslim girl's lockers, but that was never proven. She seems to have settled down now. Hope this doesn't spark her off again.'

Patti pursed her lips like she had more to add but was weighing up her words. He waited. Patti would speak when she was ready.

'Hmm, Kiran? Well. Kiran is a bit of an enigma. He's smart. A\*s all the way, but... and this is only my opinion, he can be sly.'

'Sly?'

Patti got up, walked round her desk, and leaned on it and sighed. 'He's one of those kids you find hard to like.' She wafted her hands as if to ward off any criticism he might have. 'I know, I know. It's a horrible thing to say... and it's just my opinion. It's rare that I can't see something likeable in a kid... but he's the exception.'

Okay, he hadn't expected that. Patti wasn't one to dislike her pupils without good reason and the fact that she was distressed at sharing this indicated that it conflicted her. 'Patti, you can't love 'em all.'

Her glare was enough to tell him she wished very much that she could.

'Any chance you could give me a bit more? If that's your take, then you must have reasons.'

Patti steepled her fingers in front of her lips and gave his question due consideration before replying, 'He's always there, you know? On the periphery of things. Other kids get caught doing something, and he's... just there. Looking sly and self-satisfied.'



That wasn't Gus' impression of Kiran, but then kids were often different at school than at home. Apart from that, today must be particularly difficult for the lad. However, he trusted Patti's judgement. If she thought there was something off with him, then he wouldn't dismiss it.

As if relieved she'd got that off her chest, Patti straightened. 'It's just a feeling, okay? Nothing more, nothing concrete, and it probably says more about me than him.'

Gus stood up and walked over to her. He put his arms round her and hugged her for a moment, breathing in the fresh smell of her perfume, glad it wasn't the one he associated with those wretched anonymous letters. As he released her, he dropped a kiss on her cheek. 'You take care of yourself, Patti.' That thought reminded him of something. 'You'll never believe this, but DCS Bashir has ordered additional drive-bys on your street and mine. Who'd have thought it, eh?'

Patti raised a curved eyebrow. 'She thinks I need protection?'

'Hmm, perhaps not protection exactly. It's just a precaution. There's been no implied threat—'

'Other than that single little omission, you mean? That's a threat, I'd say.'

'Omission?'

'Their name. People who don't sign their correspondence are generally up to no good, aren't they?'

He had to admit that was true.

As he wandered through the school to pick up his team, Gus wondered about Patti's assessment of Kiran Patel. Sly and smug? He couldn't arrest him for that, but it was strange that, Pratab wasn't the only one of the Patel children, who'd played up over the past weeks.

## CHAPTER 28

*Pisces*

Me: Need to talk ASAP!

**W**ish Zodiac would answer. Just want to know what's happening. That's all.  
Ping!  
Fucking notification. Gonna block them. They're getting on my tits, big time.  
Come on Zodiac, just reply.

Ping!

Why's the daft git not replying? I'll try Leo.

Me: You OK? Heard from Zodiac? PTB!

Surely the loser will reply at least.

Ping!

Leo: SRSLY? WTF? Keeping my head down. So should you. Stop texting.  
GTG.

Me: F2F. PTB!

Leo: NAGI! POS!

Arse! *Who the fuck do you think you are?* I almost text back, but I hear someone outside the door, so I slip the phone in my school bag. I'll try again later. Just need to keep my cool and it'll be ok.

## CHAPTER 29

As he approached the school canteen, Gus kept an eye open for Zarqa. He'd seen her in the assembly, and he wanted to have a quick word with her before he left. Jerry and Dave's words about her running down Oak Lane late the previous night had made him worried for her. Time he stood up to the mark and acted like her godfather. Zarqa was acting up. She'd every right to, she'd suffered a tremendous shock. Everything she'd believed was upended, and it wasn't surprising she was being a pain.

The situation was deteriorating. Mo worried about Naila. Naila worried about Mo. They both worried about Zarqa and their other kids and Gus worried about all of them. There was too much worry going around and he had to do something. He'd taken a back seat, assuming things would level off. However, hearing Zarqa was out alone late at night, near where a murder had happened and on a school night, had jolted him.

A crowd of kids gathered round the vending machines near the cafeteria and Gus cast his eye over them looking for Zarqa. Then he caught sight of her sitting on a silver chair, apart from the other kids, fingers speeding over her phone. In front of her was a pile of books and her bag. She'd done something to her hair. The bottom bit was a mucky yellowy colour. It was probably the fashion, but he thought it looked horrid. She looked skinny and frail and, unaware that she was being observed, her eyes seemed dull... full of misery. As he weaved through the milling pupils, she caught his eye. Her expression changed. Her mouth pulled down and a frown shot across her forehead. She jumped to her feet and began scurrying away from him towards a corridor leading to a maze of classrooms.

Gus frowned. What was she playing at? He only wanted to chat. 'Zarqa. Stop!'

As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted them, for every one of the pupils turned to stare at him. Their eyes following him as he headed along the corridor after his goddaughter. For goodness' sake, what had he done? He was on her side. Zarqa was usually happy to talk to him, but her trying to avoid him worried him.

About ten steps in front of him, Zarqa banged into someone and the pile of books she was carrying scattered onto the floor. She glanced behind, her face contorted into a mask of frustration and anger. It struck Gus how desperate she seemed to escape him. He increased his stride and in two seconds was with her, helping her pick up her fallen books. He kept his voice light. 'You avoiding me, Zarqa?'

She shrugged as he handed the last of her belongings to her. 'Didn't notice you, that's all.'

They both knew that was a barefaced lie, but Gus ignored that detail. ‘Look, I wanted to have a quick chat with you.’

He hesitated, as her eyes darted around looking for an escape route. This wasn’t the ideal place to have this conversation, but he wasn’t sure when he’d get another chance. He glanced round and spotted an area under the stairs that would afford them some privacy. ‘Over here.’

With reluctance written all over her face, and dragging her heels, Zarqa joined him. ‘I don’t have time for this, Gus. It’s exam time and I need to study every minute I’ve got.’ Her tone was insolent, each word an accusation, and Gus flinched. Where had the sweet acquiescent kid he’d known since she was born gone?

‘Oh, so that’s why you’re tearing down Oak Lane after eleven p.m. on the night before an important exam, is it?’ Again, just too late, he realised he’d misspoken. Fuck’s sake, he needed to get better at this god-parenting lark.

Zarqa’s lips thinned, her eyes, so similar to her mother’s, sparked their fury... and something else? Gus couldn’t decide before she was hissing at him. ‘Now he’s got someone *following* me? Really? Fuck’s sake, Gus, just leave me alone.’

She tried to brush past him, but Gus moved so that his body blocked her escape. He too was now cross. Cross with Zarqa and cross with himself. He’d no experience of this fatherhood carry-on and was out of his depth, yet he loved Zarqa and reckoned that hurt made her lash out.

‘Don’t be stupid, Zarqa. Course your dad’s not got someone watching you. He trusts you not to do owt daft.’

Her, ‘He’s not my dad,’ lashed him like a whip. This was Mo she was talking about. The man who’d been prepared to relinquish everything, including his life, for the woman he loved... and for Zarqa. The guy who’d loved her from the moment she was born. When he spoke, his words were sharp. ‘So, what is he then? A piece of shit on your shoe?’

Zarqa averted her gaze. Her shoulders shook, but Gus wasn’t sure if it was in anger or tears. He lowered his tone, softened it, and tried again, wishing he was anywhere but here right now doing this. ‘Mo is your dad, in every way that counts, Zarqa, and I know that when you’ve thought it through, you’ll realise that.’

Her head jerked up; her chin raised. ‘Don’t patronise me. He’s a murderer. He’s not my dad.’

Gus stepped back and raised his hands, palms up. ‘Okay, okay. We can’t talk about this here. I wanted to ask you not to wander the streets alone after dark. It’s not safe. Last night someone attacked a mosque, and then... well you already know about Pratab.’

Zarqa snorted and pushed her way past him. ‘Pep talk delivered. You can chill now.’ Gus touched her arm, ‘Don’t go, Zaraq. I want to help... I’m here for you.’

She yanked her arm away. ‘If *that*’s how you deal with kids, it’s just as well you’ve none of your own. That’s all I can say.’

Stunned, Gus watched her run around the corner and out of sight.

## CHAPTER 30

**L**ast thing I needed was to see Uncle Gus. Bet my da... Mo's got him on the case. Spying on me, keeping an eye on me. I was sure he was going to ask where I'd been last night. Shit, what would I have said?

I scurry along to my locker and fill my bag. School's out for today. Can't stand being here. Everywhere I go they're talking about it and I want to yell at the top of my voice... 'That was me! I did it and I don't regret a fucking thing!'

Imagine how that would go down. Imagine Ms Copley escorting me into her office, picking up the phone and phoning Gus... maybe my mum and Mo. She'd have that disappointed look on her face. The one where she frowns a little... just enough to make you feel like shit. She'd sit me in the chair opposite her desk, like she did that time I was sick. But this time, she'd scowl at me... bet she wouldn't know what to say. She'd wonder how her friend Naila's daughter could have done something so awful.

Thing is, I don't bloody care... before I found out about what Mo did to my real dad, I'd have been a nervous wreck, all jittery and nervous. Now, I don't get what's wrong with me. Mostly, I walk about in a trance. The conversations around me seem like they're filtered through water. Like at the swimming pool, when you bomb to the bottom and you can hear stuff, but you can't make sense of anything. Like you're in your own world and nobody else can reach you. The only time I'm anywhere near normal is when I'm with Jo Jo. It's only with him I feel connected. Like I'm here... present in my own life.

No, that's not quite right. I feel one thing... can't describe it, can't shake it off, can't forget about it. Everywhere I go, I carry this big concrete lump in my chest. It weighs me down so I can hardly breathe and when I see *him*, it gets bigger and bigger. Sometimes I think it's going to burst right out of my body and splatter the floor with my blood and my lungs and my ribs and... my heart.

A sob gulps up into my throat and I swallow it back down. It presses on top of the block and I can't catch my breath. I lean my forehead against my locker door, welcoming the cool metal against my skin and I take deep, slow breaths. The lump's still there, still dragging me down. Not caring who's around, I push myself upright and kick the bottom locker. The crash reverberates all around, but nobody hears. Everyone else is in class. I'm alone in my misery.

So, what would Gus do if Patti told him what I'd done? Hm, that's easy. He'd come dashing right over. Uncle Gus, the knight in shining armour and dreads. I grin at the image, but it soon

fades from my lips. He wouldn't be able to save me. Not now. Not after what I've done. But he'd still come. Wonder if he'd put the sirens on? Would he stop to pick up Mum and Mo?

Wonder how long we'd get in prison, me and Jo Jo? No, not Jo Jo. He's got his mum and his sister to take care of and I've heard if you're young and gay in prison it's not a good thing. Wouldn't do that to Jo Jo. He's got enough crap to deal with. No, I wouldn't dob Jo Jo in. It was my idea. He didn't really want to do it. He doesn't want to do the next one either. But he will. I'll be able to convince him.

I turn around and see Claire Stevens sitting there, phone in her hand. All quiet, watching me. *How long has she been there?* She smiles, one of those 'I'm sorry' kind of ones. Sorry for spying on me? Sorry for seeing me lose control... sorry for being alive? I study her more closely now. She's not there to spy on me..., she's hiding. I glance round. No one else is around, except the two of us. I plonk myself down next to her and she moves away from me, like I've got something catching. Can she sense the badness in me? Maybe this timid, spotty freak can smell the festering rot that's just waiting to burst out. I don't blame her. Instead I jump to my feet and not making eye contact with her, I walk over to my locker. 'You haven't seen me, right?'

Her laugh drifts after me. 'Who's gonna ask me, anyway? Go! I've not seen you.'

I sling my bag over my shoulder, slam the metal door shut, and wander out of school, ignoring the receptionist at the front desk as she shouts after me to sign out.

Can't get me in any more bother than I'm already in.

## CHAPTER 31

Gus watched Compo with a slight smile. Compo had been delighted to find the huge box of brownies Gus' mum had left by the coffee machine. Despite having already devoured two bacon butties and a slice of lemon cake at The Lunch Monkey before returning to work, he opened the container and stuffed a charred brownie in his gob. The lad had a belly of iron.

Taffy winked at Gus as he sat down behind his desk. 'Good to see the heat's not affecting your appetite, Comps.'

Crumbs falling out of his mouth, Compo grinned and settled himself beside his computer station, where a range of PCs and different modems and so forth sat. He sparked open the can of Fanta he'd taken from the mini fridge and took a long slurp before studying the screens. The radio played in the background as they worked...

*... are searching for a suspect the media has dubbed The Snapchat Killer. The murderer is reported to have sent an image of the dead boy to his friend using the social media app Snapchat. The police have dec...*

Gus was on his feet in an instant. 'Switch that bloody thing off. What the hell are they playing at? I'll get Nancy on the case.'

It was too late, though. The information was in the public domain and the name would stick. It angered him that the press appeared to place more emphasis on sensationalising evil than in grieving with the victim's relatives. 'Please say you've found something to move this investigation forward, Comps.'

'I've just received the info from Pratab's and Haider's phones. I'll upload it to the main screen.'

Gus moved over so he could see the interactive board and waited for Compo to talk them through his findings. 'Pratab first, if you don't mind.'

'Okay, here's his text history.'

A list of numbers with names and dates and times appeared. Gus looked at it for a moment. '... And?'

'Well, looking at this, from Easter until his death, Pratab only used this phone to contact his folks. There are no other texts... only those sent to his parents and his siblings... But...'



highlighted a date just before the Easter holidays, ‘before this date, he texted both his family and friends... granted, there are more to parents than to his peers, but that’s because he mostly used *Snapchat* or *Instagram* or *Messenger* to connect with his mates. By Easter-time he’d deleted all social media apps... strange.’

Gus scrutinised the data. There was an obvious difference in Pratab’s mobile usage pre and post the holidays. Gus had his own ideas about that. ‘Haider said he cut off his usual friends around then, which tallies with this. However, where are the texts to his new mates? Why does he only ever text family?’

Sipping the Irn Bru Compo had given him earlier, Gus studied the list. ‘Can we see his contacts list? Even if he’s not messaging his recent friends, he’ll have them in his contacts.’

Compo pressed some keys and displayed Pratab’s contacts. There were a few notable familiar names on it. Gus’s god-daughter Zarqa for one, and of course, Haider and Karim’s sister Lubna.

‘Get in touch with everyone on that list. Find out when and how he last communicated with them. Also, what about call history? His parents and brother texted him repeatedly on Sunday evening, but did they call him too? Did anyone else? Any unknown numbers?’

Again, Compo worked his magic, and the image changed. ‘There are lots of voicemails and missed calls from his parents and Kiran. A few from Mita. She’s younger so she’d probably be out of the loop on that... he ignored them all.’

Gus looked at Compo. ‘Can you triangulate those communications to check everyone was where they said they were.’

‘On it, boss.’

‘Also, access his emails and other social media accounts? So, who has he communicated with and from which device? You’re not telling me a sixteen-year-old lad’s only communications were with his mum and dad. That’s not believable. I suspect he had another phone. Get Amanjeet to see if she can find a second mobile. Oh and have Sid be on the lookout for one when he’s processing Pratab’s room. Also contact an officer at City Academy and request access to Pratab’s locker – although I think it’s unlikely he would have left it there over the weekend – you never know though, we might discover something else. Can you retrieve any of those *Snapchat* things you mentioned? Like the one he sent to Haider?’

Compo grinned like he’d just won the lottery... or, in his case, received a big cream cake. ‘I’ve accessed both Pratab and Haider’s email, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* accounts. *Snapchat* will take time. I should, at some point, be able to identify which device he used to access the different accounts too.’

Compo's eyes shone with the prospect of a computer challenge. And already he was putting his ear buds in and settling in for the task.

Gus looked at Taffy. 'Get a couple of uniforms to check the two lads' social media accounts. It's too time consuming for us.'

Gus had just returned to his own desk when his PC pinged and Compo yelled across the room. 'That's the CCTV footage from the cameras around your house, Gus. I've shared it with C team too.'

Gus had all but forgotten about his stalker and wished that they'd hurry with his new home security system so that he could have Bingo back. They'd told him a few days if they fast-tracked the order... and if he would pay through the nose for it. He opened the file and began to fast forward through it. Compo had isolated the times when his neighbour's motion-activated lights came on and then rolled it onto one thread from when Gus and Patti had entered his house on Saturday night until Patti had picked up the envelope on the Sunday. Within fifteen minutes, Gus realised it would be a fruitless task. There was an area between the side street and his front door that was uncovered by the surrounding cameras. His stalker had a clear, unmonitored route to his door.

What a waste of time! His best hope of catching his stalker was if they turned up with another letter. But only if they waited till his new system was up and running. If they caught the fucker, that would be one less thing to worry about.

'Oh, Gus, glad I caught you.'

Gus looked up, smiling at Nancy, who'd popped her head in.

'Sebastian Carlton is thrilled to assist... seems he can't wait to catch-up with you and the team. Especially now the bastards have given him a name. The *Snapchat Killer* – who the hell leaked that?'

'We couldn't keep that under wraps for long, Nance. The kid who received it probably shared it with his mates.' He shrugged. 'That's life. Looks like Bashir will have to make a statement though, but we've nothing much to give you. its early days yet.'

'Yep.' She blew a kiss at Compo, who grinned, although his face reddened a little. He was getting used to Nancy's teasing ways. 'Got to dash, Basher the Gnasher called.'

And she was off, leaving Gus smirking at the new name she'd coined for their DCS.

## CHAPTER 32

### *Zodiac*

*... dubbed The Snapchat Killer because he used the social media app Snapchat to send an image to the victim's friend. Here on Capital Radio we have the weather. Over to John... and it looks like the sun is here to stay for a few more days at least with highs of...*

**T**he *Snapchat Killer*! I like it. Sort of funky. All the best killers have a catchy nickname; The Zodiac Killer, The Boston Strangler, Bible John, The Yorkshire Ripper, The Crossbow Cannibal... and, now we have...

... Drum Roll...

... The *Snapchat Killer*!

Course the snaps were my idea... sort of. Gotta claim kudos when you can, don't you? I get none at home, after all. Got a few surprises lined up and I can't wait. Be a surprise for Pisces and Leo too.

I'm glad to get out of the house. It does my head in. Like I'm not good enough, like I'm failing... the constant glances telling me how much of a disappointment I am. Casting up the past without using any words. All probing looks and sideways glances. It's crap!

I want to escape outdoors where I can breathe and be me. I snag some bread for the ducks. Like they need it. Half the lake's clogged up with bread and chapattis and shit. Poor ducks – that'll kill them off. It passes the time, though. Might grab an ice cream before the caff shuts. A Magnum. Then I'll have another walk round the lake. Those smelly old bastards are sitting there again. Nothing better to do with their time. The pigs should move them on. They make the place look like crap.

Park's heaving. Filled with families with screaming brats. I want a turn on the rope swing. So I tell one of them to fuck off. They squeal to their dad and he gives me a mouthful. Stupid old bastard. Yeah, I'm too old, but I only wanted a quick turn. That's all.

In the café, I go over to the freezer. No white chocolate Magnums and that pisses me off. In the end I settle for a nutty one. When I'm settled near the boats, I take the burner phone out. Quick glance around me. Nobody there so I take a sneaky peek at the video... my guilty, or in my case, not so guilty pleasure.

Pratab's zonked out already. That was a joke. I'd expected him to be a div about it, but all he wanted was to show off, so he swigged the voddy like it was going out of fashion – dumbass, didn't realise we'd spiked it. Ten minutes and he was all over the place. Didn't even notice when I put the gloves on. Neither did the other two.

There's Pisces putting the cable ties round him. Out of focus for a sec. That'll be when I had to pull them tighter, so they'd dig right into his skin and draw blood. That wuss Pisces was too squeamish. While my phone's down, I draw the line on the neck, so Leo hits the right mark. You can hear them giggling in the background. *Idiots!*

Best bit coming up – Leo sticking the knife in. Stuck the vein first time. Got it just right. Blood spurting out. Quick selfie, making sure I'm not in it. I told the others I'd delete them... and I will. Just not yet. Got to keep some insurance. Never know when I'll need it.

I nibble my Magnum. I prefer white chocolate, but this'll do. When I'm done, I chuck the stick in the lake, wipe my hands on a tissue, and get my iPhone out. Selfie time! Nothing incriminating about being in Lister Park. Nothing at all, so I post it to *Instagram* and *Snapchat* it to Leo and Pisces on their real phones.

The park's emptying. Only a couple of boats bobbing about on the lake. He won't be much longer. I'm thirsty. Ice cream always makes me thirsty. Should've bought a can of Coke. Could walk to the Sainsbury's. It'll be open, but then I might miss him. I've not waited all this time to mess up. Besides, I'll have to come back later. Got to get everything sorted. I grin... that stupid tosser still hasn't worked out how I got the images. So much for being a geek. Can't even keep his room secure. I love storing little secrets... intelligence. That's what the pigs call it. But information itself isn't intelligence. No, it's what you do with it... and I know just what to do with it.

Wish he'd hurry. I flick through the photos on my iPhone, wondering which I'll use next time. More than likely the snap from this morning. I like the one I used earlier though – it'll have him wondering how I managed... let him figure out how inventive I can be. I want him to appreciate my brilliance. But I'm not using that trick again. Not just now, anyway. I'll save that for my next big surprise.

My burner phone vibrates. Pisces! I dismiss the call. First rule of, well... of ruling, is to take control. Make everyone else feel out of control. It vibrates again. Persistent! I switch it off and shove it in my pocket. No time for distractions.

It's dark, but I don't mind. This park is mine now. After all, I spend half my time here. I peer into distance. Sure enough, he's jogging down past the kids' playground. I slink off into the shadows and wait until he passes.

### CHAPTER 33

I close my bedroom door and go to the window. Jessie and Mum are in bed. Mum looked better tonight... still flushed, but the warm soup with buttered bread, followed by custard and jam Roly Poly brought a smile to her lips. She only ate a few bites, but that was more than she'd managed earlier. The cold beans, sauce hardening on the plate, went uneaten through the day. Who could blame her? I'd half expected her to question where the money for butter had come from, but she didn't. Too grateful for something warm, I reckon. I refilled her bottles of water and left them in hand-reach as she drifted off to sleep. If she's still warm like that in the morning, I'll phone the doctor. No exam tomorrow, so I can wait in. Maybe get some work done.

Got a special order, and it must be ready and at the drop off point by midnight tonight. It's a bespoke model and if it hadn't cost me an arm and a leg, I'd have been buzzing about it. As it is, I resent having to make it. Wonder what the fuck whoever it is wants it for.

I peek through the gap, taking care not to move the curtain much. Razor's henchman's out there. Goyley, they call him. Big fucker, he is, with tattoos and fists that seem permanently clenched. He was there when I brought Jessie home. Still there when I took her to the park and when we got back. He never said owt. Didn't need to. Just stared at me, fag in one hand and a smirk on his ugly puss. He was there to keep an eye on me for Razor. If Razor's crew hadn't been banned from around the school and given a restraining order, Razor would have had either Goyley or HP waiting for me at the gates. Mind you, it's a pretty safe bet that I'll come home at some point... can't leave Jessie and my mam, after all. They're counting on that. He's sitting on old Mrs Udoka's wall with a can of Stella. She'll be furious, but she won't say owt. Nobody says owt on our estate... not to Razor's thugs. Not to Hammerhead's thugs either.

I get a notification on my phone. It's an email and as usual the sender has bounced it round the world like a fucking kangaroo. No way to work out where it originates. This is crap. I know who it's from. What it's about. My finger hovers over the delete button. I'm tempted... really tempted, but I open it.

Midnight. Bandstand. Come alone... or you know what'll happen, Cheeky Boy!

That's it.

But now I have another problem. How the hell do I shake off Razor's crew? Last thing I need is for my Cheeky Boy activities to end up viral. How the fuck did they find out? I want to throw my phone against the wall. Stamp on it. Flush it down the toilet... but none of that would make any difference. I've no fucking choice. So, I lie down on the floor and do twenty push-ups. *Focus, Jo Jo. Focus!*

When I'm done and my muscles are on fire, I glug a half bottle of water, double check I've locked my door and sit down at my worktable. I spread all the components out. Only the finishing touches left. I'll give myself an hour, an hour and a half tops, then I'll sneak out the back. When I looked out Mam's bedroom window earlier, I couldn't see anybody watching, but just in case, I won't go through the yard. Instead I'll climb over the fences until I reach the last garden. Then I'll head through the side streets. With any luck, Goyley won't even realise I'm gone.

Plan in place, I settle down with my screwdriver, flick on the lamp, and crack on.

## CHAPTER 34

It had got dark by the time Gus glanced up from his desk. His neck was stiff, so he cricked it, grimacing when the bones grated together, sending a sharp pain up to his skull. Compo was on the other side of the room, head bobbing in sync with whatever music he'd selected as a theme tune for this investigation. Taffy had gone home hours earlier. Gus suspected he had a date because he looked shifty as he headed to the shower rooms with a bag, only to return twenty minutes later red faced and smelling of something a bit more upmarket than the Lynx Compo favoured.

Gus logged out and got to his feet. With a stretch, he loosened as much tension as he could. There was no point in telling Compo it was home time. The lad often stayed all night, fortifying himself with packets of crisps, chocolate bars, and an endless supply of full-sugar fizzy drinks. A conversation with Taffy a few months back had illuminated the reason for Compo's unwillingness to leave The Fort; in short, this was his home, and the team were Compo's family. Taffy had described Compo's flat and Gus had felt a pang of guilt that he hadn't been more tuned in to Compo's loneliness. He suspected Alice had been aware of it and that was one reason she always planned outings and suchlike. He shrugged... his own mum had realised too. That's why she inundated Compo with her baking and invites to Sunday lunch.

Unsettled by these insights, Gus yawned, retied his bandana and moved over to Compo's side, laying a hand on the computer nerd's shoulder.

'I'm off now, Comps. Don't stay too late, will you?'

Spinning round in his chair, Compo grinned. 'Nah, I'll just finish up here, then I'll head off home.'

*Yeah right.*

'If you get anything useful from the *Snapchat* stuff, let me know straight away?' With Compo's propensity to lose track of time in mind he added, 'Only if you think it's urgent like.' But Compo was already bopping away to his music.

With a smile, Gus headed to the door, thinking about grabbing a Raja's Pizza for his tea. It'd been ages since he'd eaten one and he had a sudden craving for a spicy keema achar topping. As he exited the lift, his phone vibrated. With reluctance, he pulled it out of his pocket, hoping it wasn't Gabriella, and groaned when he saw the caller ID. With a wave to the duty officer, he paused on the steps before answering. 'Hi, Katie, you okay?'

There was a moment of silence and Gus realised his sister hadn't expected him to answer. He glanced up to Lister Mills, noting that the lights were on in Katie's flat. He wondered if she was there or at work.

Not one to beat about the bush, Katie said, 'She's phoned you loads of times, Gus, you should've answered.'

She was right, of course she was. He should have answered, but still it irked that she called him out on it. 'Been busy, Katie... you've heard about the dead kid?'

Her indrawn breath was audible, and Gus smiled. Katie would have straightened her back and raised her chin. She'd close her eyes and do that mental count to three before replying. He counted it with her, one banana... two bananas... three bananas...

'She phoned before you caught that case, Gus. You two need to make up and move on...'  
She paused, and Gus frowned. Her voice had wobbled on the last word, like she was struggling to hold things together. 'It's important to me that you bury the hatchet.'

*Now there was an image.* Yep, Gus could go with that... the only thing was, he reckoned, his hatchet burying image differed greatly from his sister's.

'She's the one wielding the hatchet...' His voice trailed away as he heard a single sob over the line.

'You okay, Katie bear?' The childhood endearment fell from his lips for the first time since he'd discovered his sister's relationship with his ex-wife.

She sniffed, and when she next spoke, her tone was devoid of emotion. 'I'm fine. I'm phoning to invite you to tea tomorrow night.'

Katie spoke over his excuses. 'This is important, Gus... I know you're in the middle of an investigation, but...' she paused '... I *need* to see you. I *have* to ask you something.'

Fuck. He hated it when she guilt-tripped him like that. She'd done it throughout their childhood, and she was still damn well doing it. 'Okay, I'll check with Patti and get back to you.'

'Erm... can it just be you, Gus? No Patti this time.' And as if sensing Gus' annoyance that his girlfriend wasn't invited, she added a tortured 'Please' to the end.

This was a meal to look forward to. Gabriella might be a superb cook, but right then, Gus would prefer his mother's cooking any day. 'Right, I'll come whenever I can break off.'

'Thanks, Gus... I... we appreciate it.'

As Gus hung up, he decided that he'd have a single malt with his pizza... he needed it. Fifteen minutes later, armed with an aromatic box, Gus walked through the park. Some people didn't like to walk through it in the dark, but Gus did. The gurgle of the fountains in the Mogul



Garden and the faint sounds of nature settling down for the night soothed him. Gave him the space to think. He was sure he'd covered all aspects of the Pratab Patel case. Nancy had released a brief statement to the press asking for information from anyone in that area on Sunday evening. Everything was in hand. He'd spent the evening checking out any highlighted interviews, but everything seemed to back up the fact that Pratab Patel had gone off the rails since Easter. Something had prompted that, but what? Gus hoped something would break in the investigation tomorrow... because based on his experience, he was sure that Pratab's murder wasn't an isolated occurrence.

He crossed Emm Lane and turned into Marriners Drive, waving to the police car as it pulled out of his street. Although he recognised both officers, he couldn't remember their names. The one in the passenger seat leaned out his open window and said, 'Nowt to report, sir.'

Gus chatted with them for a few minutes and then continued home. Most curtains were closed and Gus' only company was a scruffy cat, taking advantage of the night to hunt. Gus walked up the incline that was his drive, humming to himself. As he climbed the front steps, he heard a sound to the side. He spun round, fists up, ready to take on the intruder. The box fell to the steps, spilling its contents on the concrete. A hooded figure sneaked from the shadows where he kept his bins, so he lunged at it. His foot landed on the squelchy pizza and, slipping, he executed a mis-aimed punch, catching his assailant on the shoulder. His hooded assailant fell backwards, with Gus landing on top.

With his weight pinning his squirming adversary down, Gus grabbed their hood and yanked it off...

'You...?'

## CHAPTER 35

*Pisces*

**S**hould I leave a message? Will it seem odd if I do...? odd if I don't? Fuuuuck! What'll I do? What'll I do? I need to stop pacing around, but I can't stop myself. Chill!

Ping!

Ping!

Ping!

I'm gonna turn them off. That's what I'll do. Just a quick scroll through first.

Ping!

Ping!

Ping!

In my heart forever, Pratab, Luv Chrissie xxxx♥♥  
RIP. You will be missed, but the angels will take care of you sweet boy,  
love always Teena Kaki and Suraj Kaka xxx😭😭  
Be at peace. Taken too soon, love and hugs Mrs Johnston xxx

What the fuck? Like two crying emojis shows you'll miss him more than anyone else?  
I type.

Missing you...

I delete it... what can I say...?

Sorry I killed you, RIP :-)

I laugh. RIP... RIP... RIP.

*You were a fucking knobhead, Pratab... a fucking dick.*

That's what I should write. Then I'm crying and I can't stop, so I punch the wall... once...  
twice.

## CHAPTER 36

**I**t's been a shit day! Full of prayers and crying and relatives getting in my head. No time to think. No space to be alone! They're always at me. 'Have some chai', 'You must eat', 'Come and see auntie fucking so and so.' I don't give a toss about auntie fucking so and so – don't know how she's related, and don't care. Why did auntie fucking so and so not turn up when Pratab was alive? They're all fucking ghouls!

I sneak out the back door before anyone sees me. Got to take the chance while I can. Otherwise they'll be all over me, smothering me. It's still hot, but after the atmosphere in there I feel free. I shrug off the guilt and ignore the clawing in my stomach. In case someone's looking out the window, I dart across the road at an angle away from the house. It's so good. I squeeze through the bushes into the field beyond and, throwing myself onto the grass, I inhale.

Can't believe he's not coming back. Can't believe he's gone. Everything's got out of hand... everything and I don't know what to do. Out here, with the moon where you can't hear the traffic, it's like I'm on another planet. I wish I was! I stretch out, arms behind my head, and watch the clouds. They're not moving, just hanging there like grey smoke. When I was little, I used to see pictures in them; monsters, animals, other lands – islands far away, with aliens. Now, I wonder who the monsters really are... where they are.

I want to cry, but I can't. There's nothing there to come out. It's like everyone else has stolen my tears and I've none left. What if they never come back, what if I can never cry again? Will my eyes always have grit scratching them every time I blink? Is that my punishment? And what about my stomach? Will it always feel raw? Maybe I'll never be able to eat again? The thought of food makes me jerk upright. I spin over and turn my head to the side, spewing up a trail of clear liquid that stings my throat and my nostrils. I've no tissue, so I grab a clump of dry grass and use it to wipe my mouth, then I fling it on top of the patch of bile. After flipping onto my bum, I inspect the pinpricks of grass indented on my bare knees. There's a stone nearby, so I pick it up and press it into my flesh. It's not sharp enough. It's making them all blotchy and red, not even piercing the skin. I throw it away, disgusted with it... disgusted with myself.

I shouldn't do this, but I can't stop myself. Glad I'd retrieved it before the police visit, I pull the phone out of my pocket and take it from the plastic bag. Not giving myself time to think, I dial.

Come on, come on! For God's sake, pick up!

Nothing!

I try again... still no reply. What the hell should I do? If this all gets out, it'll be the end for me. Can't keep the burner on me. Not with the police around, not with so many people around. What can I do with it? The house isn't safe. My glance lands on the stone I tossed aside, and I pick it up again. 'At least you're useful for something.'

With the phone back in its bag, I dig up a clump of turf and put it in the hole. Then, I cover it with the dirt and grass. No one will look here for it. It's safe here.

## CHAPTER 37

Eyes narrowed, Gus glared at the wriggling figure on the ground. ‘You gonna let me up then, Gus?’

His heart pounded and right then he couldn’t move. Anger bubbled up from his feet to his head and exploded. ‘What the fuck, Alice? You’ve not been in touch for months and then you turn up on my doorstep like a fucking stalker.’

He glowered, trying to slow his heartbeat before easing himself off her skinny frame.

Alice snorted. ‘Stalker? Who the hell would want to stalk someone as boring as you?’

Perhaps it was the tension still coming off his body in waves, or perhaps it was the tightness around his mouth, but whatever it was, Alice frowned. ‘You mean you do have a stalker?’

‘No need to sound so surprised.’ Gus knew his tone was petulant. But so what? Alice had disappeared, leaving him alone with his guilt, and now here she was acting like he wasn’t worthy of a damn stalker. *Cow!*

‘Is that why the police car was here? To check up on you. Bloody useless pair, cos they never saw me sitting over there on your bins. Never even got out to do a walk around.’

Gus grimaced. He’d have a word with them tomorrow, but as soon as he got indoors, he’d be on the phone to the officers driving past Patti’s home. It was one thing to be slapdash here, but he’d be damned if he’d allow them to skimp on Patti’s safety. He’d make sure they did a walkabout in her street.

Alice jumped to her feet much more agilely than Gus had. ‘Well, you aren’t exactly Olly Murs, are you?’

Something in the familiar tinkle of her laughter loosened his anger and for a second it was like she’d never been gone. ‘Thank fuck for that... I’m more Craig David, than Olly bloody Murs.’

For a moment, they stared at each other. ‘Why are you here, Al?’

Her eyes flitted away from his and her fingers clenched by her sides. ‘Nancy said I had to make my mind up, so...’ She splayed her hands and tried an Arnie impersonation, which without the wobble would have been convincing. ‘... I’m back.’

But Gus would not let her off so easily. She’d been through hell. Nobody understood that better than him, but she’d rejected his help and he’d missed her. ‘You’re a bitch, Al. All this time and *nothing*. No emails, or texts – not a sodding thing and then you waltz in and say you’re back. What’s that all about?’

‘I wanted to keep in touch but,’ She raked her fingers through her short hair and, voice still trembling, exhaled. ‘I didn’t know what to say, Gus. I was in bits and I needed time... time for *me*. This isn’t about you. It never was. It was about *me* coping with the things I did to survive in prison. Coping with almost losing *my* life, with being raped and brutalised.’ She sniffed and repeated her earlier words. ‘It wasn’t about you.’

*What a selfish dick I am!* Gus studied her. Although she’d gained weight since he’d last seen her and had lost her prison pallor, frown lines scarred her brow. Dark shadows hung beneath her eyes, yet their fiery darkness hinted that she was fighting back. He wanted to embrace her, but the faint fragility hanging around her made him hesitate. Instead he offered a self-deprecating grin. ‘I’m sorry. You’re right. You needed space. I just wished I’d known you were here.’

With a shrug, Alice dismissed his apology. ‘I wanted to surprise you.’ She paused. ‘Actually, that’s not it. I didn’t know I was returning till Nancy phoned yesterday and forced me to decide before Bashir took that option away. Soon as Nance told me, I made my decision. I was coming home. Before then, I wasn’t sure. Didn’t know if being here and seeing everyone, would be too much. If it would drag everything up again. I was in pain and... well, I just couldn’t.’

His lips tightened. He’d realised Bashir was desperate to have closure on Alice’s situation, but Nancy hadn’t shared how pushy the bitch was being. He’d been through enough mental trauma to understand Alice’s need for solitude. Her desire to lick her wounds in peace. How could he judge her when she’d always been there for him? Everyone dealt with their crap in different ways. The glitter in her eyes and her clenched jaw told him to avoid sentimentality. This was hard for her and he needed to make it easier, so ignoring his own emotions he nodded. ‘You’re lucky to catch me. Were you waiting long?’

‘Nah, Nancy said she’d seen you leave The Fort, so I jogged up from The Cartwright Hotel. That’s where I’m staying for now.’

It hurt that she’d sprung this on him, yet a blossom of hope bloomed in his chest. It would be good to have his team intact. Alice was their glue and, although he’d avoid putting any pressure on her, he couldn’t wait to work with her again. Besides, she was his best friend, and they’d a lot to catch up on. He turned, rescued what he could of his pizza and opened the door. ‘Come on. I suppose you’re...’

The words died on his lips when he saw the familiar blue envelope lying on the mat. He thrust the bashed pizza box at her and walked over to the small table at the bottom of the stairs that housed the home phone. Yanking open the drawer, he grabbed a pair of gloves and an evidence bag, before lifting the envelope and dropping it in.

‘So, you have a stalker. Well slap me in the belly with a wet fish...’

And like she’d never been gone, Alice marched into the kitchen, leaving Gus to slam the door behind him and trail after her, mumbling under his breath. ‘Sooner that security’s installed the better.’

Settled at the table, pizza box open, and two glasses of whisky in front of them, Gus studied Alice properly. Last time he’d seen her she’d been skinny... almost wasted, her eyes empty, and at the time Gus had doubted they’d ever shine again. He was wrong. Her eyes were sparkling... okay, perhaps not as brightly as before... but they weren’t emotionless. He felt a tear come to his eye and then Alice groaned.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Gus, if you’re going to cry like a damn wuss, then I’m out of here. Just tell me all about that.’ And she pointed to the letter in its sealed bag that Gus had shoved on the kitchen table.

Her words made him smile. His Alice was back... or nearly. She was still scrawny. Her once smooth face, had faint wrinkles fanning out from the sides of her mouth and her eyes. Her cheeks were a little sunken, her hair, although it had grown a bit, was still shorter than usual. ‘My anonymous letter will keep until tomorrow. Nobody there to process it tonight. I’m more interested in you.’

She jumped to her feet. ‘I’m skinnier, my body’s damaged... but look at these beauties.’ And she whipped off her hoodie, revealing a tight vest top and raised her arms like a weightlifter... ‘I’m effing built, Gus.’

She was right, she might carry less weight, but Al had muscles that even Gus envied.

‘I lived with my parents in Greece for a while... after... you know?’ She picked grit from a slice of pizza before biting some off. Gus sipped his whisky, happy to listen to her story at her own speed.

‘At first I was a wreck, but then I realised, I couldn’t allow *him* to beat me.’

She didn’t need to say the name for Gus to know she meant Sean, the man responsible for nearly killing her and framing her, so she spent a hellish few months in prison.

‘So, I joined a gym... and I worked like a dog and... Somewhere along the line, I reconnected with life and I was getting better.’ She raised her hands palms up in a ‘Ta Da,’ action. ‘And here I am.’

‘You coming back to work?’

Alice smiled. ‘Yep. The physio and the doctor passed me fit for work, today. I can start whenever as long as I keep seeing the psychiatrist. The email will be in your inbox. It’s been so rushed, I’m still pinching myself.’

He hadn't checked his emails since lunchtime because things had been so hectic. Nancy could've phoned him. Not that he deserved it... especially after the way he'd doubted Alice. Then it occurred to him. He'd turned his phone off to avoid Gaby's calls. A quick check informed him he had fourteen missed calls from his boss and six from Patti.

'I've been in touch with Nance throughout.' She looked at Gus. 'Told her not to tell you because I thought a clean break would be easier for you. Besides, I didn't expect to return... didn't think I'd still be here... but...'

Her eyes darkened and Gus reached over and squeezed her arm. He'd suffered dark thoughts in the past himself and knew it was hard to come back from the edge. For a nano-second, his thoughts flashed to the expression on Compo's face when he'd challenged Gus for giving up on Alice. Compo had said it was over and Gus believed that, in Compo's universe, it was. However, in Gus' world guilt was never quite so easy to assuage. 'We'll do this together, Al. We're a team, like we've always been.'

She grinned at him. 'Just as well, cause I can't live in my own house right now... too many memories... and hotel living isn't for me, so if it's all the same to you, I'm moving into your spare room for a while.'

She jumped to her feet and headed into the hallway, yelling over her shoulder. 'I cleared it with Patti... going to get my stuff, you coming or what?'

Patti had known too? No doubt, that's what her missed calls were about. Gus chewed on a piece of gritty pizza. Despite his pleasure at Alice's return, there would be a period of readjustment for all of them. He was happy for her to move in and it bode well that Patti had agreed. She and Alice got on. Still, a niggle itched Gus' spine. What if Alice wasn't ready? What if everything proved too much for her? Most of all burning inside him was the guilt he carried. How could he have thought, even for a second, that she was corrupt? Gus should have known better. Alice wouldn't have forsaken him so why was it so easy for him to forsake her. Although uneasy with the speed of her return, he would make up for letting her down. Henceforth, he'd be the friend she deserved. The friend she thought he was.

'Hang on, Al. I'm coming.'



## CHAPTER 38

It's been ages since I climbed out the bathroom window. Way before Mam got poorly. Last time I did she were furious. Grounded me for days and threatened to take away my computer. Went on and on and on. What if I'd slipped? What if I'd landed on the extension? What if I'd broken every bone in my body? I've been watching through my bedroom curtains and it seems like Goyley and HP are taking turns to watch me. Thought if I put my bedroom light off, they'd leave. But no, they're still there.

The window's tighter than it used to be so I push my rucksack out and hook it onto a chunk of sticking out brick. Hope it holds, cos if it smashes to the ground, I'll be fucked. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I half wish it would fall. Then, I couldn't do the drop. I sigh. What's the point? If I don't go, everyone would find out about me; me mam, Jessie, kids in school. A huge wave of relief comes over me... at least it'd be over. Then the guilt sets in. Fucking guilt! It's like a putrid spot oozing pus and shit. I could throw myself off the roof... end it all... but knowing my luck I'd break a leg and everybody would still discover my secrets; *He's the one wiggles his cock at dirty old pervs for bitcoins. The one who sticks dildos up his arse so pervs can get off. He's the one slathers oil over himself and wanks in front of a webcam.*

Who am I kidding? I've got to deliver the fucking thing.

It's easier to push myself up from the bath onto the sill. I squeeze my shoulders through first, angling them this way and that until they pop through... the rest's easy. I manoeuvre the bag on my back then, hanging by my fingertips, drop onto the roof and again, it's not such a big jump this time. I lie flat on the tiles, waiting to see if anybody's noticed and when there's nothing but a dog barking in the distance, I crawl over to the pipe and slide down until my feet touch the neighbour's fence. Now's the hard part, making sure I don't wake anyone. I make it through the first two gardens with no hassle, but in the third, the dog wakes and starts throwing itself at the door. There's nowt I can do, except dart across and launch myself at the next fence... up and over... and hope I'm hidden by the shadows.

'Shut the fuck up, Bruno.' It gives a few more half-hearted yelps then goes quiet.

As I cross their lawn, I trip on a toy. A light flicks on in the house and I turn and dart towards the bush by the fence. My breath's coming in quick gasps and I try to swallow the noise. Fuck, that was close. When the light goes out, I count to fifty. My legs are shaking now.

If Goyley or HP catch me, I'll be in big shit. How could I explain what I'm doing? What if they found the bag? My heart sinks, knowing that I've got to get inside later. I edge round the

garden. Two panels of wood are hanging off, so I squeeze myself through, praying they don't clatter to the ground and wake the household up. Once I'm through, I'm in the street. This is the hard bit... I need to head towards Heaton without being seen. It'll take me longer, but I've no option as I skip through the rear alleys and down to the terraced houses at the top. Once I reach them, I'll be safer. Razor and that lot rarely head into Manningham. Manningham has its own gangs and that brings its own issues.

## CHAPTER 39

### *Zodiac*

**I**t wasn't too bad sneaking out of the house. I'm invisible most of the time and that suits me fine. The night air is warm, my only company the few winos and tramps that hang out in the park after dark. They're too drunk to bother me and I don't bother them. When it gets close to midnight, I settle myself near Lister's Mansions. Their big wheelie bins give me all the cover I need.

It's funny watching him in the moonlight. He's shitting it. Keeps looking around, like he thinks someone's gonna jump him. Maybe he wants to be jumped. Maybe he's gonna dump the parcel and then hook up for a bit of dogging or something. I've nothing against gays. Doesn't bother me, but Jo Jo doesn't want people to know. Can't accept that he's gay. Ah well, that's his problem.

I wait until he crosses North Park Drive and goes in the side entrance to the park before I move. I head down towards Cartwright Hall and jump the fence. Then, I'll circle round and catch up with him from the other side. He's trying to act like he doesn't care... like he's not scared, but he is cos he keeps glancing behind him and yanking the straps of his backpack further up his arms. He must be desperate to discover who's been blackmailing him. I would be. Wonder what he'd say if he knew it was me... would he feel let down?

Well, tough. I found out the hard way that the only person you can rely on is yourself... time he found that out too. Not quite time... not yet. But soon. Bet he's pissed off that I wanted another one so soon after the first one. The other drone was fine, but a bit jittery and the images were more blurry than I wanted. This one's more state of the art, so I've high hopes for it.

As he gets nearer to the bandstand, he speeds up, like he's desperate to dispose of what's in his bag... like he can't wait to get me off his back. Then he stops. Pretends to tie his shoelace. Again, looking behind, under his arm. It's so obvious it makes me smile. Why do people always think they're being watched from behind or to the side? He's never once looked ahead of him. Not that he'd see me, anyway. I'm too well hidden, too much in the shadows. As he approaches the bandstand, he slips his bag off, and unzips it. He's almost reached the drop site, when I hear a noise from the bushes to Jo Jo's right. Two figures come out. The tramps McGuire was talking to earlier. Where the hell did they come from?

I want to yell at them to piss off. But Jo Jo's walking past the drop site, trying to seem all casual. Trouble is he's getting closer to my hiding place. Shit! I back away, merging into the

shadows, glad I'd changed into dark clothes. I turn away in case he recognises me and when I glance round, he's spun on his heel and is heading towards the bandstand and the homeless guys are walking towards the lake. Phew. That was a close thing. I want to grab the packet and go home. It's been a long day and I'm fucking knackered. can't he just dump it and leave? This isn't fun anymore.

When he climbs up to the platform, he's out of sight for a minute. Then he's on the footpath again and heading past the bowling green. He's running now. I doubt he'll hang about to see me, but I make myself wait. Slumped down, leaning against a tree, I look up at the stars and wait.

## CHAPTER 40

*Tuesday*

**A**fter spending an hour going over all the paperwork with Nancy and Bashir, Alice was now officially back at work. Gus had expected chaos when she turned up in the investigation room. She'd done this once before and caused an uproar that day. He'd entered first to break the news to Compo and Taffy, leaving her in the corridor outside, but in true Alice style she'd thwarted his plans for a controlled meeting by poking her head through the door and yelling in a mockery of Jack Nicholson, 'Honey, I'm home.'

Compo couldn't put down his pizza slice quick enough. En route to greet his friend, he knocked over three drinks, upended two chairs, and all but fell on top of her. Alice took it all in her stride, allowing Compo to grip her for a full minute or more, all the while patting his shoulder. At last he moved away making space for Taffy, who, not knowing Alice as well as Compo, settled for a hug and a mumbled, 'Good to see you, Al.'

Keen to restore order – they were in the middle of a major investigation after all – Gus cleared his throat. 'There's been a development, guys.'

When everyone's eyes were on him, he pulled out an evidence bag containing his most recent mail, a photocopy of the letter and a separate bag.

'Another one? When did this arrive?' Compo's tone was full of indignant fury as he strode over to study it.

'No idea, sometime yesterday, but my new home security isn't being installed until today, so we've got nothing other than this letter.'

'You open it yet?'

'Yep.'

'Still stink of that perfume?'

'Yep. Same font and everything.' Gus scowled. He wanted to yell, but it wasn't his team he was angry with. 'Before I came here, I had it processed. Surprise, surprise there's no useful evidence, but I'm not passing it onto Byrne and C team until we've had a look.'

'It's speeding up, boss. Who knows what they might do? And now that's two posted through your door in two days.' Compo tugged at his T-shirt, a sure sign he was nervous.

Gus had already considered this, and it worried him, but that wasn't the only thing that had him on edge. 'That's not all... there's been a...' he glanced at Alice who finished his sentence for him

'...a fucking massive development...'

Laying one of the evidence bags on the desk, Gus indicated they should look. Inside was a photograph. Taffy and Compo stared at it and as Gus watched them, he saw their expressions change from interest to horror. Compo spoke first. 'Is that you and Patti snogging, through your kitchen window?'

Tight lipped, Gus nodded. He could identify when the image had been taken. Saturday. They'd been in the woods with Bingo and then nipped into Sainsbury's for some ingredients. They were cooking their tea together.

Taffy frowned. 'Someone was in your garden?'

'Seems that way, although you'd think we'd have spotted them. The fence at the back is too...'

'Nope!'

The single word exploded from Compo drawing all eyes. As he picked the photograph up, the incident room door slammed open, and everyone's gaze swung towards it.

A girl stood there, gawping at the images on the large screen. Gus moved to stand in front of her, blocking her view. 'You can't be in here. Can I help?'

'Oh, sorry, course not. It's just, I was looking for my mum.'

Only then did it dawn on Gus that he recognised her. 'You're DCS Bashir's daughter. Moona isn't it?'

She smiled and looked down. 'Yeah. I'm sorry for butting in. Didn't think. I'll go check her office again.' Mehmoona backed away and hesitated, biting her lip. 'You won't tell her I was here, will you? Could do without a telling off today.'

Gus remembered what it had been like visiting his own parents at work and how once or twice he'd ended up somewhere he shouldn't. 'No probs. Our lips are sealed.'

Compo waited until the door closed behind her before continuing. 'What I mean is, the angle's wrong. Look. If someone had been in your garden, they'd have snapped the image from this angle. Your garden's on a slope remember?' He placed his hand in front of him, palm down, fingers slanting upwards. 'It's clear they've taken it at a downward angle.'

The other three crowded round, studying the photo. 'So, you think they were on my fence... or perhaps it was a neighbour, from their upstairs window?' Despite attempting to keep his tone neutral, Gus' disbelief was clear. Whilst with Patti, his attention was all hers, even in those

circumstances he'd have noticed someone on the fence... and if he didn't Bingo would have. As for his neighbours. They wouldn't do this sort of thing. For a start, two of them were infirm octogenarians, and the others had attended barbecues at his home in the past few weeks. Surely, he'd have spotted something off about them.

Compo sniffed and bit on a Rice Krispies cereal bar. 'Nah, your neighbours' windows wouldn't work. I reckon, your stalker was in the woods to the side of your house.'

'But...'

Compo cut Gus short. 'They probably controlled a drone from there and took a series of shots.'

Gus let that sit for a moment. The thought of some anonymous person lurking in the trees near his home, spying on him and Patti through his kitchen window was unthinkable. It was an invasion of privacy, made worse because he'd no idea how long it had been going on. Images of him and Patti in his bedroom, which also looked over the back garden, flashed through his head. In this heat it was impossible to close the curtains as they were desperate for any meagre breeze. What other images might they have? More to the point, what were they planning on doing with them? Those innocuous letters took on a new and threatening overtone.

Taffy said, 'Any clues to their intentions in the letter?' Gus shrugged and drew out a photocopy of the original and flattened it on his desk.

My Dearest Detective Inspector Angus McGuire,  
It's good to keep in touch, isn't it? Do you like my surprise, Angus?  
Caught the mood perfectly, didn't I? You two make such a cute, loved-up couple. Both so attractive, so... sexy... yes, I think sexy's the word I'm looking for. Bet I'm not the only one that thinks so either. Bet there're loads of people who would just loooove to see how cute you are. Do you and Patti use social media much? Maybe it's time to start.  
Anyway, things to do and all that and I know you're busy too. You'll hear from me soon.  
Watch this space!

'Shit.' Compo's face had turned red, as he stuffed the rest of his cereal bar in his mouth. 'This is too much, Gus. That fucker could've taken pictures of you and Patti...' He halted and his face reddened even more. '...What I mean is...'

‘It’s fine, Comps. I’m taking that social media comment as a direct threat so I want you monitoring all social media channels. I sure as hell don’t want any inappropriate images going viral. Liaise with C team on this.’

As he retied his bandana, Gus continued. ‘I know this is a lot of pressure for you, with this ongoing investigation... truth is, Comps, you’re the best we’ve got and you’ll catch anything that goes out there. I want this cut off at source.’

Taffy, voice hesitant, glanced at Gus. ‘Could be an empty threat. Whoever took that photo didn’t say they had more.’

Alice snorted. ‘You know, Taffy. The first lesson you need to learn as a copper is this. Imagine the vilest thing you can and then...’ her eyes clouded, ‘expect it to be a million times worse.’

Her words had come out sharp and Gus recognised her momentary darkness for what it was... despair. She looked at him and just as quickly it disappeared. Gus made a mental note to monitor her. He didn’t want Alice going under and he was certain that despite her cockiness, she wasn’t as strong as she pretended. He’d heard her pacing in her room the previous night. No, Alice was far from being ‘sorted’.

Compo yelped and wide-eyed began ferociously working his keyboard. ‘Shit! You got to see this boss.’

A shot of Pratab Patel, prostrate on the ground, knife sticking from his neck and blood pooling under him, filled the screen. ‘This has just been streamed to Instagram, Twitter... the fucking lot.’

While Compo’s rare use of the ‘F’ word hardly registered with Gus, the image ripped his gut out. His heart pounded. Spots appeared before his eyes as a wave of dizziness hit. When his vision cleared, rage propelled him closer. How the hell had this leaked? What callous bastard would do this? Around him the room fell silent as his team looked at it. It wasn’t an official crime scene photo. Bloodied cable ties encircled Pratab’s wrists, and the phone that had been clasped in his hands was absent. This leak hadn’t come from anyone at the scene.

Compo’s fingers flew across his various keyboards, his chair swivelling from one PC to another, his jaw tightening with each keystroke. ‘It’s going viral on Twitter. Already hit six hundred retweets...’

As the distress this would cause Pratab’s family registered, Gus clenched his fists, his voice brittle when he spoke. ‘It was the fucking killer who uploaded this. He’s taunting us.’

Compo pulled up active screens showing interactions with the initial post on Twitter and Instagram and directed it to the interactive screen. ‘Damn, it’s on Facebook now, too. Kids



from Pratab's school are sharing it – Declan Jones, Betsy Freeman – even the boss's daughter, Moona's... What the hell's wrong with them?'

Taffy, glued to the images, snorted. 'Those three posted RIP wishes on Pratab's Facebook page. Now they're doing this. Can't we report this to the companies?'

Compo flicked his head to prevent sweat dripping from his hair into his eyes, but continued working. 'I'm on it, but who knows how long it'll take. Shit, a hundred and fifty views on Facebook and it's being shared all over the place. Instagram activity is just as bad.'

As the others watched the shares and retweets and comments grow, Gus scrutinised Pratab's image, noting the similarities between it and the Snapchat sent to Haider. This was blatant attention seeking behaviour, and Gus was glad that they'd soon have Sebastian Carlton on board. This killer was becoming bolder, and this was a direct 'catch me if you can' challenge, and confirmed Gus' suspicions that he wasn't done yet. 'Get that down asap. I want it off the Internet. We can't give this arse any more publicity than necessary. We mustn't allow social media to fuel whatever sick fantasies he has. Taffy, contact the Patels' FLO and alert her. Alice contact these internet platforms and insist they remove it. Compo, are you able to trace it?'

As Taffy and Alice took out their phones, Compo nodded. 'I'm on it Gus, but the bastard's created false accounts, and trying to find the origin of them is like swimming through custard. I'm being bounced all over the world from server to server. Whoever uploaded that, had enough knowledge to hide their identity. I'll extend my alerts to make sure if anything else comes up we'll know right away.' He swiped the back of his hand over his brow. 'What about the stalker stuff, boss?'

Gus had forgotten about that. The photos of him and Patti snogging were nothing compared to this. A fist squeezed his heart as he considered the effect this image would have on the Patels. They hadn't yet been able to view their son's body, and to see these images so flagrantly circulated worldwide would devastate them. 'Pass it to C team. This is our priority.'

Compo nodded, his fingers speeding over keys, his focus flicking between screens.

'How long before it's taken down?'

Compo paused and looked at Gus. 'Thing is boss, it'll never disappear completely. Now it's out there, it's up for grabs. It'll just keep popping up again and again – that's why it's called 'going viral'. It is a virus... toxic, with no empathy or regard for fellow human suffering. People could screenshot it and re-circulate it, creating new strains. Some sickos will even Photoshop it, giving it a slightly different make-up and it'll take off again. The companies won't be able to eliminate it. All we can do is get them on board to shut it down each time it

pops up.’ He sniffed and Gus was unsure whether the droplet that landed on his keyboard was sweat or a tear. ‘It’ll probably end up on some snuff site on the dark web.’

This was a lot to consider. Gus hadn’t realised the challenge he’d given Compo until now. Compo would do his utmost to limit the photo’s exposure, but he was a minute cog in a giant wheel and his limitations clearly affected him. Gus squeezed his shoulder before turning to Alice. ‘Baptism of fire for you, Al. You up for it?’

Her expression may have lacked its usual buoyancy, still, she nodded. ‘I was ready before, but that’s just fired me up. This sicko took on the wrong team.’

## CHAPTER 41

Tension hovered like a heat shimmer over the incident room as the team working with the internet companies battled to close down each new image as it emerged. Gus could see the cleverness behind the killer's actions. In a single 'post' click, the killer had set in motion a huge snowball. Unstoppable it careered downhill, building its momentum, flattening all obstacles as it went, and nothing short of an apocalypse was going to stop it. This diverted precious time and energy away from the 'on the ground' investigation. Gus visualised a hazy figure reclining by a swimming pool, cocktail in hand, laughing at them.

With the weight of his superior officers and the police's legal advisers on board, Gus' team had exerted pressure on the social media companies to direct resources to monitor and shut down the images where they could. Profiles had been blocked from posting or sharing and, as the views and shares increased, this would continue. The sites, in consultation with their own legal advisers, had agreed to share limited data with them. Despite limitations on which data was suitable for police scrutiny, Compo had received an enormous amount to trawl through.

Headphones on, a bag of snacks in reach, Compo focused on what he did best and Gus left him to it as he waited for Professor Carlton to arrive. Gus looked forward to hearing what the professor had to say about their so-called Snapchat Killer case.

With a perfunctory knock, Carlton walked in and glared at Gus from over the top of his specs, which today, sported a Barbie plaster across the nose bridge to hold them together.

True to form, Carlton was straight over at the screen, his nose, slightly peeling and a little red, twitched as he studied the image. 'And this is?'

Gus explained about the *Snapchat* message Haider had received from the dead boy's phone, how this one had been posted and their struggle to limit its circulation.

Carlton listened, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet like some kid's wobbly toy. 'Fascinating. I'd like printed copies of the crime scene photos. This is interesting, very interesting.'

Gus itched to ask if it was interesting enough to have brought the professor in on a professional basis, or merely 'interesting'.

As if sensing Gus' question, Carlton turned to him. 'You'll need me for this, McGuire. No doubt about it, this killer's just getting started. The positioning of the body, the *Snapchat*, posting this image online – all of it smacks of narcissism. A '*look at me*' mentality. Shame really, that the media's added kudos to the murder with their stupid moniker. Combined with

this...’ He wafted his hand at the screen, ‘going viral, it’ll only egg him on and of course the public will bay for blood while gobbling up every sordid detail.’ He clapped his hands together. ‘Now, I’ve told Nancy, I’ll waive my fee on one condition.’

Gus waited. Carlton was unpredictable at the best of times, and he dreaded to hear what ‘condition’ Nancy had signed him up for.

‘Doughnuts... Krispy Kreme ones, mind... none of those cheapo six for a quid from Tesco, eh?’

Gus would happily fork out the cost of a few doughnuts if it gave them insight into these killers. It was purely an affectation from his doughnut eating FBI days, but Gus would go with it if it meant Carlton would help them. He nodded to Taffy, who rushed off to instruct someone to collect them.

The professor, his bright orange T-shirt riding up revealing a portly belly, marched over to an empty desk, and sat down. Gus, reeling from the brightness of his top over the equally neon lime-green budgie-snuggling Lycra cycling shorts, averted his eyes. It wasn’t as if Sebastian Carlton had actually cycled to The Fort. Truth was, Carlton seemed to have a clashing-of-colours fetish, which Gus was prepared to overlook on account of his incisive ability to notice what might otherwise be missed.

Besides, Carlton’s appearance offered a bit of light relief and with emotions running high, his team needed that. A sideways glance told him Alice was barely suppressing her laughter, while Compo’s, ‘Wow, love your T-shirt, Prof. where’d you get that?’ had him wondering if the lad lived on planet earth.

*Please don’t let Compo gain access to replicas of those T-shirts.* Gus had forgotten his computer geek, and the professor had forged an unlikely friendship in previous cases. He hoped that alliance wouldn’t extend to swopping wardrobe tips.

‘So, the delightful DCI Chalmers informs me you’ve received anonymous letters and that the frequency of these missives is increasing.’

‘True. But that’s a separate investigation. C team are dealing with it. My team are focussing on the Patel kid’s murder.’

Carlton quirked his eyebrow and laced his fingers together, resting his hands on his rotund belly. ‘Really?’

Unsure of what Carlton was implying, Gus nodded.

‘Nancy took the liberty of sending me the latest missives and a copy of the case files.’

What had Nancy been thinking? Why would she share the files without consulting him? Gus wanted Carlton's focus on Pratab's murder in the hope that they could prevent the killer from striking again. Not on some idiot who got their jollies stalking Gus.

'You don't think the two cases may be related?' The Professor smiled and, wiggling his fingers, nodded like a sage old Santa, minus the beard.

His air of superiority irked Gus, and he itched to whip Carlton's stupid Barbie-plaster specs from his face. He hadn't considered that his anonymous admirer and the murderer might be the same person. Seemed unlikely. Gus was almost certain that his letter-writer was female – the perfume and tone of the letters pointed that way, whilst he thought it seemed likely that Pratab's killer was male. Of course, he'd keep an open mind regarding the sex of either person. Although mildly disturbing, the sender hadn't been threatening – not really. Except for the photos and the hint that he keep an eye on...

'Crap! Social media! The photographs, the 'Watch this space' comment. You really think they're linked?'

With an exaggerated sigh, Carlton stood up. 'At this point, we shouldn't rule it out. It is rather coincidental, don't you agree? Consider the killer... clearly a narcissist. More than that though, I'd suggest he or she is organized, more than likely manipulative, certainly inventive and...' he smiled, '... addicted to attention seeking behaviour.'

He picked a pen from the desk and tapped it on his palm. 'The killer is able to navigate the dastardly world of digital technology with impunity as evidenced by both the initial Snapchat and today's post. They want to pique the public's interest, hence the detail when staging the crime scene and their compulsion to invite public scrutiny. When we consider that many sociopaths actively engage with and taunt their nemeses, it illuminates a possible link between killer and stalker. Through engaging with you, your anonymous letter writer is professing that he or she, probably she, considers you a worthy opponent.'

Gus shook his head. Although some of Carlton's hypothesis struck a chord, it seemed too easy, too contrived. 'So, my stalker and Pratab's killer may be the same person?'

Eyes on the screen where the horrific image of Pratab was displayed, Carlton nodded. 'It's a possibility, Gus.'

Gus raked his hand through his dreads. 'Then can you explain why, if this person is so tech savvy, they send me snail mail?'

Carlton's face broke into a wide smile, as if pleased by a clever child's incisive question. 'The notes are a way of making direct contact with you. The sender wants to establish a relationship and appears to be obsessed with you. Yes, the use of snail mail – nice Harry Potter

reference by the way, Gus - is a quaint way to communicate. Your stalker is setting out their stall, so to speak. Showing you how much they know about you. Attempting to establish shared interests and common ground, whilst maintaining the upper hand by remaining anonymous. It's standard stalker behaviour. A warped form of courtship. It's early days, Gus, so all I'll say is please keep your mind open to the prospect of a link between these two existing. I suspect that the photo of you and Patti is a threat designed to unbalance you. Be prepared for an escalation. I believe the reference to social media implies that you and your girlfriend may be the next on the receiving end of toxic posts.'

Sharp prickles of heat started at the base of Gus' spine before shooting up to his shoulders and grabbing his throat, making it hard to breathe. When he spoke, his tone was sharp. 'You can't know that, Carlton.'

The professor shrugged. 'No, I can't *know* it, but it is likely. You must realise that yourself, my boy. The trajectory in such cases mostly ends with violence. There's nothing benign about your stalker or the killer and although I can't prove at this stage that they are the same person, experience tells me not to discount it.'

Carlton wouldn't speculate regarding who might be targeted by the stalker. 'It depends how things pan out. If they decide to punish you, it might be Patti... or your dog that they target. On the other hand, depending on their perceptions, they may turn on you. You need to be as vigilant as Patti. I'd make sure your parents are vigilant too.'

That was all the hint Gus needed to get himself on the phone to his dad, telling him to be extra careful. He was relieved that his mum and dad had such extensive security. He would never forgive himself if anything happened to them.

## CHAPTER 42

With Carlton's words ringing in his head, Gus had attempted to shove thoughts of the latest anonymous letter with its threatening photo aside by scouring interviews and reports. Compo was working with the internet companies, but the battle to keep the images offline was ongoing. Amanjeet Kaur had confirmed that the Patels had seen them and were distraught. A doctor had sedated Mr Patel and the extended family were doing their best to support Mrs Patel, Kiran, and Mita. Anger fueled Gus' desire to identify the person responsible, yet according to Compo, the chances of doing so were low.

After lunch, photographs of Gus and Patti hit the Internet. Compo's, 'Shit, they're there. But I'm on it.' momentarily confused Gus.

Although he'd expected it, the reality of private, intimate moments being shared on social media halted him in his tracks. Compo routed eight images to the main screen. Each one a different image of Gus and Patti being intimate in his bedroom. He couldn't drag his eyes away from them.

Red heat flushed over his cheeks and a pulse throbbed at his temple. He clenched and unclenched his fists, wishing he could punch a hole right through Compo's interactive screen. But what good would that do? Those photos circulated in the ether. Available for anyone to view. A lump formed in his throat as he tried to swallow. Unused to feeling so out of control, so ineffective, he snarled at Compo. 'Get them down from there.'

It was at that point that he realised he hadn't actually contacted Patti. He'd got distracted, and it had just slipped his mind. Fuck, fuck, fucking, fuck, shit, crap. She'd be livid. What the hell had he been thinking? His priority should have been contacting Patti. What was wrong with him? She'd be devastated if her pupils saw these?

Compo, flustered, fumbling with his keyboard, typing furiously, and muttering under his breath, struggled to do so. In no time, Compo removed them from the screen. Gus faced his team. Carlton, Taffy, and Alice had all seen them. His face flamed again, and a streak of cold flashed up his spine.

His colleagues averted their gazes and returned to work, but the knowledge that they'd seen him at his most vulnerable slammed in his rib cage and increased his heart rate. Adrenaline flooded his limbs. The desire to pummel the anonymous person who violated his and Patti's privacy pulsed through him, yet he had no outlet for his anger. 'Where are they, Compo?'

Compo, eyes darting across his screens, said. ‘They’re everywhere, fucking everywhere. I’ll contact the networks again and get them on it, but ...’

Gus closed his eyes and inhaled. The images were glued to his retinas. Everyone would see them... other coppers, Patti’s colleagues, the school governors, his bosses, Patti’s pupils their parents, neighbours, friends, relatives... the list was endless. He couldn’t focus at the moment. Instead, he strode over to Compo’s computer and watched as the shares and likes and retweets counted up.

Compo’s fingers flew over various keyboards, muttering as he worked. ‘They’re on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*... Patti’s school’s *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts have been tagged. The Fort’s been tagged and West Yorkshire Police and Visit Bradford.’

Gus’ phone rang. Patti. He answered, aware that he was breathing heavily. ‘You’ve seen them? Compo’s on it, Patti. He’s working with the internet companies. He’ll get them removed.’

For privacy, Gus turned his back to the room before continuing, ‘Are you okay?’

Patti’s words came out slow and precise. ‘What do you think? The kids are sharing it. My *pupils* have seen this, Gus... how am I supposed to run a school where my students have seen me having sex? My career is shot to pieces.’

Her voice cracked and Gus could tell she was narrowly holding it together. This wasn’t like Patti. He’d never heard her so defenceless before. ‘I’ll come as soon as possible, Patti, but I’ve got to ...’

Her reply was colder than a glacier. ‘Don’t come anywhere near the school. This is bad enough without you turning up adding to the gossip. Just stay away.’

‘Patti... wait...’

But she’d hung up.

Compo said, ‘*Facebook*’s trying their best. They’re trying to remove them.’

Gus tossed his phone on his desk and shoved his hands in his pockets to stop them shaking. He strode over and positioned himself behind Compo, watching in fascination as, before his eyes, the images of him and Patti were liked and shared. One hundred shares... one hundred and twenty, one hundred and fifty...

Ping!

Ping!

Ping!



LMAO, Ms Copley screwing that hot copper 😂😂😂

Got some tits on her, has Ms Copley. Wouldn't mind a bit of that!

*This* was the power of social media? Unable to watch any more, Gus walked out.

## CHAPTER 43

*Zodiac*

Pissing myself laughing. Way better than I thought it would be. I deliberately waited until lunchtime so the kids in school would have their phones on and see it. All ready to post at the press of a button. Can't believe how many shares on *Facebook*. Over eight hundred. It's brilliant.

Patti Copley's racked, in't she? 😊 😊  
Watch the tits on her, eh? 😊 😊 😊  
Wouldn't mind a go with Mr Hot... Well fit for an old geezer! 🔥 🔥 🔥  
He's dad fit, he is. Bit of a DILF  
Wonder if he cuffs her up. 😊

All afternoon the images got posted on *FB* and *Twitter* and *Snapchat*. They might have taken the originals down, but not before they'd been screenshot and they're still doing the rounds.

Just a nice little distraction for DI McGuire, before things hot up even more.

I hang about outside school until the bell goes. Should've seen her face as she came out to her car. All the kids were sniggering, and she couldn't do a damn thing. She's got herself a policeman following her. Doesn't matter to me. I couldn't care less... who says it's her I'm after?

Time to head home for a bit of distraction. All that stuff's made me well horny.

## CHAPTER 44

**B**y the time seven o'clock arrived, Gus could put it off no longer. He'd told Katie he'd turn up for tea and, with no more leads on the case, there were no excuses left. The fact that they hadn't wanted Patti around pissed him off big time. Although, with the images of the pair of them having sex all over social media, she wouldn't have come, anyway. He wondered if Katie and Gabriella had seen it... or his dad... or mum? He reckoned not. It wasn't like any of them would be following Patti's school Facebook or Twitter accounts and anyway, his dad could barely use WhatsApp, never mind anything else. Besides, if they had, they'd have been in touch. Still, the press had picked up on it and called up for a quote, so undoubtedly the story would be news headlines soon. Obviously, that smarmy arse Jez Hopkins had phoned for a comment. Tosser! It had taken all Gus' self-control to drop the receiver without giving him a mouthful. Between the Snapchat Killer and this, that little turd would be creaming his pants. He was surprised the idiot wasn't stationed outside The Fort when he left. Of course, Patti was prettier than he was. The Facebook shares had reached over eight hundred and the views stretched into thousands. Patti was too busy fielding calls from parents and school governors to talk to him. He wondered if she ever would, or if his stalker had driven too wide a wedge between them.

Both Nancy and DCS Bashir had supported Gus, still he'd been subjected to some juvenile grins and smart-ass comments from colleagues, but Patti was the head teacher of a secondary school. Where Gus could brush it off and ignore it, Patti was in a more difficult position. Her ability to command respect from her pupils was paramount. Who knew if she could get that back? It was anybody's guess how the parents would react? As for the pupils...? It was crap. It was especially crap because, he suspected, that had it been a male head teacher, reactions would be very different.

As he crossed the road from The Fort to Lister Mills, where his sister and Gabriella lived, he felt at a disadvantage. Two against one – typical Gabriella bullying tactics. While Katie could be manipulative, Gabriella was normally brutally blunt to the point of cruelty. On the plus side, his parents would be pleased that he'd made the effort to smooth over their differences. It was that 'we've got something to ask you' of Katie's that niggled him, though.

He entered the elevator, wishing he could just go home and share a drink with Alice. Instead, he had to suffer Gabriella's half-hearted attempts at a reconciliation because Katie felt bad. As

the elevator opened, Gus realised he hadn't brought wine. *Tough shit!* He was investigating a murder. If they wanted wine, then they'd have to open one of their own bottles.

Spine straight, he pressed the doorbell. Voices drifted from inside, and he pasted on a smile as Katie opened the door. She stepped back, revealing Gabriella standing behind her... his smile faded. 'Hi.' He nodded at his sister and, looking slightly to the right of his ex-wife's shoulder, he repeated the nod.

'No wine, I see?' Gabriella's voice was like cut glass and Gus' head jerked up, his gaze spearing her.

Before Katie could intervene, he said, 'No. Didn't think it was a priority in light of the dead boy whose murder I'm investigating.'

Gabriella's chin lifted, and she opened her mouth. Before she could speak, Katie ushered Gus past the shelving unit in the hallway that housed a cloying lit, scented candle and led him into the kitchen, where a small table was set for three people.

Gus sat down without being asked and waited while Katie pottered about, pouring wine and bringing the pasta bake onto the table. Her body seemed tense, and her face looked strained, like she was barely holding it together. She was drinking water, so things must be serious. Seemingly aware of his scrutiny, she smiled at him and handed him a full plate, before doling out one for herself and Gabriella.

*Well, this was nice!* With conversation at a minimum, Gus wished he could just eat and go. This was going to be a disaster. What had Katie been thinking? Gabriella wouldn't look at him and he could think of nothing to say. Not for the first time, Gabriella had behaved appallingly. Though Gus didn't bear grudges, he had no desire to have her in his life. Of course, there was the tricky fact that Gabriella lived with his sister... that made the idea of never having to interact with her again impossible. With that in mind, he raised his glass.

'Here's to the future and leaving the past behind us.'

With a nervous glance at her partner, Katie also raised her glass, while Gabriella hesitated. 'Gaby.' Katie's tone was pleading, and Gus wanted to tip his drink over his ex-wife's head. Finally, she lifted her glass a few inches off the table and tipped it in Gus' direction.

Katie, eyes narrowed, glared at Gaby, who lifted it higher and in a tone that left no doubt of her insincerity, said, 'Moving on,'

They ate in near silence, Katie trying to initiate an exchange, but failing to hold a conversational ball between the three of them.

At last, Gus placed his fork over his half-eaten food. 'I can't stay long. I'm busy right now with this investigation.'

Katie wiped her mouth with a napkin. ‘Before you leave, we want to speak to you. About something very important to us.’

A flicker of a smile passed over her lips as she linked her fingers through Gaby’s. Gus swallowed his sigh. He’d suspected this was coming and he could just about stand to attend their wedding. Might be a bit odd – his ex-wife marrying his sister, but he’d cope. It would only be one day, after all. He smiled, congratulations forming on the tip of his tongue...

‘We’ve decided we want to start a family.’

For a moment, Gus was stunned. Kids? Gaby and Katie? He hadn’t expected that. A wedding, yes. Kids, no. Gaby hadn’t wanted kids when they were married but judging by her expression as she looked at Katie, that had changed big time. He was unsure how he felt about that. Still, he kept smiling. Katie was his sister, after all, and she deserved to be happy. ‘Great. That’s brill... you adopting? Fostering?’

The couple again exchanged glances, and Gus wondered what was going on.

‘The thing is, Gus, I have...’ She glanced at Gaby, her tongue flitting across her lips, ‘... fibroids and so it’s unlikely I’d be able to carry a baby, so Gaby’s going to have the child.’

Okaaaaay, that was unexpected, but reasonable. He risked a quick nod to Gaby and found her staring at him. He frowned. What the hell was going on?

Katie reached over and grasped his hand, squeezing tightly, her words coming out in a rush. ‘We want you to be the father. That way our baby would be genetically similar to both of us.’

*What the...?* Gus opened his mouth to speak and closed it again. Had he misheard? Katie was asking him to father a child with his ex-wife, who just happened to be her lover. He must have got that wrong. He looked between the two of them. Katie’s eyes glistened and Gabriella stared right at him, as if willing him to agree.

He laughed, hollow and cracked. ‘Nice one... Nice joke.’

‘No joke, Gus.’ For the first time that evening, Gaby addressed him with no disdain in her voice.

He glanced at Katie. Her face was pale, and she was shredding a tissue, her fingers shaking as they worked, her eyes trained on him.

And *that’s* when it sunk in. They really wanted him to father a child with Gaby. They wanted him to father the baby he’d always wanted with his ex-wife and then have to give it to her, so she and his sister could bring it up. They wanted him to donate his genes, his DNA, and then to play Uncle Gus to his own child? *How fucked up is that?*

He scraped his chair back, flung his napkin down, and strode out of the flat, ignoring his sister's tearful calls and Gaby's accusing, 'Told you he wouldn't. He's just selfish, Katie. Totally selfish.'

## CHAPTER 45

### *Pisces*

**L**east that stuff with Ms Copley and the plod is a distraction from the other shit. Dirty cow, getting all down and mucky with that copper. Wouldn't have thought old Copley had it in her. Just goes to show. She didn't look so stern in the sack, did she?

Zodiac's fucking at it, though... and Leo. 'Got to keep up the momentum.' 'Can't stop now.'

I've about had it. Feel like ditching the phone... they can't do owt if I ditch it, can they? What can they say? They won't turn up at the door, will they? I walk into Undercliffe Cemetery. Reckon that's as good a place as any to dump it. Could bury it under a stone. They'd never find it.

Ping!

Fuck, Zodiac! It's like I'm being watched. I glance round. Nobody there but that old git with the dog. Disrespectful that is, letting it shit on the graves and not picking it up. Wish I had the guts to go over and say summat, but he's big... way bigger than me.

I plonk myself down on one of the raised rocks and stare at my phone. If I dump it now, I don't have to see what Zodiac's saying... I practise shrugging and saying, 'I must've lost it.' Even to me that dun't sound convincing.

Ping!

Fuck, I nearly drop it. I look round again. Wish I'd stayed at home. I'm safe there, they can't get me there. I wipe my fingers on my shorts and leave a streak of red there. Shit, I'm a twat... picking my spots again and not even noticing.

Ping!

Ping!

The knobhead with the dog's gone. My leg's shaking and I want to scream. I never signed up for this... not really... did I? Zodiac says I did. Leo says I did... I must've.

I press the button to view the texts:

Zodiac: Next one tonight. That's what you said. We still on?

Zodiac: You did say tonight? This one's your choice, Pisces.

Now it's ringing! *Zodiac!*

'Yeah.' Even to my ears, my voice is wobbling.

'You okay? Been worried about you. Thought you'd lost the burner.'

'No, no... course not.' Shit, now I can't say I've lost it. Would be too obvious. Why am I such a twat?

'So... we're on? Leo and I were wondering.'

'Yeah, yeah. We're on.' There I go again, agreeing with them. Get a grip... get a fucking grip. I don't want to be Pisces anymore. I just want to be me.

I hang up. The graveyard's peaceful... quiet like. If I stay here forever, I won't have to answer that phone ever again. I pull the knife from my rucksack and press the blade against my wrist. It makes a dent and I see the veins through the skin. Never noticed them before. Three of them like rivers running from my palm and up my arm before they fade away. I imagine my blood pumping up them. Why are they blue when blood's red? Weird, right? I press harder, nicking my wrist a little, and a spot of blood appears. It looks nice... feels nice too... all warm. If I press a little more it'll be over. My heart's thumping so hard I can almost see it through my T-shirt. *Come on. Just a bit harder. You can do it.*

I flash to the other night. See Leo jabbing the knife into Pratab's neck. It looked easy. Leo said it split like a watermelon. He didn't even flinch.

I exhale and focus on my fingers against the blade, willing them to move. To press harder and push it right in. To make the blood spurt out and end it all, just like we did with Pratab. Instead they slacken and as the knife falls to the ground, I brush tears from my cheeks. I can't do it.

I'm such a coward, I can't even do that. Can't say no and can't fucking end it either... useless twat, that's what I am. And as I sit, the sky gets darker... it's going to thunder. Maybe if I stay here, I'll get struck by lightning. Then I won't have to be Pisces anymore.



## CHAPTER 46

Gus didn't wait for the swish elevator, but dashed down the stairs, his feet pounding in time with his heartbeat. This was crap... total crap. When he burst out into the heat and realised the evening sky had become overcast, dark clouds gathering on the horizon, the air close and stagnant, he paused. Should he go back to The Fort and risk his team's curiosity or... what...? Home to an empty house? The distant rumble of thunder echoed his mood as he shoved his hands in his pockets and headed down Oak Lane. A quick power walk round the block would ease his tension and then he could return to work.

The sky got darker, with ominous gun-metal grey clouds bearing down on the layers of heat, stealing every gasp of air. Then, in an electrical explosion, the sky erupted. Thunder and lightning clashed, and enormous raindrops bounced onto the pavement staccato-like. Gus held his face up to the rain and, as it soaked his T-shirt, he experienced the slow release of his pent-up anger and frustration leaving his body... the relief was palpable. If it hadn't, he would have snapped. It had been ages since he'd thought like that... been like that.

As he walked, torrents of water gushed down the road, seeking drainage grates. Soon, his clothes were sodden but although the heat was still unbearable, the heavy pre-storm threat had all but dissipated. He approached Mo's SaMosa cafe and saw his best friend looking out at the deluge. As Mo glanced up Gus raised his hand. He wanted to spend some uncomplicated time with a mate.

Before he reached the door, Mo had yanked it open and ushered him in. The familiar smell of spicy chai and warm samosas was like coming home. In silence Mo handed Gus a towel and then disappeared through the beaded curtain that led to the kitchen. Within seconds he returned with a pair of jogging bottoms and an old T-shirt.

'Saw the crap on Facebook. Get changed first... then we'll talk.'

Gus met Mo's eyes and hoped that his own didn't reflect the same pain he identified in his friend's. He wasn't only a crap godfather, he was a crap friend too. He hadn't seen Mo for ages and one glance told him things had deteriorated in the Siddique household.

He took the clothes and slipped into the small toilet cubicle to change. When he exited, Mo was sitting at a table, looking out the window watching the deluge. Although still heavy, the rain had lost its earlier ferocity. On the table, Mo had placed a plate of samosas with raita and two cans of Rubicon Mango, bubbles of condensation dribbling down the sides.

Mo turned and pointed to a plastic bag on the counter. ‘Put your wet things in there, you div.’

‘Div?’

‘Yeah, only a div would decide to go walking in that damn downpour.’

Gus shrugged, accepting the observation, and shoved his dripping clothes into the bag, before joining Mo at the table. He’d barely touched the meal at Katie’s, so he dived into the samosas with relish. Mo’s business was doing a roaring trade. So much so that he’d expanded into all sort of ranges from vegan spicy spring rolls, to paneer and pea samosas. Gus’ favourite were the bite-sized samosas with spicy lentils. He rolled the can across his brow and cheeks to cool himself down, all the while observing his friend. Mo had lost weight, and a scowl scarred his forehead.

‘Alice is back.’

A smile flashed across Mo’s face. ‘Yeah? That’s brilliant. Tell her to pop down. Can’t wait to catch-up. How’re her parents?’ Alice’s parents had stayed at Mo’s for a short time during the winter and Mo had grown fond of the eccentric couple.

They talked about Alice and her recovery for a while until Gus said, ‘You’re working late.’

‘Yeah, well. Thought I’d give Zarqa the chance to tell her mum about her exam before I went home. Soon as I walk through the door, she walks out or locks herself in her room.’

‘Things no better?’

Mo opened his can and took a long drink. ‘Nah. She won’t talk to either of us, but she completely ignores me unless she deigns to swear at me and storm out.’

‘That bad?’ Gus wondered whether to mention about Jerry and Dave seeing Zarqa pelting down Oak Lane the other night. He didn’t want to worry his friend, but didn’t Mo deserve to know that his sixteen-year-old kid was out on her own after dark? Who was he kidding? Course Mo knew she’d been out. Thing was, did he know where she’d been or that she’d been on her own and frightened? But Mo was speaking again.

‘Sunday night, for example. She stormed out and disappeared for hours. Naila and I were frantic. She wouldn’t answer her phone and Naila refused point blank to access the tracker we have on it.’ He made bunny ears with his fingers and spoke in a near perfect imitation of his wife’s tone. ‘No, Mo, that would violate her privacy. She’d never trust us again if we did that.’ Like I was going to *broadcast* the fact we’d spied on her. Naila got all indignant like she does and then we’re fighting.’

Despite his friend's obvious distress, Gus smiled. Mo's concern for Zarqa's safety, in his eyes, trumped considerations of privacy. After all this time with his wife, you'd think he'd have known she wouldn't agree with that. 'So, what happened?'

Mo's frown deepened as he drained his can and crushed it. 'I was about to trawl the streets looking for her, when I checked out Oak Lane through the staircase window. You know, one last time to see if she was walking home.'

Glad that *he'd* not betrayed Zarqa's trust, Gus said, 'And was she?'

'Nah, she wasn't...'

Gus hadn't expected that and the vibrato in Mo's voice told him that what he was about to confide was upsetting.

The rain thrashed the window as Mo continued '... she'd sneaked in through the hedge, like they used to do when they were little.' He turned, and eyes fixed on Gus and said, 'and you know what she was doing... my beautiful, wonderful daughter...?'

Dreading his friend's next words, Gus shook his head.

'She was sitting on a patch of grass, knees pulled up to her chin and rocking back and forth sobbing.'

Mo stopped to wipe his own eyes. 'My baby crying, and I couldn't comfort her because she hates me... because *I'm* the cause of her pain... because it's my fault she's suffering on her own...'

Gus reached over and squeezed Mo's hand. 'She doesn't hate you, Mo. Deep down inside she doesn't. She doesn't know how to cope with things, that's all.'

'It's more than that though, Gus. I've fucked up. Well and truly fucked up. Naila blames me for not listening to her. She's right; we should have told Zarqa the truth years ago. Then it wouldn't have been such a big thing. *Then* we might have survived it. You should be glad you don't have kids, Gus – it's a minefield.'

Gus flinched and bit his lip, remembering Zarqa's words the previous day. Mo stopped and studied Gus' face. 'What have I said... you and Patti arguing about kids?'

Gus snorted. 'If we were talking about kids, I'd be over the moon... but it's not...' his voice died away at the last word. Shit, where had that come from? He and Patti having kids? Christ, they didn't even live together, what the hell was he thinking? She wasn't returning his calls. He wasn't sure there was any more 'he and Patti'. Now it was his turn to look out the window to avoid his friend's scrutiny.

'Okaaaay. I'm confused – if it's not you and Patti talking about kids then *who* is it?'

With difficulty, Gus tried for a neutral tone as he waved his hand. ‘Aw, it’s just Katie and Gabriella.’

When Mo didn’t respond, Gus turned towards him. Mo was biting his lip. ‘Thought Gaby didn’t want kids.’

Head to one side, lips in a tight line, Gus forced his next words out. ‘She’s changed her mind, and, with Katie’s fertility issues, she’ll be the one carrying the baby.’

‘Weeeell, I suppose, it’s a good thing, if they want kids. Katie’ll make a great mum... and *you’re* great with kids... you’ll make a great uncle.’ Mo’s tone was that of a mother coaxing a child to eat broccoli.

The words catapulted out of Gus’ mouth. ‘That’s just it, mate... I wouldn’t be just the kid’s uncle... they want me to be its dad.’

If it hadn’t been so upsetting, Gus would have laughed outright at Mo’s expression. Mouth agape, Mo gawped at Gus, taking him right back to Year Seven, when Gus had told him that not everyone shaved their pubes.

Mo wiggled his index finger. ‘You telling me... you and Gaby... yeuk... that’s just yeuk... and Katie’s okay with that?’

Gus reached over and slapped Mo lightly over the head. ‘Idiot. It’d be done through artificial insemination.’

Mo exhaled. ‘Oh... that’s okay... Ah no, it’s not... that’s just yeuk – a bloody test tube? Yeuk.’

The friends sat in silence and then Mo asked, ‘So, what you gonna do?’

Gus shook his head.

‘You spoke to Patti about it?’

Again, he shook his head and explained about the anonymous letters and the uploaded images. ‘You’re the only one I’ve told. This is too much, Mo. How can they ask me to create a child with my ex-wife and then just pretend to be its uncle?’ He squished his mango juice can and tossed it on top of his empty plate.

‘That’s well fucked up. But I’ve always though Gaby was fucked up. Why can’t they just do it through a damn clinic, like other folk?’

‘Katie wants the kid to be as close genetically as possible to the pair of them.’

‘Well, that’s just stupid.’ Mo looked out the window again, his thoughts not only with Gus’ predicament. ‘Genetics don’t make a family... love does that.’

Gus stood up to go, wondering if he'd added to the burden on his friend's shoulders. 'Rain's stopped; I better slope back to The Fort. You got any samosas left I can take to the team? You know Compo needs his sustenance.'

Laughing, Mo's face lit up, as he jumped to his feet. 'Yep, give me a sec.'

Gus watched his friend pack the pastries. 'They find the people that graffitied your mosque yet, Mo?'

Cursing under his breath, Mo added more samosas to the already bulging box before replying. 'Not a bloody dickie bird. Bloody travesty, what they sprayed over the walls. LIARS! SINNERS! RAPISTS! in foot-high letters. Makes me sick. Who'd deface a mosque like that?'

'Some right-wing idiot, more than likely. But I thought you had cameras and CCTV all over.'

Mo's voice was grim. 'We do. That's the point – we do. Fuckers used some sort of drone or other to deactivate it before they climbed the fence. Caught it flying towards the camera and then the signals just went off. Your lot reckon they must be right techie experts. Maybe you could ask Compo what he thinks.'

## CHAPTER 47

*Leo*

I don't want to let them down. We've come so far together, but it's not gonna be easy to get away. This time it's one of Pisces' targets. I should be there... that was the deal... all three of us together... a team.

Ping!

Zodiac: You still on for tonight? That chicken shit Pisces is going all wobbly. Am relying on you. You know that, right?

I knew it. Knew that bell end Pisces would cause a stir, make it hard for everyone. I push my specs back up my nose. Could do with a cig. Only got a few minutes to reply. I need to think. Can I manage it? Should I ask to delay by a few days? It's not what we agreed; I know that. What an arse. I sigh. There's nowt else I can say.

Me: Sorted. I'm in. Later!

## CHAPTER 48

*Wednesday*

Gus peered through the darkness, squinting to see the time on his phone as it vibrated on his bedside table. *Fuck's sake! After two o'clock.* He didn't recognise the number, which was strange as night-time calls were usually work related. His thoughts jumped to his parents. Had something happened to them? His dad wasn't in tip-top health. Was it a neighbour phoning with bad news? A familiar tension gripped his stomach and squeezed, pushing it upward into his chest.

He slid his legs round until he was sitting on the edge of the bed and lowered his voice so as not to wake Alice in the next room. 'Yeah, Gus McGuire, what can I do for you?'

The person on the line was garbled and, for a moment, Gus didn't recognise it. Then it came to him. It was Jerry, one of the two homeless men he saw at Lister Park. His breathing eased now he knew his parents were okay. He suspected something had happened to Dave, Jerry's friend, and resigned himself to jogging over to the park to help when a different thought occurred. What if Jerry had seen Zarqa again? What if she was in danger? Gus ran his fingers through his dreads and stood up, whispering into the mobile as he paced the room. 'Calm down there, Jerry. I can't hear you. You need to hold the phone closer to your mouth.'

After two small taps on his bedroom door, it opened. Alice poked her head through, and he shrugged in response to her, 'Who's that?' and flicked the phone to speaker.

'Jerry, slow down. Take a deep breath and tell me what's up... is Dave okay?'

A different voice came on the line and Gus recognised it as Dave's. 'I'm fine, Gus.'

Gus raised an eyebrow. This Dave sounded comparatively calm, which was unusual, as Jerry was normally the leader. 'You alright, Dave? Jerry okay?'

Dave got straight to the point before hanging up. 'Get yourself over here. Botanic Gardens. Dead kid.'

Gus stared at the silent phone for a few seconds and then blinked. Shit. Fuck, could it be Zarqa?

Alice prodded his arm. 'Come on, Gus. Botanic Gardens, chop chop. Those two won't have three-nined it. I'll phone it in, you contact the team.'

'What if it's Zarqa?' He hadn't meant to speak, hadn't wanted to voice his greatest fear aloud, but the words wouldn't remain unsaid.

Alice looked at him, her expression puzzled. ‘Why would it be Zarqa?’

Gus shook his head as if to clear his mind and pulled on a pair of jogging bottoms. ‘Just me being daft. Not proper awake yet.’

Alice’s eyes narrowed, and he suspected she wasn’t convinced by his response. Her next statement confirmed that. ‘Seems like I’ve missed a lot in the last six months. Now we better get a wriggle on.’

Gus pulled a T-shirt on as his friend walked out of the room. ‘But what if it is, Al?’

She paused, her hand resting on the handle, before turning around to meet his eye. ‘Then, we’ll deal with it... and we’ll be there for Mo and Naila.’ Her voice hardened, became brisker as she added, ‘But what the hell’s got into you? You need to get a grip, Gus. Move it!’

As they walked through Lister Park, mere minutes later, the air was filled with the warm mulchy smell of vegetation after the earlier rainstorm. As they approached the Botanical Gardens with their decorative bridges, Gus saw two figures crouched on the ground. ‘Dave, Jerry, that you?’

One man stood and turned towards them. Gus recognised Dave, but Jerry remained slumped. As he and Alice neared them, sirens approached. Just in case, they’d alerted emergency services and requested an ambulance and police units. Voices drifted from the right of the gardens, so Gus called out, ‘Who’s that over there?’

A disembodied voice floated through the air. ‘Police. Identify yourself.’

Gus shone his torch towards it and saw two uniformed officers approaching down the hill from the North Park Road entrance. ‘Stop where you are. I’m DI Gus McGuire with DS Alice Cooper. Wait there until I’ve established what’s happened. Make sure no units come closer, okay?’

A ‘Yes, sir,’ followed by the mumble and crackle of police radios, reassured Gus that his instructions were being followed. As he approached Dave and Jerry, Alice following in his tracks, he said, ‘You said there was a dead kid, Dave?’

Gus’ heart hammered and a sense of foreboding hung over him, making each step heavier than the one before. He angled his torch light so as not to blind Dave and Jerry and studied them. Why was Jerry slouched over? Why was Dave doing all the speaking?

‘Yep, a girl.’ Dave’s eyes remained on his friend’s hunched-up figure.

Gus faltered, then, pulling himself together, he stepped closer. Dave was pointing to an area of shrubbery to the right and Gus, slowing his breathing, moved over, casting his torchlight over the body of a young girl. Almost sagging with relief, he closed his eyes. It wasn’t Zarqa. This was followed almost immediately by guilt, because whoever this kid was, she was



someone's daughter, sister, friend. He edged closer, registering the similarities between this and Pratab's crime scene. Whilst hoping for a miracle, but expecting none, he extended two fingers and felt for a pulse. Nothing.

Alice had waited on the path so as not to disturb the area. Gus retraced his steps, already giving directions for the CSIs as well as the pathologist. For once, he hoped the on-call pathologist was his dad. It would be beneficial for the same one to conduct both post mortems. Especially since the similarity between the crime scenes indicated the same perpetrator.

Between them, he and Alice established an inner cordon around themselves and Jerry and Dave. All they could do now was wait for the crime scene investigators. The older men had moved away from the body, which would minimise cross contamination. As he walked over to them, Dave spoke, his voice higher, and more agitated, than it had been on the phone earlier. 'Soon as we saw her like, Gus, we backed off and phoned you. Jerry's not right good. Got a shock like... daughter that age himself. Fainted... cracked his head on summat... bleeding... bleeding. Needs help, he does.'

Shit. He hadn't stopped to question Jerry's huddled position on the ground. He'd been too keen to make sure the dead girl wasn't Zarqa. Gus hadn't known Jerry had a daughter, never mind one so young. Truth was, he'd placed him in his late seventies and had given little thought to the two men's backgrounds. Now, he was angry with himself for being an idiot. Of course, they had a previous life.

He knelt down beside Jerry, cursing himself for not realising sooner that Dave wouldn't have been so vocal had Jerry been well. 'Don't worry, Dave, I called for an ambulance.' As the sirens got louder, he continued, 'You can hear it now, yeah?'

The smell of unwashed clothes was overpowering, but Gus ignored it and concentrated on Jerry. A trail of blood smeared across his forehead, coming from a gash just beneath his hairline. He must have cracked his head on a rock or something when he fell. The bleeding had slowed to a trickle and Gus suspected it was shock rather than his injury that was affecting Jerry. Behind him, Dave's fidgeting dislodged some loose pebbles as he moved from foot to foot in a nervous shuffle. Jerry was pale, but conscious. 'In my pocket, Gus. Dave's meds. Was gonna give them him.'

Despite his distaste, Gus rummaged in the man's pockets until he found a box with blister packs of Clozaril in.

'Just one. Give him one.' Jerry's voice was a whisper, and Gus leaned in to catch his words.

With a nod, Gus turned to Dave. 'Here, Dave, Jerry's fine. Just needs a couple of stitches. He says you've to take this.' And he offered the blister pack. Dave held out a hand, and when

Gus popped a pill onto his palm, the older man threw it into his mouth and dry swallowed, opening it again immediately to show Gus it had gone.

A gross wave of halitosis wafted out, but Gus kept smiling. ‘Great. That’s great. Now here’s the ambulance. You can go with Jerry, okay? He needs you to look after him. I’ll come and find you at BRI later on.’

Gus yelled up to the uniformed officers at the top of the hill. ‘Can one of you accompany my friends to the hospital?’ When an older officer approached, Gus moved to meet him and spoke in a low voice. ‘Go with them. See what you can find out. If they saw anyone hanging about or anything. But don’t frighten them. Dave is fragile.’

The officer nodded, switched on a smile, helped Jerry to his feet and said, ‘Looks like we’re getting a ride in an ambulance. Come on. I could do with a cuppa. Last time I was at BRI they had hot chocolate in the vending machines too... Galaxy hot chocolate, no less.’

## CHAPTER 49

### *Zodiac*

**R**eally wanted to stay. Couldn't have planned it better if I'd tried. Just as well we'd finished, though. Those two smelly old dumbasses turning up was bloody brilliant. Pisces and Leo – shit! Should've seen their faces. Nearly shat themselves. Then we were off, running... running like the wind. I nearly yelled at the top of my voice, 'Run, Pisces, Run! Run, Leo, Run!' Like in that stupid film my mum made me watch the other week, *Forrest Gump* or something... box of chocolates, yeah right... life's more like a pile of crap than a box of chocolates... unless you make your own chocolates, like we are... filled with blood and murder and revenge.

We'd no idea the tramps were about. By the time Leo had convinced her to meet us and she'd downed the drugged booze and smoked half a spliff, we were at the point of no return. It'd been easy to convince her to skip out. Leo was very persuasive. I'd listened in on the conversation.

'Please, you got to come. With everything that's happened, I need a friend... someone who understands the sort of shit I'm going through.'

Pure genius. Leo played a blinder there. Pisces, not so much. Wittering on, moaning. Wanted to slam a punch into that pock-marked face. Only the thought of pus splattering all over my fist stopped me in the end. That and knowing that the best way to get Pisces onside was to be sympathetic. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that keeping them off-balance is the best control there is... sympathise one minute, then lay into them, a bit of guilt tripping, a few hours of ghosting... A fine art, polished over years of practice with gullible idiots.

Betsy was an easy target. Rushed, but enjoyable, all the same. Just got to dump the phone, and it's done.

I'm always amazed by what you can make people do... with the right training, that is.

As we skipped, I heard the old guys nattering on. One of the minging idiots fell over, trying to get away from the body. Weeping like a fucking wuss. Then they're whispering like an old couple,

'What should we do?'

'It's that *Snapchat Killer* innit?'

'Yeah, but should we phone the police?'

‘Just leave it. Someone else’ll find her soon enough. They’ll think we did it if we phone.’

‘Gus won’t. He won’t. I’m phoning him. Help me phone him, Dave. That’s someone’s wee girl there.’

Idiots! I’d have loved to have stayed. Seen Gus’ reaction first-hand. That would’ve been cool as crap. Too risky though. Never mind, I’ve other stuff to do... important stuff. It’s all part of the plan. I’ll be in touch with DI McGuire again before too much longer. I can hardly wait.

## CHAPTER 50

**B**y the time Dr McGuire arrived, officers had established an outer cordon round the Botanic Gardens from the Emm Lane entrance and swooping around the periphery as far as Cartwright Hall. Hissing Sid had set up a crime scene tent and his CSIs were combing the immediate vicinity. Despite their previous disagreement and the fact they had called him out in the middle of the night, Sid seemed in good spirits.

Dr McGuire, dressed in shorts from which his sturdy, hairy legs protruded, tackled the hill from the boating lake up to the Botanical Gardens. A mega sized T-shirt, under which his man boobs wobbled distractingly, completed his ensemble. With a frown Gus watched his dad struggle up the slight incline. The doc's red face and heaving chest showed how out of condition his old man had become in recent months. His hair, sticking up like demon horns at either side of his skull, showed how quickly he'd responded.

Gasping to catch his breath, Dr McGuire stopped and when he recognised Alice, now suited and booted up, his eyes widened. 'Aw, yer back, Alice. It's grand to see you and looking so well too.'

Alice grinned as Dr McGuire shimmied into his XXXL crime scene suit and pulled the hood over his errant hair. 'You're looking good yourself, Doc.'

And, when he was fully suited, she went over and allowed him to envelope her in a bear hug.

Gus tapped his toe exaggeratedly. 'Time's a ticking, you pair.'

The whole greeting had taken two minutes, but prior experience told him that if he didn't nip it in the bud pronto, his dad would start a full investigation into the last six months of Alice's life. Time for that later.

Gus ushered the pathologist through the tent door, with Sid following.

Sid was the first to speak. 'You notice?'

Gus nodded. 'The phone?'

'Exactly.' The CSI moved closer. 'No phone anywhere, but mark my...'

At that moment, Gus's mobile rang and seeing it was work, Gus held up a gloved finger and answered. 'Yep, Hardeep?'

'Just texting you a photo, boss. A Ms Freeman came in saying her daughter's missing and... well, you know?'

Gus did know. No such thing as coincidence. ‘Good thinking.’ His phone pinged. ‘It’s arrived... I’ll let you kn—’

‘That’s not all... the boss came in five minutes ago and...’ Hardeep paused.

Keen to get him off the phone so he could crack on, Gus interrupted. ‘Nancy? Did you tell her what’s gone off?’

‘Eh, no. Not Nancy..... it was the big boss.’

‘Bashir?’ What the hell was the DCS doing at The Fort this late?

‘She’s with her daughter. The girl’s in bits. Says she got a *Snapchat*...’

Fuck! Gus had been expecting that. He just hadn’t expected his boss’ daughter to be the recipient.

‘... she says, the boss’s daughter, Mehmoona, that is, that it’s from her friend Betsy Freeman.’ He paused a moment and inhaled sharply before continuing. ‘She’s a smart lass that Mehmoona. When she saw the Snap, she realised what it was and managed to screenshot it when she viewed it the second time. Lucky for us. It’s the same girl, boss. Ms Freeman’s a single mum – she came in on her own.’

Gus’ heart sank. He understood what Hardeep was telling him. The victim’s mum had no one to support her, and she was going to be given the worst possible news any parent could ever receive. ‘Right. Keep both parties in separate rooms. Brief Taffy and get him to sit with Ms Freeman. Tell Bashir I’ll be up as soon as possible. In the meantime, ask for Mehmoona’s mobile and get Compo working on that.’

‘Should Taffy tell the mum?’

‘Look, let me see for myself if the image matches. I’ll be quick.’

Gus accessed the photo and sighed before turning it round to show the other three. ‘Looks like we’ve ID’d the victim. Alice...’

‘I’m on it. I’ll head up and inform the next of kin and see what information I can get from her.’

Gus spoke into his phone. ‘You get that, Hardeep? Alice is on her way. Tell Taffy that Alice will help him with the death notice.’

If there was anybody best suited to breaking the news to a mother that their teenage daughter was dead, it was Alice. Gus hoped it wouldn’t place too much strain on her. Although she’d put on a brave face, Gus had heard her pacing in the early hours of the morning. He wasn’t surprised she roamed the entire house. After her spell in prison, the confined space of a bedroom probably conjured up terrible memories for her. Perhaps what she needed was a distraction. This investigation might take her mind off her own demons.

As Alice left the tent, Gus looked at Sid. ‘So, if a *Snapchat* was sent, that begs the question... where’s the damn phone?’

Sid spoke into the walkie talkie. ‘We suspect someone may have ditched a phone nearby. Extend the initial bag and grab area, keeping a special lookout for a dumped mobile.’ He turned to Gus. ‘We might need to consider trawling the lake in case they have tossed it in there. Wonder why it they took with them this time?’

Dr McGuire looked up from his kneeling position next to the teenage victim. ‘Despite, that slight change in MO, my initial examination says that most other things are consistent with the previous murder. Again, there’s a stab wound to the jugular. It looks like they took a couple of attempts to get it just right this time. They positioned the hands in the same way and there’s evidence of cable tie usage.’

‘Yep, we found those thrown in a bush,’ Sid confirmed.

‘Some bruising to the head, again, as if someone yanked it in position and held it steady. I’ll confirm at the PM.’

As his dad struggled to his feet, Gus stepped forward and lent his arm. ‘Will you be able to prioritise this?’

Doc McGuire nodded. ‘Yes. I’ve got a non-suspicious death – probably a heart attack, which I’ll do first thing and then get cracking on this one by ten. That suit you?’

Mind on the crime scene and the conundrum of the missing phone, Gus nodded. ‘Thanks, that’s great.’

As Dr McGuire edged his way by CSIs to exit the tent, he turned back as if in afterthought and leaned right over Gus, his morning breath sour. ‘Whatever you decide is fine with me and your mum, Angus.’

Gus frowned, momentarily confused and then, as realisation hit, his shoulders stiffened, and blood suffused his face. ‘You knew? You bloody knew... the both of you... Mum too? And you didn’t think to warn me?’

He shrugged off his dad’s huge hand. ‘This is not something to discuss now. Go away and let me do my job.’

He moved off, paused, and swung round to his dad. ‘And...’ his voice sounding strangled as he spat the words out, ‘... you’ve always taken her side...’

## CHAPTER 51

*Leo*

**S**till boiling, even at this time. I'm sweating like a pig after running. Need to quit smoking... really do. My chest's gonna explode in a minute... phlegm crackling right across it and up to my throat. I stop, cough a couple of times, wishing it wasn't so loud in the dark, and hoik up a gob of gunge. Disgusting or what?

Zodiac said not to take a taxi. Not to draw attention to ourselves... but what the heck? It's late and I need to get back. If anyone notices I'm not there, things could go badly wrong. What excuse could I give for being out at this time of night?

I'm smart. Didn't take it all the way home. Just from Oak Lane to a few streets away. Driver never even looked at me and I used the burner... no trace. Anyway, it's not like I've got *Snapchat Killer* tattooed on my face, is it? Nobody's looking at kids for this... we're in the clear.

Won't tell Zodiac, though. Nobody needs the wrath of Zodiac when they're in top form, even less when they are under the weather and right now, I feel crap. Just hope Pisces holds it together. Think Zodiac has a plan... we need one... just in case.



## CHAPTER 52

It was one of the strangest professional situations Gus had been in. Interviewing a distraught witness was always fraught. But, interviewing one in the presence of their parent was worse and interviewing said witness in the presence of their mother, when she was also your big boss, was like walking on ice so thin you expected it to crack under your feet at any moment. Alice had arranged for Ms Freeman to be escorted back home with a Family Liaison Officer and now sat with Mehmoona while they waited for Gus to arrive.

Alice had wanted to keep Mehmoona Bashir and the DCS in the comfortable interview room downstairs. With its soft couches and pastel coloured walls, it was custom built for sensitive interviews. However, the DCS had insisted on taking her daughter up to her office.

This was another thing that put Gus at a disadvantage. Despite his best efforts, the thought that Bashir had seen the images of him and Patti kept intruding. Thoughts of Patti and concern over how she was coping were never far away. As he walked into the room, he'd smiled at Alice and judged, by her strained smile, that the previous hour had been uncomfortable. Mehmoona was sprawled over the couch in the corner, head resting on a cushion, her long dark hair with its bleached tips spread out over it. She held a strand of it and twirled it round and round between her thumb and index finger as she stared at the ceiling. DCS Bashir sat behind her desk, sifting through paperwork. The remains of a vending machine sandwich and a squashed Pepsi Max can were on the coffee table.

As Gus strode into the room, Mehmoona swung her legs round and stood up, smiling, hand extended. 'Hello, DI McGuire. Nice to see you again.' As if she realised how trite her words sounded under the circumstances, she grimaced, withdrew her hand, and sank back onto the couch. Immediately, she was transformed from a self-confident teen to a hesitant, awkward girl, who didn't know what to do with herself.

Her mum, DCS Bashir, got up gracefully and moved round her desk. 'At last.'

Gus glanced at her but saw no sign that her words were accusing.

She sat down beside her daughter, put her arm around her, and squeezed the girl's shoulder. Gus sat with Alice at the other side of the coffee table. Gus studied Mehmoona and his boss. He'd learned from the phone conversation he'd overheard that there was some friction between parent and daughter, but right now all he saw was a shocked girl, pleased to have her mother with her.

'You've seen the *Snapchat*?' The DCS' tone was brusque and business-like.

Gus nodded. It had been almost a carbon copy of the one sent to Haider, except the victim was Betsy Freeman. Mehmoona's quick thinking had preserved the image for their perusal. She was her mother's daughter. Maybe she'd have a career in the police in the future. When the photo had been taken, the knife was still in the wound. It looked similar to the weapon used on Pratab Patel. A bog-standard kitchen knife that added little to their case.

'Was Betsy a particular friend of yours, Moona. Or do you prefer Mehmoona?'

The girl exhaled and glanced at her mother before replying. 'Either's fine. Didn't really know Betsy. From school, of course, but we didn't hang out. She was in a couple of my classes. Haven't seen her for ages, because it's exam time. We have study days.'

Ah, this was different. Haider had been Pratab Patel's best mate at one point, but Mehmoona claimed hardly to know their newest victim. That would need verifying. He looked at Alice, pleased when her slight nod confirmed that she'd check it out.

'So why'd you think it was sent to you?'

Moona shrugged. 'Dunno.'

'Can you remember when you last saw her?'

Mehmoona frowned, tapped her leg with her fingers. 'Well, I saw her on Monday. In the hall for our Maths GCSE. But to speak to...' She pursed her lips and began twirling her hair again. 'Can't be sure, but not for weeks, I'd say.'

'What can you tell us about Betsy? Who were her friends? Do you know where she hung out, outside school? Anything you can tell us, no matter how unimportant it may seem to you, might help.'

'The thing is...' she gave a small shrug, 'Betsy didn't have many friends.' She wrinkled up her nose in an apologetic gesture and continued, 'Nobody liked her that much. She was a bit of a telltale... you know? Got Pratab's sister in trouble a couple of times, that sort of thing. Other than that, I don't know.' She looked down at her hands before glancing up. 'Why don't you ask Ms Copley, she'll be happy to help you.'

Gus froze. Was that a smirk that slid across her lips, or did he imagine it? He glanced at Alice and saw her frown as she watched the girl. So, not his imagination. Well, it was to be expected. Probably every kid at the Academy had seen the images.

DCS Bashir glared at her daughter. 'Moona, I spoke to you about this.'

Mehmoona rolled her eyes. 'Yeah, well. It's not like I can pretend not to have seen them, is it? Every kid in school's seen him having it off with Ms Copley. Can't act like it never happened, can I?'

She turned to Gus. ‘Not that I’m judging or anything. Think it’s pretty cool that old folk still ...’ She grimaced in a sort of *it’s gross* gesture. ‘You know, like, get it on?’

Conscious of both Bashir glaring at her daughter and Alice’s snort of laughter disguised as a cough, Gus wanted to throw his arms up in the air and say, ‘For God’s sake, I’m not old, you cheeky cow,’ in the same tone he would have used with Zarqa. Instead, he adopted a self-effacing manner and said, ‘You realise that was an infringement of both mine and Ms Copley’s privacy, yeah?’

Mehmoona nodded.

‘Now you’ve fessed up to seeing it, let’s move on from that childish rubbish and get on with the important thing... the murder of your school friend.’

The girl bit her lip, a flicker of confusion in her eyes, but then as she exhaled, it disappeared. ‘Yeah, yeah, you’re right. Sorry. That was tight of me. Poor Betsy... poor Betsy.’ And she turned, flinging herself into her mother’s arms, sobbing as if she’d never stop.

For a moment, Gus felt like a dick. He’d been firm with the girl and hadn’t taken into account how traumatic it must have been for her to view that *Snapchat* and to realise its significance. She’d done well to screenshot it, and he could have been a little less brutal with her. Mind you, this was the girl who’d seen fit to share that awful image of Pratab. He’d have to tell her mother about that, but not right now. He raised his head to meet his boss’ eyes, expecting to see condemnation there. Instead, she gave a curt nod, her lips scrunched up in sardonic approval, and continued to soothe her daughter.

‘Al, could we have some drinks?’

Alice tore her gaze away from the mother and daughter and nodded. ‘I’m on it. Back in a tick.’

By the time Alice returned, Mehmoona had stopped crying and, face tear-stained, leaned against her mother. Gus studied the tableau. Bashir appeared embarrassed to be in the vulnerable position of comforting her daughter... but there was something else. She seemed uncomfortable, uncertain of herself. That insight into his boss’s frailty made Gus like her a little more. Good to know she was human, too.

As Alice deposited a range of soft drinks and bottles of chilled water on the table, Gus smiled at Mehmoona. ‘Can you tell us anything about Pratab Patel? Were Betsy and Pratab friendly?’

Mehmoona lifted a strand of hair and began twisting it round her finger, looking thoughtful. ‘I wouldn’t have said so. Though I heard she left a mushy message on his *Facebook* page.’

Although Compo was monitoring the outpourings of grief posted to Pratab’s timeline, he hadn’t come up with anything dodgy or suspicious. Gus was the first to admit, though, that the

best judges of ‘dodgy and suspicious’ were undoubtedly Pratab’s peers. He made a note to get Compo to cross reference the two *Facebook* pages. No doubt Betsy Freeman’s timeline would soon be filled with just as many RIP posts. ‘What sort of message?’

The girl shrugged. ‘Dunno. Never saw it. I’m not friends with either of them on *Facebook*. Someone was going on about it on the bus. They were laughing at her. Don’t think Pratab liked Betsy.’

‘You pick up anything else? Hear anything else?’

Mehmoona scrunched up her nose. ‘No... I’m not really in the loop. Not been here long enough to be in the *in crowd*.’

*That’s right.* Mehmoona had only moved from Birmingham with her mother just over a year ago. Was it strange then, that the killer had sent the *Snapchat* to Mehmoona or was it merely a random thing?

‘When will I get my phone back? I got to have it. How else can I keep in contact with my mates?’

Before Gus could reply, the DCS, voice harsh said, ‘For God’s sake, Moona. A girl is dead. A girl you knew. You can do without your phone until DI McGuire has finished with it.’

If it hadn’t been in such dire circumstances, Gus would have laughed out loud at the outraged look on Moona’s face. Only a teen could open their eyes so wide, raise their eyebrows so high, and twist their mouth into a silent snarl of derision, while their entire body radiated annoyance.

‘Okay, I was only asking. Yeah?’

Exhaling, Gazala Bashir stood and stretched. ‘I’ll give you my old one if it bothers you that much. Come on. Let’s get home. Let’s try to catch a couple of hours’ rest.’

Gus looked out the window. It was getting lighter. How he wished he too could grab a few hours’ kip. Alas there was work to be done and the next day was forecast to be the hottest yet. Oh joy.

## CHAPTER 53

‘Right, we need to find Betsy Freeman’s damn phone.’ Gus hadn’t slept, and it was now eight in the morning at the start of another scorching Wednesday. He’d not spoken to Patti since, what he now referred to privately as, ‘SexTapeGate’ It weighed on him that they hadn’t connected. The longer they didn’t speak, the more distant from each other they became. Already, he was sticky and irritable, and it would not get any cooler. Compo had made a trip to The Lunch Monkey café and the smell of bacon butties filled the air, reminding Gus that he hadn’t eaten yet. His stomach growled, and he grabbed the last one, before Compo, the human Hoover, could devour it as quickly as he had the other three. He was sure the lad had worms.

As he watched Gus bite into his roll, Compo looked crestfallen. ‘I’ve initiated a trace on the phone. If it’s switched on, we should be able to locate its whereabouts. If it’s still with the bastard who did this, then he’s toast.’

Gus didn’t hold out a lot of hope. He suspected Jerry and Dave had disturbed the killer who had then taken off with the device. By now they would have dumped it in the boating lake or a bin somewhere. He turned to Sebastian Carlton, who was picking his teeth with a paperclip. ‘Any thoughts on these fresh developments, Sebastian?’

The man’s sigh would have been annoying, had Gus not recognised it for what it was; frustration at having nothing more to add.

‘At this stage, Gus, I can’t say much. Two victims aren’t enough to go on. The killers haven’t had a chance to make many mistakes... to leave many clues.’ He nodded at Compo. ‘Unless we get lucky with the phone of course. At this stage, I can only advise that you work on victimology. Find out everything about the victims... there must be a link between the dead kids and the killers. Alice tells me both the victims and the kids who received the Snapchats attend the same school... I’d start there.’

Gus groaned. He didn’t fancy braving the City Academy before he’d spoken with Patti. He missed her and wanted to clear things up between them, but as usual, his job made that impossible. He was certain that she wouldn’t thank him for pitching up at school again. Not even as part of an official line of inquiry. Besides, asking questions of teenagers was never easy, but the knowledge that they’d each probably giggled over his bare butt, made it less appealing. He could send Alice. She was good with teenagers.

He re-ran Carlton’s words through his mind. ‘That’s twice you’ve said killers... plural. You agree there’s more than one perpetrator?’

‘Yes, definitely.’ Carlton dug deeper with the paper clip, making Gus cringe. ‘I’ve got a thought spinning in my head. Nothing concrete yet to back it up... it’s about this *Snapchat* thing.’

‘Yeah, I was wondering about that... it seems to be a kids’ thing, doesn’t it? Mo’s eldest three use it, but I don’t know any adults who do.’ Gus took another bite of his sandwich, ignoring Compo’s plaintive gaze. ‘Of course, that could just be a smokescreen?’

‘Yeah.’ Carlton dropped the clip on the desk and ran his tongue around his mouth. ‘Although, we could be looking at serial killings, there aren’t many serial killer teams around. Still, strange dynamics if it’s a team.’

‘You mean a team like Rosemary and Fred West or Hindley and Brady?’ Compo, always keen to get brownie points from his mentor, bounced in his chair. Carlton smiled at his protégé, again reminding Gus of how incongruous *that* partnership was. Maybe Carlton should write a paper on *those* dynamics.

‘Exactly, Compo, prime examples. Makes me wonder if it’s a pair or perhaps even more than two. They could also be spree killers. Sprees normally occur within a short time span, often resulting in the perp’s death... either by suicide or suicide by cop. We can’t rule that out, either. Despite the posing, the lack of a sexual element makes me question the serial killer idea. Although stabbings often have a sexual element, they’re usually more frenzied and not normally directed at the jugular in such a clinical way. I wonder if our perps are playing games with us... taunting us - which would tie in with your stalker’s games. Perhaps, they’re throwing down the gauntlet. They’re seeking attention. It remains to be seen whether public attention will suffice or if their focus is on a particular person.’

*Perps...* Gus rolled his eyes; *here we go again with the Americanisms*. He’d almost forgotten Carlton’s tendency to Americanise everything. Carlton maintained it was because of his time with the Behavioural Unit. Gus suspected it was an affectation.

Carlton’s face lit up as if he was discussing a tricky political topic. ‘Fascinating... lots to think about.’ And he leaned back, folded his arms across his chest and closed his eyes.

Gus blinked. Apparently, that was all they were getting for now! He turned to Compo. ‘Can you get a list of Betsy’s contacts and cross match them with Pratab’s?’

‘Yep, I can... hey, Gus. The tracking details have come in for Betsy Freeman’s mobile. Let me download it.’

They waited, ignoring Carlton’s small snores, as they watched the map appear on the large screen. For a moment, there was a stunned silence. The device was switched on. Gus took a step closer...

On the map a green light flashed. 'What the...?'

Compo jumped up. 'Shit, Gus, that's...'

But Gus was already heading out the door, yelling after him, 'Send patrol cars right now. Alice and Taffy follow me...'

## CHAPTER 54

### *Zodiac*

**H**ow long does it take them to hack into a phone, for God's sake? I switched it on and dropped it off over an hour ago. Can hardly contain myself. Can't wait to see what they'll do. This plan was sheer genius. He'd never in a million years expect this... how could he? He was still in the dark. But now the Snapchat Killer's in control. I sip my water. It's already lukewarm and my T-shirt's sticking to me. Hope I don't have to kick my heels here for much longer. Don't want to catch anyone's attention, especially with the pigs all over the shop. Crime scene tape's still up. It'll be there for days. The pigs are mixing with folk, talking and asking questions. Like that'll do them any good. How many of this lot would've been around last night? No wonder they're getting nowhere. Two kids dead and they're kicking their heels wasting time. *Snapchat Killer Two: Bradford Police Zilch.*

I'll head off for a walk. Only so long you can sit on a bench with headphones on and pretend to be engrossed in your phone. They're all at it on *Facebook*, sharing photos of Betsy, and posting on her timeline.

There's one more angel in heaven, love Jess xxx☺  
Miss you Betsy Boo xxx☹  
How can I go on without my best friend? Love Sadie 🌸

It's gross. Half of them don't know her or even like her. Fucking Sadie. Only last week she was mouthing off in the canteen about Betsy being a two-faced bitch. Now she's her best friend. Serves them right. Serves them all right. Maybe now they'll sit up and take notice.

I reach the end of the path near the play area before I see him. *Knew it!* Knew he'd come tanking through the park as soon as they tracked where I'd dropped the phone. He's like a superhero or something, with his dreads splayed out behind him.

Oh, this is good. So bloody good. Jo Jo came up trumps this time. Amazing what you can do with a bit of technology.

I step behind a tree, but McGuire's focus is only on his destination. He doesn't even glance to the side... doesn't notice me. This is brilliant. Fucking brilliant!



## CHAPTER 55

The image of the phone tracker bleeping from the interactive screen prompted Gus into action. In a split second, he ran, reckoning that by the time he'd accessed a pool car, got it through the barrier, and driven down Oak Lane in rush hour, he'd be too late. He ran full out. As he exited Lister Park opposite The Turf pub, the sirens were just heading along Bradford Road. His mouth was parched, and his heart boomed against his chest, his gasps racking up his dry throat. Ignoring how his shirt stuck to his skin, he forced himself to go faster. And all the while, he was cursing. *Bastards taunting me like that, fucking bastards. If anything's happened to him, I'll kill them!*

Dodging the traffic, ignoring beeping horns and the squeal of brakes, he skidded into Marriners Drive and, despite the pain in his thighs and calves, pushed himself even harder for the last twenty metres. When he reached his house, he ran up the drive, skirted the front of the house and, pausing only to unlock the six-foot side gate leading to the rear of the property, he thrust it open. It juddered on its hinges as he entered his garden.

Bingo, who'd returned home after Gus' new security system was installed, heard him, and was already dancing at his feet, yapping, excited to see his master. Gus collapsed to his knees, and breath hitching in his breast, allowed the dog to lick the sweat from his face. 'Thank God, Bingo, thank God.' He hugged the squirming dog close to his rib cage and glanced round for signs of an intruder. He saw none. The only odd thing was the small rectangular item in the middle of the lawn.

Minutes later, two police cars, sirens blazing, pulled up in the street outside. Taffy and Alice spilled from the first one and ran to where Gus sprawled on the path inside the gate.

'We'll need Sid's crew here, Alice. Look.' And he pointed to the patch, he called Bingo's 'pooley grass'.

Alice, pulling her phone out of her pocket, dialled, while Taffy offered Gus a chilled bottle of water.

With a brief grin, Gus grabbed it and glugged. Although his heartbeat was returning to normal, his legs still shook, and he doubted he'd be able to get to his feet without falling over. Best just to sit and cuddle Bingo for longer. He leaned his back against the wooden fence and, face lifted to the sun, thanked God that his pet was okay.

Scratching Bingo's head, he realised that security system or not, Bingo would have to go live with his parents for now. Gus didn't believe in coincidences and while having one stalker

delivering letters to his house was conceivable, having a separate person, a potential killer, dump a victim's phone in his garden was stretching the boundaries. Somehow, the deaths of these two teenagers must relate to his anonymous letter writer... and that made it personal.

Despite his wobbly legs, Gus handed Bingo to Alice and, using the wall for support, got to his feet. 'Let's see if our *visitor* got inside, then.'

Still carting a wriggling Bingo and flanked by Alice and Taffy with two uniformed officers taking up the rear, Gus unlocked the front door to be greeted by the warning beep. Reassured, Gus thought it was unlikely the intruder had broken in. Still, best check. After switching off the alarm, he walked into the hallway. 'I'll check downstairs with you two.' He gestured to the officers. 'Alice, Taffy, you go upstairs.'

Houses had a way of telling you if they'd been disturbed and Gus had the sense that, apart from the officers checking his home, his was empty. His pumping adrenalin had heightened his senses, and he breathed in the lingering scent of Patti's perfume. It reminded him that his relationship lay in tatters. He swallowed the anger that exploded in his chest and concentrated on the task as he moved from room to room.

Five minutes later, they congregated in Gus' kitchen, having found the house empty, and Gus said a mental thank you to Patti for hounding him about getting an alarm and better locks. Who knew what would have happened if they'd gained access?

The uniformed officers wedged themselves around his kitchen table as they waited for the crime scene team to arrive. Taffy busied himself making them all coffee while Alice, still holding Bingo, stood by the sink, looking out into Gus' back garden. 'How do you think they got in?'

Gus moved to the narrow dog flap and locked it so Bingo couldn't escape outside, and filling a glass with water said, 'Let's find out, shall we? No point in having my snazzy security and not using it.'

He led them through to his home office and started up his PC. 'My new security system's all linked up, so I'll be able to access the different cameras. The guys showed me how yesterday.'

After a couple of wrong passwords, a lot of impatience, and some cursing, Gus accessed his system, but stared at the menu, unsure of where to go next. Alice nudged him out of the way. 'For God's sake, let me. We don't have all day.'

Within seconds they were looking at footage of the back garden where Betsy Freeman's phone still lay, next to a pile of dog turd on Bingo's poeey grass.

'Rewind it. The phone wasn't there when Bingo went out at half six, so rewind it until then.'

Alice glared at him as if to say, ‘you think?’ Gus grinned as her nimble fingers moved over the keyboard. Soon they were watching fast forwarded footage of Bingo tearing round the garden like a blue arsed fly, chasing butterflies, flinging himself under a bush for a snooze, slurping at his water bowl and having a dump. It was strange to see what his dog got up to in his absence. Bingo’s antics made Gus smile. The dog had access to the house whenever he wanted, but appeared content to be outside. He was happy. ‘Wait, what the hell’s that?’ Alice rewound the tape and then set it to play. They watched as Bingo jumped up and barked at something that looked at first glance like a crow swooping into the garden.

‘Zoom in, Al.’

‘Fucking hell, Gus,’ said Taffy as they observed Bingo, ears back and tail down, flee into the safety of the house. The black shape hovered, and Alice zoomed in more. It was like a miniature spacecraft. And then they saw it... It dropped something that landed right next to Bingo’s still steaming turd.

‘A drone... a bloody drone.’ Taffy was all but pissing his pants as he pointed.

Alice hit replay, and they viewed the footage again.

‘Compo’s been telling me all about them... since you know... the photos and all. You can make them yourself.’

But Gus was thinking he’d heard someone else mention drones before... something separate from this case. He couldn’t quite remember when. Compo suspected the images of him and Patti had been captured by a drone. Now this. The coincidences were racking up a little too smoothly for his liking. And then there was Carlton’s most recent suggestion that they’d thrown down the gauntlet.

Well, now they knew who was expected to pick it up.

## CHAPTER 56

Gus showered and changed before taking his car and dropping Bingo off at his parents' house. He hated the cloud that passed over his mum's face when he told her to be extra vigilant. It wasn't so long ago that a killer had targeted her outside her home and although he wished he didn't have to remind her of that, he wanted her safe. He was tempted to confront her about his sister's little bombshell but decided that then wasn't the time. That his mum had known what Katie was going to ask him sat heavy with him. She'd always been scrupulously fair in her interactions with her children. The fact that she'd kept this secret from him smacked of favouritism and Gus found it unsettling. He didn't want to push it with his mum... wasn't sure what the outcome would be... or, more to the point, if it would wound him. The real stumbling block for him was that his mum had welcomed Patti into the family. Didn't she realise that this whole mad paternity crap would put a strain on his fledgling relationship with Patti? How could she side with Katie...?

Despite his desire to hurry back to The Fort, Gus forced himself to wait while his mum packaged up the remains of an inedible coffee cake for him 'To share with your team'. He glanced out the kitchen window and was sure the sparrow sitting on the bird feeder was laughing at him. The bird was probably relieved to avoid yet more burnt offerings heading in its direction. With the cling-filmed package in one hand, he'd hugged his mum close to his chest. 'Mum. When the dogs are outside, you need to watch out. Whoever dropped that phone in my garden might just as easily have dropped poisoned meat... or a bomb. You see anything like that, and you lock yourself in and phone me.'

Her lips had tightened, and her chin lifted. 'I've no truck with bullies, Angus. I won't change my routines.' Her expression softened and, laying a hand on his arm, she relented. 'But I *will* keep an eye out. I'm not a fool, you know?'

'That's just it, Mum. You've *got* to change your routines. Juggle them around a bit. Don't do everything exactly as you always do. The person who sent that phone to me, he or she knows where I live... so, by extension, they may know where you live. I want you to be safe.'

She flapped her hands at him. 'Och, Angus, let's stop all this depressing talk. I'm more interested in hearing about Alice. Your dad says she's back. I'm so pleased. He says she's skinny. But Alice, bless her, was never on the heavy side, was she? You'll have to bring her for lunch on Sunday.' She rubbed her hands together. 'We'll get her fattened up, no bother. Oh, and tell Patti, I've a new recipe I'm going to try.'

Gus grunted a non-committal reply and got into his car. He'd told his parents about the video footage and both were stoutly pretending it had never happened. That suited Gus fine. He'd no desire to talk about it in detail with his folks. He wouldn't be coming to Sunday lunch for a while. At least not until he'd processed the bombshell Katie and Gabriella had dropped. Nor did it seem at all likely that he'd be bringing Patti to lunch, either. Not if her lack of response to his calls and texts was anything to go by. At the back of his mind he heard Alice's mocking tone telling him to make a point of going to see his girlfriend... to 'get it sorted, Gus.' He suspected the word 'wuss' would pass her lips, along with a few other choice phrases. How the hell had he got himself into this mess?

By the time Gus returned to The Fort, they had confirmed the phone belonged to Betsy. As expected, the only discernible fingerprints belonged to her, too. Compo by-passing the fingerprint access, had hooked it up to his system and was downloading as much information from it as he could. On the interactive screen, he was zooming in and out, replaying the CCTV footage of the drone from two different camera angles.

Prepared to be baffled by Compo's answer, Gus asked anyway, 'What can you tell us about it?'

Compo shoved a half-eaten Mars Bar next to his keyboard, oblivious of the toffee, dribbling down onto the surface and grunted, 'Not a lot yet. It looks like a bog-standard do-it-yourself drone you can buy off *Amazon* or *eBay* or a robot shop. However, whoever constructed it made adaptations to it.' He zoomed in until the drone hung in mid-air. Up close it resembled an alien spaceship from *Star Wars*, with its multiple legs, acute angles and glossy metallic body.

'In what way?'

'Well...'

 Compo was ready to go into techie mode, so Gus interrupted.

'Simple, yeah... keep it simple.'

The enthusiasm on Compo's round face faded a little. With an exaggerated sigh, that said clearer than any words, 'bloody simpletons', he homed in closer to the image of the drone just before it dropped Betsy's mobile in Gus' garden. A claw, similar to the 'grab a toy' machines at the seaside amusement arcades, held the rectangular item. 'It's like the ones Amazon uses to deliver parcels, but it's been adapted to hold a smaller package... like the phone with no packaging or owt. Also ...' He pointed to the screen. 'If you look closely, you can see the camera here. Whoever is controlling it can view your garden in real time. The camera will transmit the recording to a phone or tablet. That way they can choose precisely where they'll deposit their package.'

Compo whirled his chair to another keyboard and typed. ‘I’ve chopped the footage up a bit and slowed it down. Watch here. The drone hovers by the decking, then veers over to the grass, then... look...’

Compo elbowed Gus’ arm and pointed, as if Gus could miss it, considering the size of the damn screen.

‘It swoops closer, as if considering where to drop it. It’s hovering again, now, look. Right above Bingo’s poo poo...’

*Poo poo? For fuck’s sake.*

‘... and then, the controller reconsiders, and it edges to the right. This joker chose exactly where he wanted to position that phone. We should be thankful he opted for next to, not right on top of the p...’

‘Yeah, the poo poo. I get it.’ Despite the overpowering heat in the room, a shiver rattled up Gus’ spine. This was creepy as hell... creepier even than the damn letters. The drone itself, like a miniature spacecraft, was chilling enough, but the realisation that it could easily be used to violate a person’s privacy made it ten times worse.

‘But...’ Compo wasn’t finished. ‘Look at this...’

The drone, after making its drop, circled round, swooping and diving in an aerial dance routine, before hovering in front of one of the security cameras covering the back garden then swiftly redirected to the other camera. It flew right up to it and Gus almost believed the machine winked at him. Whoever was controlling it was taunting him.

Gus exhaled, then turned to his team. Alice, Taffy, and Carlton, having watched the slowed-down action, now sported stunned expressions.

‘There’s no way in hell you can convince me that the murders and...’ Gus waved his hands at the paused image, ‘that aren’t connected to my anonymous letters.’ As he uttered the words, Gus wished that one of the team could form a coherent argument against his hypothesis.

No one uttered a word.

Carlton nodded twice, his lips in a tight line, telling Gus that the psychologist shared Gus’ own belief that the *Snapchat* Murders, as the press had dubbed them, and Gus’ stalker were linked. Taffy, Alice, and Compo all exhaled like a synchronised swimming team, their eyes fixed on the drone.

His teeth gouged the inside of his lip, as Gus tried to control the surge of anger that pounded in his head. If he’d acted more quickly on those letters, made identifying the sender a priority, then perhaps two kids would still be alive, sitting their GCSEs, smoking weed, and exploring relationships... just being kids. This had just got very personal.

## CHAPTER 57

*Pisces*

**D**idn't really want her dead... not really. Just hated her, but that doesn't mean she had to die, does it? She was a bitch, though... a real bitch. Got all the other kids chanting, 'Smelly! Smelly! Smelly!' on the bus to school. Even the younger kids were doing it. All I wanted was to be left alone. Not our fault we've no money, is it? Not our fault the house is damp, and the landlord won't sort it. Our old washing machine is broken more often than not. Fucking damp makes my clothes smell. If she'd only let me be, none of this would've happened.

They kept telling me to do it: *Leo did it, now it's your turn*. And then I'm trapped. No escape.

Wonder what Zodiac's done with her phone? Can't get caught with that. But Zodiac's too smart for that. I almost want to get caught. That's why I'm at the park again. Half waiting for somebody to shout '*Stop! You did it!*'

I'd hold my hands up. Let them cuff me, take me away, lock me up... maybe then I'd be able to sleep. Be able to rest. I don't want to do it again. Can't bear it. Can't bear seeing all the posts on *Facebook*.

## CHAPTER 58

I didn't know Betsy Freeman very well... not really... but I didn't like her. She was a bully sometimes, so I don't know why I'm making Jo Jo come down here to Lister Park with me. It seemed the right thing to do. Two people from our year group are dead and we've still got plans to make. He thinks we should stop while we're ahead, but I'm not done yet... not by a long shot. Where the hell is he? He must have dropped Jessie off by now.

I push my foot against the ground and my swing moves back and forth. The movement doesn't even bring a breeze and I can't be arsed. Too hot! The park's nearly empty. Partly cos it's a weekday and partly because of the crime scene tape around the top part of the park. There are a few mothers with their kids toddling around, some with pushchairs, some gripping plastic bags containing bread to feed the ducks. Don't they know that could kill them? It's not heaving like it is on a weekend, though. The traffic's died down a bit on the main road. Rush hour's over. Should I go home? The house'll be empty. Mo and Mum at work, the kids at school, but it's nice to be outside.

'Hi, Zarqa.'

I glance up, scowling. It's Claire and my heart sinks down to my boots. Can't I have a little personal space? I don't want to talk to anybody except Jo Jo, but then when I see how pale she looks, I relent. No point in being a bitch for the sake of it. Besides, I think she was friends with Betsy. Maybe she'll know what's going on. 'Hi. You okay?'

She sits on the swing next to me, her hands tight round the chains like she thinks she might fall off as she rocks herself back and forth. She looks distraught, poor cow. Must be hard for her. There's a sheen on her face and I'm not sure if it's sweat or oil. I'm just about to ask her if she's heard owt when Mehmoona Bashir saunters over.

Mehmoona's funny. I don't know her very well, but she cracks me up. She doesn't say a lot, but when she does, it's usually sarcastic and to the point. She leans against the metal pole, phone in hand, scrolling through *Facebook* no doubt.

'Do you know there are one hundred and fifty-two messages on Betsy Freeman's timeline?' She angles her head to the side and pushes her sun specs up. Her dip-dyed hair's a nicer colour than mine and I consider asking her where she had it done, but it's too much effort.

Claire's stopped swinging now. From the corner of my eye, I notice she's staring up the park to where the crime scene tape stretches around the trees. I glance at Mehmoona and shrug.



She nods and moves in front of Claire, blocking her view. ‘You left a message yet, Claire? She’s a friend of yours, isn’t she?’

Claire flinches like Mehmoona’s asked her to soak her face in acid and shakes her head. When she speaks, her voice trembles, ‘No. Wouldn’t know what to say.’

On the last word, her voice sort of hitches and I think she’s gonna burst into tears. Fuck’s sake, Jo Jo. If you’d just be on time, I wouldn’t have to deal with this shit. But again, I take pity on her. She looks upset. So, I smile. ‘Tell you what, Claire, we’ll help you. Me and Moona. We’ll help you write something.’

Eyes all over the place, Claire hesitates. ‘No, no... I’ll leave it.’

But Mehmoona butts in. She’s having none of Claire’s weakness, and I feel sorry for her when Moona hassles her. ‘Get your phone out, girl. You’ll feel better after you’ve left a message. I did.’

Claire’s as surprised as I am that Moona posted on Betsy’s timeline. Claire looks at Mehmoona. ‘You left one?’

Mehmoona shrugs. ‘Course.’ She turns to me, ‘You did too, didn’t you, Zarqa?’

‘Eh, well, actually no. I didn’t. Didn’t know what to say. I’m not into that sort of stuff. It’s all a load of bullshit.’

Hands on hips, Mehmoona looks at us in turn. ‘Phones out, girls.’ Her tone is firm, so rather than come up with an argument, I take mine out and Claire does too. Looks like I’ll be posting a message after all. I hadn’t realised Moona could be so forceful, but what the hell, if it helps Claire, then it can’t do any harm.

‘Right, all you need to say is RIP or Miss you or Taken too soon or some such shit. Whap on a couple of emojis and you’ve done your bit. It’ll help her family feel better.’

Claire gulps and a tear rolls down her cheek. ‘Don’t think an emoji’s going to do that, Moona.’

I can’t help thinking she’s right, but still, Moona has a point. Better to do something than do nothing. I scroll through *Facebook* until I find Betsy’s timeline.

RIP Betsy, love Zarqa :(

‘There done.’

As Claire writes hers, I scroll down the other messages.

Another angel in heaven. The stars will shine brighter, love Moona

Duh? Bit poetic. I scroll on.

Gone but not forgotten, love Ben xxx  
Will miss you, Jo Jo xx

Ping!

I'm sorry you're gone, Claire :(

Mehmoona looks at Claire, a huge grin on her face. 'There. That wasn't so hard, was it?'

I grimace and shove my phone in my pocket. Don't know what she's so happy about. Poor Claire looks like she's gonna freak out and when she shakes her head, it's as if she's being tortured. All I want is to get away from her misery but Mehmoona's going off on one again.

'...heard Pratab's sister's arranged a secret 'vigil' by the bandstand tonight. Just for us kids. You coming, Zarqa?'

I hate the stupid finger bunny ears she makes round the word 'vigil'. No way am I going to that. I feel sorry for Pratab's sister, but he was a dick. I'm not going to go so I shrug. Then my eyes land on Claire and she's smiling all hopeful and pleading. *Fuck's sake! Now I have to commit.* 'Okaay. I'll be there.'

Claire's smile widens and I feel like a cowbag for being annoyed with her, but just then I spot Jo Jo. He jumps the fence at the side. He must have climbed the wall from the main road and run up. *Brill! I'll rope him onto the stupid vigil too!*

'You all right?' His greeting takes in all of us and I notice Mehmoona straightening up, sticking her tits out. Almost makes me laugh. Like she's got a chance. Then I spot Razor and Goyley entering the enclosed playground through the small swing gate. Bloody hate those two. Why the fuck have they shown up? Thought I'd seen the back of them when they were expelled from school. They shouldn't be in Manningham – that's a riot just waiting to happen. Goyley throws himself down on the grass.

'Heard the bitch got herself stabbed... blood everywhere...'

Jo Jo opens his mouth to say something, but I jump in first. They're less likely to hurt me... 'Show some respect, eh? We don't know who's gonna be next.' As if in an afterthought, I smile

my sweetest smile and bat my eyelashes. 'Would be a shame if it were you, though, wouldn't it?'

'Ooooooooooh!' Razor says, wiggling his fingers like a tosser. 'The paki's threatening you, Goyle. You scared?'

Goyley jumps to his feet, pulls a knife from his back pocket, and gets in my face. The blade right at my throat. *Shit! That escalated quick!* I feel the point dig into my neck and instead of backing off like I should, I jut my chin out and say, 'Piss off, tosser!'

Beside me, Jo Jo's groans and then Mehmoona's speaking. 'Smile, Goyle.' She's got her phone up taking a photo. 'Might send this to my mum if you don't piss off. You know she's a copper, right?'

To add to the circus, barking starts up behind me and someone else is speaking. 'Fucking drop the knife, Goyley, or I'll set the dog on you.'

And for the first time in forever, I'm happy to hear Karim's voice. The dog's straining at its lead now and snarling right at Goyley's legs. For long seconds, the blade nips my skin. Then Razor does a slow hand clap. 'Come on, Goyle. We'll split.'

He turns to Mehmoona. 'Delete it, sweetheart, or I'll find out where you live... you get me?'

With a wide smile, Mehmoona inclines her head to Goyle. After he steps away from me and pockets his weapon, she holds her phone out so Razor can see the image. Razor nods and she presses delete. 'All gone.'

Razor studies her for a long moment. 'I see you,' he says and raises two fingers to his eyes and then swipes them towards Mehmoona. 'You're on my radar, bitch.'

Hands shoved in his jeans' pocket, Razor turns to Karim, who juts his chin out in a fair imitation of a 'fuck you' stance. 'You better watch out, paki boy. You won't always have your dog with you.'

And he backs off, retracing his steps out of the kiddies' playground towards the boating lake, Goyley following.

In silence, we watch them go. My throat's dry as owt. I swallow and accept the bottle of water Karim offers me. 'Thanks. For the water and... well.' I gesture to the retreating figures. And he nods.

Claire's shaking, like it was her on the receiving end of Goyley's charm. Silly cow looks like she's gonna puke. Mehmoona's face is unreadable and Jo Jo avoids looking at anyone.

Karim's the first to speak. 'D'ya think they did it? D'ya think they killed Betsy and Pratab?'

'They got knives... I'd say it's worth mentioning to the police,' I return Karim's bottle. 'You should tell your mum, Moona.'

‘Sure. I’ll do that. Got to share any information we have. Who knows how many more of us he’s going to kill?’

With that sobering thought hanging between us, she turns to Claire. ‘Come on, girl. I’ll walk you home.’

Claire shakes her head, but we can all tell it’s half-hearted. As they leave, I turn to the boys. ‘So, anything exciting going down?’

## CHAPTER 59

Sebastian Carlton had taken over the back wall of the incident room. He'd enlarged Gus' anonymous letters and, ignoring the large printed sign saying,

Newly painted walls!  
Thank you for not using Blu Tak!

he had stuck them up in chronological order across the paintwork.

He'd also stuck up printed copies of the images of Gus and Patti and the uploaded ones of both victims. Gus groaned. He'd get it in the neck if Bashir caught sight of that, but deep down, he didn't care. He'd told her they needed an extra board along the back wall, but she'd insisted that Compo's new-fangled interactive swipe board would suffice. Gus had argued his corner, but she'd been insistent. Like Carlton, Gus preferred to see things spread out. He liked to have the information around him, so he could dip in and out. It was the way he worked. He didn't compartmentalise into handy little folders. It helped him visualise the whole picture.

It was strange seeing the anonymous letters all in a line. Usually, the stuff they pinned up were details about a victim or suspect, not anything personal to him or his team. In isolation, he'd been able to downplay the seriousness of them. Laid out like this, Gus saw how sinister they were. There were six in total. Carlton had scribbled on multi-coloured Post-it pads and dotted his observations and thoughts around the letters. With his chair reclined to its full extent, another positioned in front to elevate his legs, he studied his collage with his hands clasped around his middle and a half-eaten doughnut balanced on top of his belly. No wonder Carlton and Compo got on so well!

A pulse throbbed in Gus' temple, reminding him of how charged he was. Every time he touched something, he expected it to burst into flames or, at the very least, give him an electric shock. He was desperate for action, yet there was little to be done right now. Two dead kids, a few anonymous letters, and no damn witnesses. The investigation was stalling. It was as if the heat was suffocating every clue he had. They'd found no unusual links between Betsy and Pratab and were unable to link the victims to Gus himself. The only common denominator was City Academy. Gus and Patti were linked to the school, and Betsy and Pratab had both attended it... as did upwards of a thousand other kids and over a hundred staff. He was impatient for a

breakthrough, and with City Academy the only link, Gus had set Taffy and Compo the task of trawling through Gus' past cases.

A couple of recent cases had involved him with City Academy. The first was when a serial killing tattooist had targeted a student's parent. The second was when a house party had gone wrong, resulting in the deaths of two children and with the perpetrator linked to the school. More recently, since he and Patti had begun their relationship, Gus had supported her through the suicide of one student and the arrest and imprisonment of a staff member for grooming a pupil. These may well be unrelated incidents, but Gus wanted Compo to use his skills to scratch beneath the surface.

Gus moved closer and studied the display. Each letter used the same form of address: *My Dearest Detective Inspector Angus McGuire*. Carlton had commented on this in his sloppy handwriting with a series of questions circling the greeting on a variety of neon sheets:

Deliberately formal?

Contrived?

Use of language?

My dearest – from a book/Internet?

Use of 'Angus'?

Use of full title? – Knowledge of Gus as DI?

He'd commented on the perfume used to scent the letters.

Adult fragrance?

Significance of fragrance name?

Each letter had been signed in exactly the same way:

Watch this space!

Around these notes, Carlton had repeated the process with the Post-its: Language – youthful? Link to Snapchat – a teen app? – distraction or clue? Implied threat? Warning?

Gus thought the last two observations were near the mark. Especially when combined with phrases like:

'Your girlfriend's pretty... very pretty!'

'... and your dog's so sweet. Soooo tiny! I could squeeze and squeeze and squeeze him.'

'You must tell Patti that I love that blue dress...'

'Do you and Patti use social media much?'

Carlton lifted the doughnut off his wobbling belly and bit into it. Gus took that as a sign that the profiler had some insight about the anonymous letter writer to share. 'What you got, Prof?'

'Well, you've certainly piqued someone's interest, Gus. The question is whose.'

*Give me strength.* Gus struggled for calm rather than the 'for fuck's sake you've been staring at these for ages and that's all you can come up with?' Finally, he managed a nod. 'You're not wrong there.'

Carlton pushed his specs up his nose and swung his feet off the chair, sending a flurry of chocolate sprinkles from his doughnut onto the floor. Gus noticed the Barbie plaster around the profiler's specs was unravelling, and had left a sticky black mark across the bridge of his nose. Carlton stood up and began pacing in front of the letters. The realisation that he'd have to bide his time had Gus slumping into a chair to wait. Carlton, as usual, would speak when he was ready.

'There's been a bit of an escalation...'

Gus chewed the inside of his lip. *A bit of an escalation?* Two dead kids, threatening letters, dumping the victim's phone in his garden and a stalker was 'a bit of an escalation?' No, you got that right. You don't need to tell me that. Gus bit back his cutting response, folded his arms across his chest and with effort stopped tapping his foot on the floor.

Carlton, hands linked behind his back, rocked on his heels and studied his display. 'The language is contrived. It's a disguise of sorts, an attempt to deflect our understanding of who

the writer is. However, some of the vocabulary that's slipped through makes me think, we're talking about a relatively young person. The *watch this space*, the *loved-up couple*, *all that...* Say under twenty-five?

'Of course, I'm combining that with the assumption that the drone link to the teen murders and your stalker points to a very definite correlation. If we take the drone technology. Compo tells me that these drones appear to have been 'build it yourself' sets, bought via the Internet, that have been adapted. He says they would need a lot of skill for that. He's already checking supply sites to see if we can find the supplier. Long shot and time consuming, in my opinion. There can't be so many drone experts in Bradford, though. However, with the Internet, they could have bought their parts from almost anywhere. If anyone can ferret out this information, Compo's your man.'

'Although I agree with your logic, I'm going to need more than that. You got anything else? Surely anyone could learn how to do the drone techy stuff?'

'Yes, of course, you're right. But it is a combination of things. The fact that the victims are teens themselves, the use of *Snapchat* to taunt their friends, the ease with which they uploaded the images of you and your delightful girlfriend to social media, but...' He turned and looked at Gus. 'Perhaps the most telling indicator is the fact that you, an observant and skilled police officer, have been observed for months and yet you've not noticed. That tells me your stalker was someone you didn't view as a threat... a kid, a woman, someone you're used to seeing.'

Gus reflected on the past few weeks. Had he noticed anyone hanging around? He didn't know. Carlton was right, he hadn't paid a lot of attention to people he didn't perceive as potential threats. The only people he'd seen regularly were Jerry and Dave and he could discount them. They didn't have the money, the ability, or the know-how to devise something as complicated as this. Carlton was still speaking.

'Another thing points towards the perp being younger... the fact that the two victims attend the same school and also the fact that the murder scenes are in close proximity and took place late in the evening. Kids sneak out of their houses all the time, but they're more likely to stay near to their homes when they do. Less chance of being noticed wandering around the city. Also, they showed a familiarity with the CCTV coverage.'

'So, they're definitely linked. My stalker and the dead kids.' Gus' heart contracted. No matter how much logic told him that the stalker was responsible for Pratab's and Betsy's murders, he couldn't dodge the guilt that landed on his shoulders. If he'd taken the anonymous letters more seriously earlier on, he might have been able to prevent two kids' deaths.



Carlton whipped his spectacles off and frowning, stuck one earpiece in his mouth. ‘Yes. They’re related...’ He made a sucking sound as he chewed the end of the earpiece. ‘... but you can’t forget the forensic evidence and that’s what makes this case so fascinating.’ He turned and looked at Gus, his eyes shining. ‘There’s more than one killer, Gus. We’re looking for a team.’

Gus let the words sink in. He’d been well aware that forensic evidence pointed to two killers. He just hadn’t expected them to be teens. It made him feel queasy. What would prompt two kids to work together to kill another youngster? A thought struck him.

‘You think they’re both teens?’

Carlton grinned. ‘That’s what makes it so fascinating. I just don’t know. We haven’t enough evidence to form an accurate profile yet. The dynamics of the duo, are unconfirmed. I’ll keep working on it.’

Gus wanted to shake him. This wasn’t an academic question. This was real. Real people with families and friends now bereaved.

‘The teen could be working with an adult. They could be responsible for the social media, technical stuff at the behest of a grown up. That doesn’t sit comfortably with me. There seems too much evidence indicating a youthful mind. However, their keen attention to forensics points to a very savvy person, regardless of their age.’

Carlton put his specs back on and continued. ‘This brings us to motivation. Your stalker is murdering kids – possibly their own friend – in order to elicit a reaction from you. So, the motivation is twofold. One they want to taunt or punish you and two they’re using their campaign against you to justify killing peers they dislike. The killings aren’t only for your benefit, Gus. I’m convinced they have a personal agenda against the victims too. So... the question is... which teen have you pissed off big time? Consider one with traumatic stuff going on that could act as a catalyst. I suggest you get your thinking cap on.’

Gus’ stomach lurched. He hated the places his thoughts were heading. ‘I’ll send some officers over to City Academy to re-interview students and staff with this profile in mind.’

## CHAPTER 60

### *Zodiac*

This afternoon is pyjama time. Lounging about, scoffing what I like, drinking voddy, watching *YouTube* videos, and planning. The only good thing about exams is the study leave. That's why I chose this part of the term for my adventure. It gives me time to do all the – what I call, finishing touches, with no one catching me. Everything has been so exciting. Last night was brilliant. Don't know if we'll be able to top it, the excitement, the adrenalin.

The others let me down, though. Pisces in particular... such a baby. You'd think we hadn't talked it all through... planned it. Never mind, they both came around in the end. How could they not? The important thing though is to keep the pressure on; keep them on side.

The press conference earlier was brilliant. That stupid DCI Chalmers all pouting and flirting at the cameras, full of herself. Thinking she was all that. But the best part was McGuire standing just behind her. He'd ditched the bandana and his cargo shorts and T-shirt in favour of a shirt and tie. Boy, did he look hot... and I don't mean in a sexy way...

He's well pissed off, I can tell. He scowled the whole time, glaring at the journalists when they asked questions.

'DI McGuire, do you think there is a link between The *Snapchat Killer* and the intimate images of you and head teacher Patti Copley leaked through various social media channels?'

'Is the *Snapchat Killer* calling all the shots right now?'

'Has the police investigation into these teen killings been less than effective?'

'What measures are Bradford police implementing to ensure the swift arrest of The *Snapchat Killer*?'

With every question his face got more and more sour. Poor old Gussy boy. I almost feel sorry for him. Bet he can't wait to get his hands on me. Trouble is he'll be waiting a while, cos I've no intention of getting caught yet. By the end of the summer it'll all be over ...

The one sure thing about my plan is that McGuire will relax, ease up... he'll get careless with his security... think it's all wrapped up and then BAM! My final act will wipe him out... wipe him out completely.

I click a few keys and send my baby off into the ether. Leaning back, I spin the computer chair round for a bit, then tip some more voddy into my glass. Who says you can't drink in the

afternoon? My burner phone buzzes and, frowning, I retrieve it from where I've stuck it under my desk. Should have had it on vibrate. Last thing I need is anyone else hearing it... just as well I'm home alone. It's Pisces. Fuck's sake! That name's so apt. Wet as a bloody fish, that one.

'Yep?'

'I'm scared. I feel sick. Can't believe we did that. It's wrong. Can't do it again.'

Irritation seeps from my pores. Can't be arsed with this stupid self-pitying carry-on. Why is Pisces such a dumbass? What's done is done. I hold the phone close to my mouth and exaggerate my breathing... only a little. Just enough to show I'm pissed off. I take my time to respond. I want to smash the phone down on my desk. What the fuck? Phoning me up, bursting my bubble... spoiling things for me. 'You're. Being. A. Dick.'

Pisces' breath catches and I hate that wobbling whingy voice. Now I want to smash the phone into Pisces' stupid face. I'll make sure the idiot will suffer for this. As I listen to the stuttered words, I glug my drink. 'Can't do this again. It's not right. Didn't think we were going to...'

I cut the words off right there. 'Crap! You knew *exactly* what we were doing. YOU agreed. You and Leo both agreed. You were all full of swag... well up for it. It's too late to back down. You need to keep your shit together. Got it?'

The sniffing irritates the hell out of me, but I know I have to change tack. 'Look, everything's all good. We're doing the right thing. We're in this together. The Zodiac Club. The *Snapchat Killers*. Besides, you don't want any little secrets getting out, do you? You've got a lot to lose if those get out... won't just affect you either, will it? It'll affect your family too. Look we'll meet up later. The three of us. You'll feel better then.'

'I saw them on the news. They say they're closing in. It were that copper. The one who's shagging Ms Copley.'

I laugh out loud, amused at such naivety. 'Idiot,' I say indulgently. 'They've got nothing – not a fucking thing if we stick to the plan.'

My computer screen flickers in front of me and then, there it is. Large as life. The product of our hard work. *Twitter* and *Facebook* and *Instagram* – throughout the Dark Web. 'Check *Facebook*, Pisces. We're famous again.' And I hang up.

The thought of McGuire's team scurrying about trying to get it taken down amuses me. As I watch, I see the shares and retweets escalate. Everyone likes a bit of drama and... grinning, my hand drifts down to my crotch.

## CHAPTER 61

Gus was walking through the Smith Lane entrance to Bradford Royal Infirmary on his way to visit Jerry and Dave, when Compo rang. The recent renovations were a vast improvement to the hospital with a food court, shops creating a friendly vibe for out-patients and visitors. The only downside was the abysmal lack of parking. Aware of the parking difficulties, Gus had parked on Toller Lane and jogged down rather than spend ages driving round looking for a spot closer.

Although he'd been expecting the photo of Betsy Freeman to be posted to the Internet, that didn't make it any more palatable. There was nothing he could do about it other than curse, which he did, more loudly than he'd intended, causing a few visitors to scowl in his direction. He'd probably confirmed any racial stereotypes they already held. With a shrug, Gus moved on. No point in dwelling on it. His team were on the case and they'd get the offending images down as quickly as possible. Still, Gus trusted that Ms Freeman's FLO had kept her away from the Internet. When he'd glimpsed the woman that morning, she'd looked ready to slump into a heap and give up. Her mother had been with her, smelling of smoke and BO and blaming the police in strident tones at every opportunity. The FLO was trying to convince the mother to leave her daughter in the more capable hands of her neighbours who'd turned up with a bagful of groceries and a pragmatic attitude. Gus hoped she'd succeeded.

The officer who had accompanied Dave and Jerry after Jerry's fall, had informed Gus that the hospital had decided to keep Jerry in for observation. The constable had been pro-active and arranged for temporary space at a hostel for Dave. He'd dropped the old man there earlier, then picked him up to visit his friend a short time ago. Gus made a mental note to thank the officer. This was the sort of community policing they should praise, and he'd make sure he got credit for it.

Gus strolled into the small side room where he'd been told Jerry was, however he wasn't there. He turned to walk out, but a, 'Hey, Gus, nice of you to drop in,' made him spin round. The man lying in the bed wearing an incongruous floral hospital gown, grinned at him. Gone were the layers of dirt that had become ingrained in Jerry's wrinkled face and instead of the matted mop Gus had grown used to, his hair was cut and shampooed and now sat tamed to his skull. Next to him sat Dave, looking much the same as he had earlier. He had a newspaper open at the crossword page and, leaning on Jerry's table, he was filling it in with a biro. His only acknowledgement of Gus' presence was a distracted grunt.

‘You’re looking well, Jerry. They taking care of you?’ Gus’ smile was genuine. The old boy had suffered a shock. Almost immediately Gus rethought his words. ‘Old boy’ was not an appropriate description. Jerry, all spruced up, with his beard shaved off, looked much younger than he’d previously thought, mid-forties, perhaps.

‘Can’t complain, can’t complain. Though they say I’ve got to stay another day. Dave’s okay with that. He’s going to sleep at the hostel until I’m better.’ Jerry’s eyes had lost some of the spark they’d held earlier. ‘That poor lass. Dave says she’s definitely a gonner.’

‘Yes, I’m afraid so, Jerry. That’s why I’m here. I need you and Dave to tell me about how you found her.’

Jerry’s fingers kneaded his sheets, and he glanced at Dave, who’d folded the newspaper and placed the pen on top. It was strange to witness the role reversal. But Gus suspected it would do Dave good to realise he could be strong for his friend.

‘It’s okay, Jerry. We’ve done nowt wrong. Gus needs to know, that’s all. So he can find the bugger that done this.’

Gus smiled. A few months ago, Dave would have been the uneasy one. Clearly his meds were working for him and Gus was glad. It was hard to be homeless without having to cope with untreated mental health problems too. He filled a glass of water and placed it on the cupboard close to Jerry. ‘Here, have a drink. Don’t be getting all flustered. It’s only routine.’

‘Aye, I know that, Gus. It’s just I got me a bit of a shock when I saw that lass lying there. I got a daughter that age meself and that threw me.’ He sighed and lifted the glass as Dave patted his leg.

For a second Gus thought he was going to cry. He wondered about the circumstances resulting in Jerry’s homelessness but didn’t want to intrude. ‘How old is your daughter?’

Jerry focussed on something over Gus’ shoulder and gripped the tumbler with both hands. A play of emotions drifted over his face, making Gus wish he’d not asked, then Jerry began in a quiet voice, a slight smile on his lips. ‘She’ll be sixteen will Gemma... Gemmy we used to call her, because she was our gem... our precious stone. The most wonderful thing in the world...’

The pause lasted so long, Gus wondered if Jerry had finished. He was about to speak when the older man continued. ‘Down’s Syndrome... she has Down’s Syndrome, but it never mattered a whit to me and Natalie, not one whit. She was the light of our lives. But when Natalie died... the big C, I fell to pieces. Lost my job, wun’t able to keep up with payments, couldn’t keep up with... life.’ He looked right at Gus, tears filling his eyes. ‘That’s it. I couldn’t keep up with life... not even for Gemma.’

Gus tried to swallow the lump that was in his own throat, but it wouldn't dislodge, so he nodded, hoping that his inadequate response hadn't come across as uncaring or judgemental. Jerry was fragile and Gus didn't want to distress him any more than necessary. It seemed the man had suffered enough anguish already.

Dave plucked a tissue from the bedside cabinet and handed it to his friend. 'They took Gemma away from Jerry. Said he wun't looking after her properly.'

Jerry blew his nose before responding, 'And they were right, Dave. I wun't looking after her. My Gemmy deserved more than I had to give. She deserved me there full-time. She deserved a dad... not an empty vessel.'

'Yes, you're right, she did... but they should've looked after you too. Helped you get better. Helped you get over your grief.'

A tear gathered in Jerry's eyes. 'Aye, maybe, but that's water under the bridge. She'll have forgotten me now. She'll be a young woman.' He turned to Gus. 'I saw her once, at her school. She must have been ten. She came running out into the playground, her hair in pigtails... flying out behind her. This man crouched down, arms opened wide, and she screamed with laughter and launched herself right into them. He whipped her off the ground and spun her round. Gave her a big kiss on the top of her head and then passed her to the lady standing beside him. They were all smiles. The three of them walked out of the playground, with them swinging her between their arms, just like Natalie and I used to do. As she passed, I heard her say, "Mummy, Daddy, guess what I painted in school today?"'

Tears streamed down his cheeks, yet he was smiling. 'Gemma, my precious Gemma had a new family, and she was happy. That's enough for me.'

His words about family reminded Gus of Mo's thoughts about genetics not making a parent and Katie's face as she looked at him so pleadingly. Why were things so damn complicated?

Dave was speaking. 'Gus needs to know about the girl last night, Jerry. You tell him.' And he settled back into his chair and folded his arms across his chest.

Gus nodded and smiled and, his tone conversational, asked, 'How did you come across her?'

Jerry glanced at Dave. 'We were looking for somewhere to bed down for the night. We like the Botanical Gardens. Always a breeze there and the birds come in the morning. It's nice and comfy. But soon as we got near, we saw her lying there. Dave went over, but he said she were dead, and I just lost it. I went faint. The moonlight played a trick on my mind and I thought it was Gem. We didn't touch owt. I fell over and cracked me head.' He touched his forehead which had a couple of stitches in. 'We stayed where you found us and phoned you.'

'Did you see anyone else there? Hear anything?'

‘Well, we’d only just arrived. We’d been up in the Heaton Allotments. Had a picnic there and waited until it got quieter outside in the village. Sometimes, there’re lads that’ll hassle us. So, we’d only reached the park five minutes before we found the poor lassie.’

‘So, you saw no one?’

‘Oh, yes we did. Some youngsters ran past us laughing and jeering they were. They jumped over the wall into North Park Road. Too far away for us to see them properly, mind. But they were just kids. Wouldn’t have been them that done this... they were only kids.’

## CHAPTER 62

‘So, you gonna tell me?’ Alice perched herself on the edge of Gus’s desk. He’d been aware of her casting glances in his direction for the past half hour. The room had quietened off a bit. Compo was in his own little world with his headphones on. Taffy was at the post-mortem, and Carlton had gone for a walk. After his earlier chat with the profiler, Gus had come away feeling unsettled, and he didn’t like where his thoughts strayed. Carlton had asked him if he knew any teens struggling with events that might act as a catalyst and although he’d shrugged it off, he couldn’t rest easy. After taking Jerry and Dave’s statements, Gus had sent the police artist to see if they could tease out a more detailed likeness of the teens spotted running away from the scene. Unfortunately, their descriptions had been too generic, leaving Gus frustrated that, once again, they’d missed out on a lead. They hadn’t even been able to agree on how many kids they’d seen.

Now, Alice stared at him, her head to one side, her over-sized black T-shirt falling off her shoulder, revealing a clavicle that protruded more than it should. Despite her obvious improvements, it made him all too aware that Al was still recovering. He rolled his shoulders, trying to get rid of the persistent tension that had settled in his upper body. ‘Tell you what?’

She pulled up a chair in front of his desk and rested her elbows on it, looking like a small elf with her short black hair and pointed chin. Gus settled back, knowing that whatever Alice wanted to discuss with him was going to be discussed... she had that stubborn glint in her eye and, to be honest, Gus was glad she was up to pinning him down, although he wished it was about something less sensitive.

‘Why you assumed the dead girl was Zarqa?’

Ah! He should’ve known that his momentary panic about the body in the park would not have escaped Alice. But how to answer? Since his chat with Carlton, things had become even more complicated. From terror at the idea of Zarqa being a victim, to concern that she might be the killer, he was in a muddle and unsure what to share with Alice.

Hell, he didn’t know what he thought himself. Could discovering that Mo wasn’t her real dad, and that he’d actually killed her biological one, trigger such extreme behaviour? Of course it could. Gus had witnessed people kill for a stick of chewing gum before now. Should he tell Alice that Zarqa was out and about the night of Pratab’s murder? About her running away from the vicinity of the crime scene? Should he tell her about the girl’s troublesome behaviour?



About the way she was with Mo? About the guilt he'd seen in her eyes when he questioned her at school?

What was he thinking? This was Zarqa. He was her godfather. The person who should have her back, guide her through life and help her be the best possible version of herself. Still, that little worm of uncertainty ate through his heart like it was a rotten apple.

Alice frowned. 'Gus? What are you not telling me?'

Gus studied his friend for a moment. A deep furrow sprawled over her brow, and doubt filled her eyes. She thought he was holding out on her. It wasn't that he didn't trust her. He trusted her completely. But he was concerned this would knock her off kilter. And, if he was being honest, the lingering guilt he harboured about doubting Alice's innocence when she was in prison made him loath to verbalise the possibility of Zarqa's complicity. Once it was out there, it couldn't be unsaid.

She raised her chin, her eyes sparking. 'Don't you dare patronise me with some shit like, 'oh it's nothing' or 'I was being a dick' – which of course you are being right now.'

Hands raised in mock surrender, Gus tutted. 'Okay, okay... but I'm going to need coffee.'

With a scalding drink in one hand and a cereal bar in the other, Gus wished he'd ordered a pizza earlier when Compo had headed down to Raja's. Truth was, he'd been too nauseous to eat and even his favourite keema achar pizza had been unappealing. His stomach growled, causing Alice to go over to the mini fridge where she fiddled about, readjusting the contents, before retrieving a bag of samosas she'd hidden there.

Minutes later, when the stale incident room smells were masked by spicy pastry ones, Gus was ready to fill Alice in.

When he'd finished, Alice exhaled. 'Fuck. I didn't realise I'd missed so much. I thought I was the only one with shit happening. I'm a selfish cow.'

She played with the samosa crumbs on her plate then, raising her head, stared right at him. 'The way I see it is this. You never once faltered in your confidence in my innocence... so why would you falter with Zarqa? You need to believe in her, just like you did in me.'

And there it was!

Shame flooded Gus' body. He couldn't meet her gaze, couldn't risk her seeing the truth in his eyes... that when she needed him most, he had failed her. Alice had the utmost faith in him, yet, when she needed his unquestioning support, he'd wavered. He was a shit friend and, much to his undying shame, it had taken Compo to make him face it.

But Alice had moved on. 'Talk to her. Do it tomorrow. Get this sorted out before it gets all awkward. She's a teenage girl. Course she's got secrets, just not the ones you think. Unsuitable

boyfriend or girlfriend, hormones, anger, worry over failing her exams, grief, guilt... all sorts of rubbish.' She looked at Gus, all serious. 'There's no end to the shit teenagers put themselves through.' She bit into another samosa, then waving the remains in the air sending flakes of pastry flying over his desk, she added, 'She doesn't need you being an arse. Be her friend, Gus. Yeah?'

Still avoiding her gaze, he nodded. But he wasn't convinced Alice was right. She'd not seen first-hand the changes in Zarqa. The way she'd avoided looking at him. The anger and hate that flashed from her eyes when he challenged her at school. Alice was basing her belief on her knowledge of the Zarqa of last summer. This Zarqa was an entirely different ball game. This Zarqa was filled with turmoil.

However, one thing was certain - he'd have to confront her, and that's what he'd do first thing in the morning, without Mo or Naila about to make things worse for all of them. Unable to quell the niggling worry that his delay might prove too late for some other poor kid, he threw his half-eaten samosa on his plate and looked at the images of Pratab Patel and Betsy Freeman on the wall. The Zarqa he knew, the one underneath this snarling, wounded girl, could not have done this... no way!

## CHAPTER 63

*Leo*

I could lie here for hours with the fan drowning out the chatter from downstairs. Can still hear the kids outside yelling and giggling, getting in my head. Feel like all I want is escape. Need something to take the edge off. It's all crap. I'm dying for a smoke, but soon as I move, everyone's on my case.

Clauuuus troooo effing phobiic, or what?

*He* cornered me again, chatting on and effing on about smoking and stuff. Bell end! Like he's such a goodie two shoes.

Really pissed off with those dirty old scumbags from last night. Scared us shitless for a minute, then we realised it was just the old mingers. Fuck! My heart hammered like shit. They fucked it up for us, though. Spoilt it. I hardly got the chance to savour it.

Should've knifed them too. That would've made everyone sit up and take note. Mind you, I can't get bloody again... not like the first time. They could've caught me all covered in blood. Only just got away with that. Good job they were too distracted. Zodiac was right though. It gets easier... so much easier.

Can't wait to see it. Hope it's up soon. Come on, Zodiac! Come on!

Ping!

At last!

Zodiac: It's up... enjoy!

Me: Brill! Later!

My hands shake as I scroll. Fucking yeah! There it is. Good old Zodiac!

Not as good as seeing it for real, but still good. Betsy fucking Freeman with a knife stuck in her stupid little neck... Sorted! As I watch, I try to remember the stink. That's one thing I didn't know before... how it would smell. The blood, that is. The coppery animal pong. Gets right up your nose.

I'm so engrossed in Zodiac's post that I almost don't hear him at my bedroom door. He's got it half open. Fuck! I slip the phone under the duvet and glare at him. 'What d'you want?'

He shrugs, eyes all over the place, looking for something. ‘Nothing, just checking on you, that’s all.’

He thinks I don’t see him sniffing the air. Well bully for you, matey, you won’t smell owt. I’ve swiped Mum’s expensive perfume to cover-up the smoke. I smile, pretending to be nice. I really want to stick a knife in his neck too. Still grinning like an idiot, I jump up off the bed. ‘Come on. Let’s go downstairs.’

## CHAPTER 64

‘Somebody’s popular tonight.’

Cursing, Gus lifted the receiver to Hardeep’s voice. ‘What you on about, Hardeep? I’m knackered. If it’s not urgent, put whoever it is off please.’

He didn’t want to field visitors right then. Patti had agreed to meet with him at last and he needed to prepare. She’d be here soon. It bothered him that she’d insisted on meeting at The Fort rather than at his home, but he’d agreed. The Fort was the only place she was guaranteed not to be photographed with him. Her reluctance to meet in public showed how badly she’d been affected by it all. On numerous occasions, since they’d gone viral, Gus had sensed strangers on the street gawping at him. Despite Alice’s reassurances that he was imagining things, the unease lingered. He understood why Patti wanted to minimize the risk of more incriminating snaps hitting social media.

However, Hardeep was in a playful mood. ‘I’ve no idea how urgent it is, but judging by the daggers they are giving each other, there’s a danger that World War Three might erupt... and I’m not insured for that.’

Two people? Gus didn’t have time for games. ‘For God’s sake! Who is it?’

‘You’re Mr Popular. Both your girlfriend and your ex-wife are demanding an audience with you.’

If the wall had been closer, Gus would have banged his head against it. His day had been shitty already. Patti and Gaby didn’t gel at the best of times, but when he had bridges to build with Patti and an escape tunnel to dig to avoid Gaby, the last thing he wanted was them in the same square footage. Why hadn’t Patti phoned to let him know she was on her way? He’d have met her at reception. As for Gaby? It was like her to assume she could flounce in and demand to see him. That woman had no boundaries whatsoever. Now they were in the same room. His heart plummeted. He’d make up with Patti with no distractions, but that bitch had fucked him over and created tension between them before they’d even met up. The story of his damn life. The desire to have Gaby escorted from the building burned inside him, yet out of respect for his sister, he couldn’t do that.

‘Well, what shall I tell them?’ The humour in Hardeep’s tone was inescapable.

‘Stop fucking gloating. Send Patti up first and ask my ex-wife to make an appointment for later in the week.’

That seemed the best solution. Keep them separate and send a clear message to both that Patti was his priority and Gaby nothing more than a gnat to be swiped away. He didn't want Gaby to realise there was any rancour between him and Patti. She was such a bitch, she'd just stir things up even more.

As he waited for Patti to arrive, beads of sweat dappled his forehead. This would be awkward enough without the added tension of Gaby rearing her ugly head. Quite rightly, Patti was angry about private moments being shared on the Internet. She had a duty of care to her students, staff and the school governors. Her priority had been mollifying them and dealing with the aftermath of going viral. Gus understood that. Still, her unavailability to talk had irked. It wasn't his fault a stalker had targeted him, and it wasn't his fault someone had uploaded the images. He'd hoped giving her some space would give them some perspective and make it easier for them to discuss it. Now he wondered what the outcome would be, considering Gaby's presence. Would she give him the big heave ho? Many murder detectives found it impossible to maintain a relationship because of work pressure... but this had gone beyond that. Someone had aired their private lives in the most public of forums and he wasn't sure Patti could forget that.

He knew he'd got off lightly. His colleagues, after a few light-hearted and borderline sexist 'Jack the lad' type jibes, which had resulted in Alice giving them a piece of her mind, had let it go. But God knows how Patti had fared. Her staff would have sympathised. He'd met most of them and it wasn't like she'd embarked on a *50 Shades of Grey* fling with a stranger. He hoped that the governors and parents would realise that Patti was the victim in all of this. As for her pupils? Gus had an almost pathological fear of dealing with large groups of kids, so he couldn't understand how Patti would cope. He could imagine their cruel snickers and sly looks... their pointed remarks. Hell, even Bashir's daughter had taunted him, hadn't she? On the one hand, he was desperate to see Patti, to set things right. On the other, the thought of what she would say petrified him.

A peremptory knock at the door signalled Patti's arrival. With a tentative smile, Gus got to his feet as she walked in. When he saw Gaby had followed her, it morphed into a frown. Patti's mouth was in a stern line and there wasn't a single iota of warmth in her face as she strode over to him. His heart plummeted. What had the bitch said to Patti?

He looked over Patti's shoulder and addressed his ex-wife, not bothering to hide his anger. 'I told *you* to make an appointment. I need to speak to Patti in private.'

But before Gaby could respond, Patti interjected in a calm voice. 'No need for that Gus.' Her shoulders slumped, and she shook her head. 'I wanted to apologise for overreacting and

blaming you for that fiasco with the photos. I know that wasn't your fault.' She shrugged and moved so that her body blocked Gaby from his view. 'But after what she's said, I realise everything is too complicated. I can't handle all the fallout at school and your unconventional family plans, Gus.'

Gus stepped towards her, but Patti extended her arm to stop him. 'We had something good, Gus, but I need distance from it... from us. I can't cope with all this melodrama.'

An immeasurable sadness engulfed Gus, immobilising him, stabbing him, as she uttered the words he'd been dreading.

'I'm sorry, Gus, but it's over... we're over. I have to take care of myself and...' she cast a glance at Gaby. 'I've no energy for this. We seem to be in different places with different priorities at the moment. I really am sorry.' And head held high, she walked out.

Gus took a step towards the door, but Gaby's amused drawl halted him. 'Well, well, well, that was some show.'

Gus had never hated her as much. Her obvious glee made him wonder how he could ever have loved someone so shallow... so cruel. How could Katie not see her harshness? With difficulty, he kept his tone flat as he pushed past her.

'I'll have an officer escort you from the building. We're done.'

He strode out of the room shouting, 'Patti!' The lift doors closed, cutting off his view of her anguished face. *I can't lose her. I just can't!*

Cursing Gaby, cursing Katie, and cursing the damn lift, he took to the stairs, taking them two at a time, using the banisters to swing round each floor and arrived at the main entrance to see Patti walking through the doors. He sped up, wrenched the doors open and pushing a couple of uniformed officers out of the way, he jumped the four steps, landing on the pavement.

Sweat pouring down his face, he yelled the only thing he could.

'I love you. *You're* the only person I want to have kids with.'

For a second, as she continued walking, her body rigid, he thought his words had landed on deaf ears. Then, she stopped and for long seconds stood with her back to Gus.

He faltered and held his breath. Should he run to her or wait? Before he'd decided, she turned around. Gus scoured her face.

Her lower lip trembled, and she blinked. Gus ran to her, ignoring the cheers from the officers and Hardeep who'd congregated on the steps. When he reached her, he put his arms round her and pulled her to him, breathing in the coconut fragrance in her hair, savouring the weight of her body moulded to his as all his doubts faded until, grinning, she pulled away from him...

'If that's a proposal, McGuire, then you really need to work on it.'

## CHAPTER 65

It's hard to escape them, even for a minute. I tried to check out Mita's room – see if she had owt, but it's hard. Everyone's acting all weird. I suppose that's what happens when your brother gets killed. Never thought this sort of thing would happen to us. All I want is some privacy... time to myself... space to breathe, to do summat normal, for once. I collected the business phone from the field earlier... just in case.

All this intense shit... prayers and tears ... it's too much. Can't use the Xbox, can't stay in my room, can't go out, can't do anything but fucking suffocate. It's like they think I'm not grieving if I'm not with them twenty-four seven. Course I am... but I need space. Don't want the entire family there all the time. Pratab'll be laughing his arse off up there. Can't stay away from *Facebook* either. All the shitty messages:

Fly with the angels, Pratab. I'll never forget you, love Priyanka xx :( I look at the stars and see you twinkling there, always in my heart, Iqrah xx
---

Who the fuck are these idiots? I wanted to change the settings on his page, but Mum and Dad like to scroll through it. They don't get that half of them hated Pratab or, worse still, didn't even know him. None of this is about my brother. None of this is him, not how he really was. He could be a right knobhead. Getting lasses to sext him and then he'd upload it so everyone could see their tits and fannies. Stealing and shit. Winding the other kids up. He was a tosser.

The tears come again. Wish they'd fucking stop as well. No way I can go downstairs now, not until I've got it together. Not that I want to go down. Fuck that, I've stuff to do and if I don't do it, all hell's gonna break loose. It's not like I have much choice in the matter. Can't even have a phone conversation – too many ears around, too many nosy aunties and cousins.

I lock myself in the en suite and stare at my reflection in the mirror. Shit, are those eyes mine? Big fucking bags and all red too. Look like a real stoner, I do. That's mad... fucking well mad. It wouldn't be so bad if I was stoned. Could do with some bud right now. Anything to help me drift off for a while... forget all this crap. I sit down on the toilet lid. Glad for the privacy. Before long though, someone will hammer on the door, demanding I tell them I'm okay, demanding I step up to the mark and take my responsibilities seriously. It's okay for my dad to fall apart, but me? No. I have to be brave, got to be strong... hold things together for everyone else.



Like I don't have my own junk going on. Incense drifts up the stairs and mingles with lemon bleach and Adidas Shower Gel, it's almost overpowering. The window's open and I can hear some kids in the back garden. They're playing with a football. To them, it's just one big party. They play outside while the grown-ups pray inside.

I pull my shoulders back. I've a job to do and only a short time to do it. So I pick up my phone and text.

Me: Need to dump the shit. Too busy here. Need to shift it quick. Not safe.

Come on! Come on! Reply! I stare at the screen, willing a response to miraculously appear. In the distance, someone's calling my name, getting louder as they come up the stairs. Fuck's sake, can't I have a minute to myself?

'Kiran, do you want some chai?'

Fucking chai. If I have to drink another cup of fucking chai, I'll explode. It's like there's some unwritten rule somewhere that says, if you lose a family member, you must drink your bodyweight in chai.

I'm on the point of screaming, *Leave Me A Fucking Lone* when I get a notification. Shit, now they're knocking on the door. Fuck's sake I could be having a crap or anything. Can't they leave me in peace.

'Are you okay, Kiran, beta?'

No, I've got a dose of the shits that'll keep me here until a week on Tuesday. Just leave me the fuck alone. My stomach's griping and I want to throw up. 'I'm fine, Auntie. Be down soon.'

'I've made some chai. Come and sit with us and have your tea. It's not good to be on your own. Your parents need you.'

Fuck's sake, chai, chai, and more fucking chai. Bet you're up there pissing yourself, Pratab. Looking down at us, drinking ourselves to death on chai while your body lies cold in a fucking morgue. Trust you to get yourself killed. Silly little fucking knob. Selfish little bastard.

I look at my phone.

Razor: Whassup dude? You owe us. Need to sell the stuff.

Me: Summat's come up. Need time.

Razor: No time. Dosh by tomorrow or else.

Me: Shit dude, my bruv got killed. You see it on the news?

Razor: Not my prob. Deal's a deal. It's pay day!

## CHAPTER 66

### *Zodiac*

**I**t's a relief to be outside now it's cooler. I enjoy being out in the dark. Makes me feel invisible. I get out easy enough, but Leo? Must be hard for Leo.

Me: Am here. Usual spot.

Leo: On my way. Pisces?

Me: No, just us. We need to talk.

Leo's street is always heaving, so I stick to the shadows. Stay invisible, that's my motto. All of a sudden, specky four eyes is there looking at me and I grin. *Funny!*

'That was quick.'

Leo walks further from the house. 'Yeah. But I can't be long. Pisces grounded or summat?'

I shrug. 'No idea. Pisces has become a liability, I think. Might have to deal with that. Stress that we need to hold it together. Can you sort it? Tomorrow, eh?'

Leo shrugs, lights up a cig and inhales.

The smoke irritates me, so I waft it away, but Leo grins and starts blowing rings like a pro.

'Fuck's sake, don't be a div.'

After a last drag, Leo shrugs and flicks the half smoked cig in an arc until it lands on the road. 'You're such a square sometimes, you know that, Zodiac?'

'Whatever. So?' I pause and study my friend. 'You're okay?'

Leo kicks the kerb, then laughs. 'Course I am. No worries. I'm sorted.' Then Leo looks at me. 'What you doing here?'

'Nothing. Needed fresh air.'

'You're not doing something without me, are you?'

'No, course not.' I punch Leo's arm and then say, 'But you'll never guess what happened in Lister Park today...'

## CHAPTER 67

### *Pisces*

**D**on't think I can do this anymore. I'm shitting it. I never meant for all this to happen. Zodiac's arranged a meeting, but it's only me and Leo so far. I'm sitting on the ground and my whole body's trembling. I've not stopped shaking since the other night. People are noticing. It's crap. They all think it's because of my exams, but fuck, if they knew.

It's like I'm shell-shocked or summat. Thought Leo would look as bad as me, but no. Cool as owt, that one, digging into the wooden floorboards with the knife. Every time I look at it, I see blood on the tip. Dun't matter how clean it looks now, that's all I can see... inside my head, like. To be honest, I'm surprised Leo's here. Thought it'd just be me and Zodiac. Not that I want Zodiac here either. Wish I hadn't come.

I peer round the room. All the bits of paper. All our plans. Photos with darts in them, lists and lists of the things they'd done to us. It all seemed so trivial then... a game. *Shit, wish my leg would stop jittering!* Didn't expect everything to get so serious. It all started as a prank. A way to get our own back on the idiots at school. Never meant it to get to this. Never thought we'd actually kill somebody. Thought Zodiac was chatting shit. Thought Leo was acting up too, full of swag, acting big in front of Zodiac.

Right up to the moment I pushed the knife in, I kept thinking we'd stop... that *I'd* stop, but I didn't. Why the fuck didn't I stop? Not even sure I regret that Betsy's dead. I hated her. Bitch got me in trouble, told tales, spied on me, and reported back to the teachers. I wish one of them had done it, though. Zodiac has all the photos... all of them, and that worries me. It's like I'm not in control.

'What are we going to do?' My voice sounds shaky... weak and Leo smirks, mouth curling up... pure evil. I flinch. That single look holds so much venom and an image of Leo pushing the knife into Pratab's neck flashes in my head. Bile fills my throat, acid stinging, and then there it is. I imagine Leo taking that knife and sticking it right into my neck. I swallow it down and instead of the bile, it's blood I taste... my blood. Shit, I'm losing it big time. Then it hits me. *This* is why I'm here. This is what it's all about. They've decided *I'm* next.

Leo's standing up now, tapping the blade on one hand. It's then I notice the glove. My gaze flicks to the list on the wall. My name's on it... in pencil at the bottom... and then, like an afterthought, Leo's scrawled next to it 'For Being A Bell End.'

I jump up, stumble a little. *Fucking leg!* Now that it's going to happen, I realise I don't want to die. I'm dizzy, sweat's dripping down my cheeks, the salt stinging where I've scratched my spots. The weird rasping sound is coming from me.

Leo's between me and the door and although I'm bigger, don't reckon much to my chances. I try edging closer to the exit, but Leo matches every move, like we're dancing or summat and all the time that evil grin leers at me. I'm bricking it big time now. This is it. I'm gonna end up dead in a dingy squat. Tears pour from my eyes, but I barely notice them.

Then what the fuck? Leo's laughing... and handing me the knife, handle first.

I look at it. What's going on? I smell my fear through the mildew.

'Take it, go on, take it!' Leo's thrusting it at me, grinning.

I want to slap the grin off that stupid face, but I'm too scared.

'Your face were a right picture then, tosser. What? Did you really think I were going to do you? It's not in the rules, is it? You know that. We can bring a name to add to the list, but we each have to agree that the person deserves it, yeah?'

Leo plops down onto a cushion and chucks the knife on top of the box we use as a table. 'Tosser!'

Then, with no warning the laughing sneer fades and Leo's eyes all sparky and dark, bore into me. I've edged closer to the door, but now I stop and listen as the words drop like ice through the heat.

'This was just a message from Zodiac. You need to man up. Got it?' Leo's hand darts towards the box and I freeze. Leo grabs something and throws it at me. I catch. Leo waves a hand at the list. 'Rub it off, you bell end. You're back on track now, yeah?'

My knees wobble, but I make it to the list and as I rub my name off the bottom, Leo strikes a match and smoke fills my nostrils. By the time I turn around, Leo's talking to Zodiac on the phone. 'Lesson delivered. Pisces is on track again. I'm heading home before they miss me.'

Alone in the headquarters, I wish that none of this had happened, and I was on my own in the park.

## CHAPTER 68

Gus hadn't slept well and even an overload of caffeine and the walk through the park to Zarqa's house wasn't improving his mood. He kept his head down as he walked and pondered the events of the previous evening. If Gus' rather public declaration of love had surprised Patti, it had also freaked him out. Yes, he'd thought about their relationship for the last few months and was well aware his feelings for Patti ran deep. Deeper than those he'd felt before. Still, there was that flutter of panic as the words left his lips. That second of wanting to suck them back in. Now, it was too late.

What was worse was that, Patti had taken it as a proposal of marriage and knowing how close he'd come to losing her, made it hard for him to backtrack. Yes, he loved her. Course he did. But settling down? That scared the shit out of him and he didn't know why. Maybe the whole Katie-Gaby debacle had upset him. His track record was pretty dire, yet if he was to have kids, Patti would be his only choice. That was why he'd said it. He could see how she'd misunderstood, but he'd been talking in relation to Gaby's bombshell.

The previous evening, Patti and Alice had opened a bottle of wine and gushed about wedding venues, engagement rings, and bridesmaids. He'd spent the evening with a rigor grin on his face, that neither of the two women noticed. Things were moving too fast, that was all. He needed space to process it. Trouble was, with a double murder to solve, time was one commodity he had little of.

This morning's visit to Zarqa was more to reassure him that his goddaughter had done nothing wrong, than anything else. Yet, he wasn't looking forward to the meeting. Zarqa was not pleasant to be around at the moment.

He knocked on the front door and stood with his back to it as he waited. Mo's story about Zarqa sobbing on the grass stuck in his mind and he looked at the corner of the garden, imagining her crying there. Footsteps approached and the door opened. He turned. When Zarqa saw him, her eyes flitted away, her annoyance obvious as her lips formed a sneer.

Not giving her the chance to slam the door in his face, Gus pushed by her. 'Glad I caught you. You on your own?'

She slammed it shut and slipped past him and stood blocking the hallway. 'You know now's not a great time for me. Exams.' She shrugged. 'Gotta study.'

Gus smiled and stepped closer, forcing her to move as he walked through to the kitchen. 'Pop the kettle on, squirt, we need to talk.'

In the doorway, Zarqa glowered as he sat down at the table. Mo and Naila's kitchen was as familiar to him as his own. The spicy chai aroma from breakfast time lingered and, as if to confirm this, he spotted the upended chai pot on the draining board. There were some new paintings and drawings pinned to the walls and he tilted his head trying to decipher one in a virulent shade of purple. It took him a moment to realise it was a painting of Alice's Mini. He spotted the family organiser that Naila had stuck by the fridge hoping to bring some order to their somewhat chaotic lifestyles. A smile tugged his lips as he remembered Mo moaning about his wife getting uppity when he forgot to fill in his section. The windowsill behind the sink had an army of potted plants. All the normal domesticity of his friend's home brought a pang of guilt at what he was about to do. He swallowed it down and smiled. 'Go on then. I'm gasping. Kettle on. Any biscuits?'

With an exaggerated sigh, Zarqa moved over to the kettle, checked it for water, and then flicked the switch. 'I don't need a pep talk, Gus. Dad, I mean Mo's put you up to this, hasn't he? But there's nowt you can do. I've had it with him.'

Still smiling, Gus let her wind down before saying, 'I'm not here about your dad.' He met her eyes. 'It's more serious than that and I think you know what it is.'

He didn't imagine her shaking hands or the slight quiver of her lips before she turned away and began getting mugs out of the cupboard. His heart plummeted. The disquiet from the other day when he spoke to her at school, returned. She was hiding something, and he wasn't leaving until he'd found out what. If she was implicated in these killings, she'd be punished, but he needed to find out from her first before going down the official route. He suspected Bashir would have his badge for this, but sometimes what was right had to supersede what was legal. Alice believed in Zarqa and so would he. Maybe she had nothing to do with this... but what was she concealing, then?

She plonked a mug of coffee in front of him, slopping it onto the wooden surface and followed that with a packet of digestives that landed with similar force. Gus kept his smile intact. This was going to be bad enough without him losing his temper. By forcing himself to relax, he kept his anger simmering beneath the surface. Why was she such a stubborn cow bag?

She tossed her phone down and slouched into a seat opposite him. Despite her bravado, fear lurked in her eyes. Gus wanted to pick her up and cuddle her. Tell her everything would be all right, like he used to when she was a kid. She was in pain. Every tense muscle in her body, every tight-lipped smile, every shadow in her eyes, told him that.

She pulled her foot onto the chair, knee tucked into her chest, and her arms wrapped round her shin, and rested her chin on her knee. Gus had interviewed enough people to realise that

she was erecting a physical barrier between them. Her mobile vibrated and bounced across the surface. Its screen lit and the name Jo Jo danced across it. She snatched it up, her face flushed as she dismissed the call. Gus wondered why that phone call had warranted such a flustered reaction... boyfriend? Partner in crime?

Not sure where to start, he jumped right in. 'You know shit's been happening in the city, Zarqa, and I'm not messing you about. You were spotted near a crime scene and, as a favour to you and your parents, I'm here asking you about it in private instead of dragging you up to The Fort. Who were you with and what were you doing on Sunday night?'

She blinked, her gaze flitting round the kitchen as if looking for an escape route. There was none. Gus lifted his cup and sipped the coffee. It was only lukewarm. Little bitch had only half boiled the kettle. Pretending not to notice, he sipped it, watching her expression the entire time. Eyes still on her face, he opened the biscuit packet, took one out, dunked it, and put it in his mouth. These were the sort of intimidation techniques he used on hardened criminals and, here he was, using them on his goddaughter. Sometimes life was shit. 'I'm waiting, Zarq. I'm not leaving until I've had a reply.'

She shrugged. 'Was out walking. Couldn't stand the atmosphere here any longer.'

Her eyes were all over the place. Her knuckles, clasped round her leg, were almost white.

'On your own?'

'Yeah.'

Now her knee was shaking. Gus took a punt. 'Not with Jo Jo, were you?'

Her entire body stilled. Her eyes widened, and she swallowed. 'No. Course not. Why would I be with that loser? I were on my own, walking like I told you.'

Fuck! Zarqa was a crap liar. But, at least that chance phone call had given him a name. One that had elicited a reaction. Whoever this Jo Jo was, he, or she, he supposed, was a person of interest.

He narrowed his eyes, pushed his mug to the side and leaned on the table before spitting his next words right into her face. 'You were seen, Zarqa. You and this Jo Jo.'

She recoiled and as she unclasped her hands, her leg fell back to the floor. She scraped her chair across the kitchen floor. Her chest heaving and her darting eyes filled with tears. 'He'd nowt to do with it. It were all my idea. He wasn't even there.'

Her response punched Gus in the gut. He'd hoped she'd prove his suspicions wrong, but here she was admitting to it. He wanted to exhale, but he knew he had to keep the pressure up. He had to find out everything. His shoulders ached with the strain of keeping them relaxed. What the hell would he tell Mo and Naila? This would break their hearts. As he looked at



Zarqa, the angry teenager was replaced by a frightened vulnerable girl... still he had to know everything. It was the only way he could help her... Then his phone rang. Shit!

He snatched it up and growled down the line. 'I'm busy, be quick.'

Compo hesitated before responding. 'Got a few hits on those drone part orders, Gus. One's a man in his seventies so he's discounted on account of the fact he's on oxygen for emphysema and housebound. The second is a technology teacher at a school in Leeds, and the third is a lad from Belle Hill Estate... a lad called...'

Still focussed on Zarqa, Gus, sensing the inevitability of it all, said, 'Jo Jo?'

'How d'you know that? Psychic or summat?'

'Yeah, something like that. Alert Alice, we'll go together to bring him in. I've got another suspect here. We'll need responsible adults in place. Two child interview rooms and bring Carlton in. I want his input.'

What had happened to the sweet beautiful girl he'd watched grow up? The full implication of her admission robbed him of breath. It was hard to accept that Zarqa had not only murdered her friends but also stalked and humiliated him. How had she come to hate him so much? When had she become so tortured?

Zarqa shook, her shoulders quivering. Gus strode over to her and put his arms round her. This was the shittiest situation he'd ever been in. How the hell would Mo and Naila ever recover from this? And what would the rest of Zarqa's life be like? He had so many questions for her, but they would have to wait till they returned to The Fort. It wouldn't be him who questioned her. He was too invested in the family. However, he'd make damn sure they treated her respectfully.

'We tracked the drones, Zarqa. We'll take you down to the station. I'll phone your parents. When we we reach The Fort, you must tell the whole truth. You understand me? Everything! It's the only way forward for you.'

## CHAPTER 69

Razor: Expecting my dosh today, brown boy. No Excuses!

Me: FFS Razor. My brother's been killed. Give me a break. I don't have the money. You can have the goods back.

Razor: Deal's a deal, tosser. Money, Money, Money... you know the score.

2 p.m.

**F**uck! What am I going to do? What the hell am I going to do? There's one thing I could do, but that'd take a bit of planning and I'm not sure I can. Not with the house so busy. Glad to be on my own for once, I lean against the wall. It's so claustrophobic indoors. Maybe I should just ignore Razor. What's he gonna do? I mean, would he really carry out his threats? Who am I kidding? Course he would, guy's a bloody psycho, in't he? Why the hell did I let Pratab get me involved in all this crap. Another notification and, heart hammering I open it. Razor's sent an image. I open it and almost vomit. The sick fuck's sent a screenshot of Pratab with the knife in his neck.

I jump a mile when Mita speaks. Why does she always creep about like that?

'Who's that, Kiran? One of your homies?' Her voice is all smug and know it all.

'Piss off, Mita. None of your business. Where have you been? Mum's been looking for you. The Brahmin's coming soon, and she wants you here.'

'Aw, poor little Kiran, all upset... got yourself in too deep, have you?'

I want to slap her, but now's not the time. If she goes in and distracts Mum for a bit, I could access Pratab's stash of money. It's the only chance I have. Just hope Dad's downstairs too. I wait a few minutes until Mita's indoors, then I follow her, slipping past the living room, where I can hear her talking to Mum and I head straight upstairs. When I first found Pratab stashing his drug money in the gap at the bottom of Mum's wardrobe, I thought it was a great hiding place. Mum would never think to search there. We all knew she did checks in our rooms for weed and stuff and we'd all got wise. I kept mine in the field opposite, don't know where Mita keeps hers, and Pratab used the cistern in his en suite for drugs and Mum's wardrobe for the cash.

I hesitate outside the door. The aunties have been putting their saris on in front of the big mirrors, going in and out like they own the joint. I'll have to be quick. Pushing it open, I listen. The coast's clear and there's no one in the hallway either. I nip in, shutting the door behind me and straight over to the wardrobe. Pratab's stash is on the right, under all her shoe boxes. How

many shoes does she need? I prise it up with my nails and peer into the gap. Nothing! The entire lot has gone. Three hundred quid... disappeared, just like that! It can't be. I stretch my hand to the back, but no... nothing! The door opens and I fling the boxes back in and am closing the wardrobe when I hear Mita's smarmy voice.

'What you looking for, Kiran?'

Fucking little bitch beat me to it! What am I gonna do now?

## CHAPTER 70

Of course, Jo Jo tried to run. Gus was expecting it and ran after him, elbowing aside the bruiser who'd been loitering outside Jo Jo's house. The lad had gangster written all over him and it gave Gus pleasure to have an excuse to land one in his belly. Who knew why he was staking out Jo Jo's home. Probably some gang related reason or other.

Jo Jo was faster than Gus had expected, as he took off down the street and further into the estate. Aware of the two uniformed officers pounding the concrete after him, Gus focussed on the lad in front. The officers, with their kit, carried an extra twenty pounds, which although it offered them protection close up, it also slowed them down. Gus' stab vest was heavy, but he hadn't bothered with all the other paraphernalia and he wondered how the hell they managed in this heat.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gus had spotted a red-haired freckled face peering out from behind the lad before he'd taken off. Gus presumed Alice had remained with the little girl and now her plaintive cries followed him, getting fainter as he gained on her brother. He'd summoned a last spurt to get within tackling distance of the lad, when Jo Jo ground to a halt, bent over, hands on knees wheezing like a fifty-a-day man. Droplets of sweat dripped from the lad's fringe onto the pavement as he dragged air in through his mouth.

As he drew level, Gus, remained alert, ready to dart after him, if he ran off again, but Jo Jo glanced up and scowled. 'You can take me in. I've had enough.'

Gus studied him. The lad oozed discomfort. His face contorted in anguish, his lower lip trembling. Gus, recognising the lad had given up, raised a hand to stay the officers who had just arrived. Bent over and gasping, Jo Jo spoke, 'Anything'll be better than having to sell my soul to Goyley and his boss.' He lifted his chin in an infinitesimal gesture towards the thug who Gus had elbowed earlier. Gus realised that Jo Jo was using his lowered head to impart this information without being seen. 'Got you. One of Razor McCarthy's thugs or Hammerhead's?'

Still bent over, Jo Jo said, 'Razor's.'

Gus considered this for a moment. Jo Jo seemed more concerned about McCarthy than about being arrested and Gus wasn't sure what that implied. 'Reckon we don't need the cuffs, eh?' Gus linked his arm through the boy's and led him towards his house, the officers trailing behind.

A crowd had gathered in the street. Nothing like a police presence to bring folk crawling outside. McCarthy's thug stood towards the rear, maintaining a watchful eye on proceedings.

His phone was glued to his ear and as they got closer, Gus noticed his lips move. More than likely keeping his boss in the loop. Gus focussed on Jo Jo but directed his next words to the two officers. ‘Go over and hassle that thug, will you? See if he’s carrying anything. He tried to obstruct me when I was chasing Jo Jo. That’s a good enough excuse to hold him for a while.’

Leaving the officers to it, Gus guided Jo Jo through his front door. After closing it behind them, they made their way through to the kitchen where Gus could hear Alice talking. As soon as they walked in, the little girl jumped to her feet, her face tear streaked, and ran to her brother. ‘Jo Jo, what’s going on? Why did you run off? I was scared.’

Jo Jo lifted her up and hugged her close. ‘It’s fine, Jessie, everything’s fine. Just got to help these people for a while, that’s all. Someone will take care of you.’

Gus frowned. The lad’s ready acceptance that they would take him away seemed to confirm his guilt. Watching the brother and sister together, reminded Gus of his relationship with his own sister albeit that Katie was the older sibling. A glance round the kitchen, showed that although basic with few homely touches, it was clean. Similar to Mo’s, they’d covered the walls with a child’s colourful artwork. However, damp stains escaped from beneath the paintings and peeling wallpaper. The fridge made a peculiar sound that told Gus it was on its way out. String and gaffer tape held one of the mismatched kitchen chairs in place.

Voice gentle, Alice smiled at the little girl. ‘Where are your parents, Jessie?’

Jo Jo ruffled his sister’s hair and made an admirable attempt at keeping his tone level. ‘It’s just me mam. She’s not right well. Please don’t tell her what I’ve been doing. It’ll kill her.’

As if on cue, a faint voice drifted downstairs. ‘Jo Jo. What’s happening? What’s all the noise?’

The lad glanced up at the ceiling, before blinking, his gaze settled on Gus.

‘Your mum?’ Gus asked.

Jo Jo repeated his earlier words. ‘She’s not well. She won’t be able to cope with this. What’s gonna happen to her... and Jessie?’

After a shared glance with Gus, Alice left the room and went upstairs. Jessie, thumb in her mouth gazed up at her brother, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. Jo Jo smiled at her. ‘It’ll be all right, Jess, you’ll see.’

But the tears rolled down Jessie’s cheeks. This was so unfair. Gus had seen it before. It didn’t take a genius to realise what the outcome of all of this would be. Social services would become involved and this family would be obliterated. Gus wasn’t sure what would be best, but looking at the siblings together, he was certain that the repercussions for both kids would

be far reaching. When Alice returned, she switched the kettle on and said, ‘I think we could all do with some tea. Pop for you, Jessie?’

Jessie looked to her brother for permission, before nodding and hiding her face in his shoulder once more. Alice made the pop and placed it beside her. With a smile at the boy, Alice took her phone out of her pocket. ‘Need to make a call. I’ll do it outside.’

Jo Jo, eyes downcast, nodded. He’d no fight left in him and Gus could see the guilt rolling off him. Before following Alice into the hallway, he squeezed the lad’s shoulder. There was a backdoor in the kitchen, but the lad wouldn’t use it.

Out of earshot, the door closed, Alice ran her hand over her face and exhaled. Her expression was dark and her entire body bristled. ‘This is fucking shit, Gus. Fucking shit. That kid’s been looking after his invalid mum and his sister for months now. The mum says the carer who’s supposed to come daily, blobs most of the time and they’re too scared to complain in case they take Jo Jo and Jessie away. Now, I’ll have to phone social services and attempt to be civil. This shouldn’t be happening. Not in this day and age.’

Gus swallowed. He’d seen the look on Jo Jo’s face before. When he’d been a kid, his friend, Greg, had often carried the same haunted expression – despair and fear and hatred all rolled into one. It wasn’t until adulthood that Gus had understood how bad things had been for Greg. Society had let him down and thirty years later, it was still letting families like this down. Although Gus wanted nothing more than to rant and rave and punch a wall, he took a deep breath instead. ‘We need to do our job, Alice. They will take Jessie into foster care and the mum will go to hospital. You *know* that’s what has to happen. Neither of them is safe here. At least now they’ll be looked after.’

‘But they’ll split them up.’ She spat the words at him.

‘Yeah, they will. But they’ll be safe. Now if you can’t hold it together, leave. Go for a walk, calm yourself. This family needs us to be professional.’ Her body still rigid, he added ‘Maybe you returned to work too soon, Al. Maybe you need more time.’

For a moment, he thought she might turn on her heel and walk out or punch him. Either was a distinct possibility, but she did neither. She straightened her spine and gave a curt nod. ‘I’ll be back once I’ve made the call.’

He watched her walk down the hallway, rigid and fragile all at once. She stopped when she reached the door and said, ‘You should ask him for the key to the padlocked bedroom before they take him away.’

## CHAPTER 71

Can't bear this. Can't bear to see Mum and Mo, their faces all worried and underneath all of that they'll hate me. I know they will. How could they not? Anyway, I made Uncle Gus promise not to let them in. He wasn't happy about it, but I insisted. Now I've got a stuck-up smiley social worker, who probably knows my mum and is more than likely laughing up her sleeve at this turn of events; Middle class kid gone wrong... middle class *Pakistani* kid gone wrong. Shit! Everything's scary all of a sudden. I don't know what to do with myself, don't know what to say. So I'll say nothing.

I've landed Jo Jo in it and that's the last thing I wanted. Jo Jo's had my back for so long. He doesn't deserve any of this. He's got responsibilities... he's not like me. Jo Jo has his mum and Jessie to think of, so why did I drag him into this shit? That's where Gus has gone... to bring Jo Jo in. I've really messed up.

I pull my knees up to my chest, my heels balancing on the edge of the soft chair and catch the frown from the social worker. Sod her! Ms Bloody Perfect. If I'm gonna end up in the nick, then I'll sit how the hell I like. I glare at her, daring her to say something, but her frown goes and a slight smile tugs at her lips. Why is she just sitting there, arms crossed and knees together? Bet that dress she's wearing isn't Armani... what's it Jo Jo calls it...? ah, yeah Primani. Yeah, the stuck-up cow's all cheap clothes and attitude.

The door bursts open and my mum, followed by Mo and a police officer, are there. Mum pulls me into her arms, her perfume embracing me like invisible armour. I want to give in and let them stay, share my pain with them. But then I jerk back, pushing her away and glare at the social worker. She's on her feet, glancing between the three of us and the officer. She steps between the officer and my parents and puts her arm round mum. 'Naila!'

So, she knows my mum!

'You can't be here. You know that.'

Mum looks at me, her tear-stained face scrunched up, her eyes pleading, and I want nothing more than to say, 'Stay, Mum, please stay.' But I can't. I flick a quick glance at Mo. He's so skinny. His chin quivers, and I know he wants to hug me.

I straighten up and although I'm bleeding inside, I pull on a scowl and make my voice cold as ice. 'Get them away from me. Get them out of here.'

The social worker leads my mum out. Something in my stomach squirms as Mum's sobs cut through me, but it's Mo who breaks my heart. As the officer guides him from the room, he

turns back, not bothering to hide his tears. 'No matter what you've done, Zarqa, I'll always love you. You're my daughter... now and forever. I love you.'

As the door slams behind them, I keep breathing. How can I still be breathing when I'm dead inside?

'I love you too, Dad,' I mumble, but it's too little, too late. I turn and sit down again, keeping my feet on the floor this time.



## CHAPTER 72

Gus found the key on the door ledge where Jo Jo had told them to look.

He'd walked up the worn stair carpet after Sid and his team, with Alice trailing behind. They were already suited and booted. The house, although not spotless, wasn't filthy, like some houses they'd had the pleasure of searching. The wallpaper was shabby and marked. There was a faint damp smell, overlaid by lemon disinfectant. Jo Jo had tried his best to keep things tidy and clean.

A quick glance into a single room saw a made bed, with a pink princess duvet and a bundle of soft toys spilling all over the pillow. Jessie had chosen two toys to take with her and, sobbing into them, she allowed the social worker to lead her to the waiting car. Alice had turned and returned to the house, her anguish at the desperate situation resonating with Gus. When the officer escorted Jo Jo to the police car, Jessie had clung to him like a limpet, until he said, 'You gotta be a big girl, Jess. You gotta keep an eye on Mam. I'll come visit you soon as I can.'

Her lower lip had wobbled, but she'd done as her brother asked, which only made the separation of mother and child worse. Jo Jo's mum, almost too weak to speak, tried her best to reassure her daughter, but Gus could tell she was resigned to losing both her children. When the paramedics arrived, they'd lifted her emaciated frame onto the gurney with little effort. Gus cringed at the sight of her skeletal frame as they wheeled her down the path, a drip attached to feed her fluids.

'She going to be okay?' As the words left his lips, he realised how stupid they were. Even with the right care, their mum was in for a long and painful recuperation. If she made it all. He hoped that worry over Jo Jo wouldn't impact on her recovery, but deep down he knew it would. If there was one thing he was sure of, it was that this little family loved each other.

Sid unlocked the padlock, bagged both the lock and the key, and pushed the door open while Gus stood aside to allow a lanky CSI, who was carrying the evidence storage box, to enter.

Jo Jo's bedroom was unlike any other teenage boy's room Gus had ever seen. He'd divided it into two distinct areas. The wall behind the headboard was painted black and his bedding was a deep purple. Next to a shelving unit containing eight different sized and shaped drones stood a long pasting table that was used as a workbench. Spread along it were Jo Jo's tools;

electrical screwdrivers, pliers, spanners. Battery casings and a selection of drone parts and controllers took up the rest of the space, with an extendable spotlight positioned at one end.

If Gus had needed convincing that Jo Jo was involved in the drone activity, it was here, laid out on a platter for him. So why did that knowledge deflate him? He supposed he'd taken a liking to the lad. Wanted to trust in his innocence. Although there was no proof that Zarqa and Jo Jo were responsible for both stalking him and the murders, evidence was piling up. He struggled with the idea that Zarqa had stalked him. Sure, she was angry with Mo, but that didn't explain why she would send him anonymous letters? Until recently, they'd been close and the possibility that Zarqa had been so cruel to him hurt. His head pounded as he tried to make sense of everything. Carlton was convinced the stalking and murders were linked, but something told Gus that nothing was certain... not yet, anyway. Alice's words about trusting Zarqa pulsed in his brain. Still, doubt wormed through his good intentions. He wavered between believing in her innocence and wondering just how much she was hiding. Lost in his muddled musings, he studied the array of drone paraphernalia. How the hell did the lad afford all this stuff?

On a dresser at the foot of the bed stood a large screen. It was hooked up to a smaller laptop with a webcam. Gus' gaze drifted to the two spotlights directed towards the bed. It was then he noticed the handcuffs attached to the bedpost. Spread out on another surface lay sex toys ranging from butt plugs to dildos and cock-rings of every imaginable design. Large bottles of oil and lubricant stood among tissue boxes, wet wipes, and antibacterial wipes... Gus' stomach lurched... there was his answer. The lad was webcamming to make ends meet and to fund his DIY drone hobby.

Gus wanted to smash the objects to the floor. Jo Jo was just a kid and no kid should have to do this. He often witnessed how other people lived, and learned of the inequity and injustice that led them to desperate acts and no matter how hard he tried to improve things, Gus would never reach the bottom of the cesspool. Heavy-limbed and heavy-hearted, he turned to leave the room. Was Jo Jo a cold-blooded killer? Gus couldn't help but feel sorry for the lad and frustrated with the situation he found himself in. 'Get that PC and all the drone stuff to Compo pronto. I'll take his phone with me.'

## CHAPTER 73

This was the longest Thursday Gus had ever endured. Every passing minute added a further twist to the toxic coil in his gut. The conversation with Mo and Naila earlier had been torture. He'd noticed streaks of grey running through his friend's hair, but what worried him most was Mo's glazed expression and the way he stood back, his body so tense that Gus thought it would snap and Mo would end up a rubble of bones at his feet. The last time Gus had witnessed an expression like that was when Alice was arrested. He wanted to hug Mo and tell him everything would be all right. That he'd get Zarqa out of there no matter what, but he couldn't.

Naila had grudgingly given them permission to search Zarqa's room. Her eyes, like a laser, had pierced Gus' heart. Her tone was accusing. 'My daughter has done nothing wrong, Gus. You, of all people, should know that. I hope you're ashamed of yourself.'

Mo had tried to reason with her, saying, 'Gus is on our side, Naila. He's our friend. He's Zarqa's godfather.'

But Naila had turned on Mo, her teeth bared. 'If he was on our side, he wouldn't have accused his goddaughter of committing a crime, would he?' She spun to face Gus, eyes flashing, 'My daughter is not a criminal, so just you get the fuck out of my sight. You're a disgrace... an absolute disgrace.'

Her words stung, and Gus was ashamed... ashamed and angry and confused. He'd followed the evidence. Zarqa had admitted culpability, said it had all been her idea... he didn't know what else he could've done, yet the guilt was threatening to strangle him. And now he'd been excluded from the interview process because of his relationship with Zarqa. He wanted to ask Zarqa to confide in him, but not here in an interview room. If only he could take her to the park. They could sit in a quiet spot with an ice cream and she'd tell him everything. He wished he could turn back time till before any of this had happened. But none of that was an option.

'Naila, she's only being questioned. We've not charged her, but she knows something about the night of Pratab Patel's murder and Jo Jo admitted that he and Zarqa used his drones to commit a crime. All we're doing is interviewing her. That's all. If she tells the truth, it will be better for her.' The glare Naila threw at him as she stormed off told him she was unconvinced.

Carlton was insistent that the stalking and murders were related, which made him wonder how many crimes Zarqa had committed. They'd found nothing of consequence in her room, bar some weed and a few spray cans. Zarqa was an artist in the making, so the cans weren't

unusual. Sid had suggested she could have access to somewhere else that may hold incriminating evidence and Sebastian Carlton had agreed, suggesting that if Jo Jo and Zarqa were working together, they could keep incriminating stuff like burner phones elsewhere. But they didn't know where that might be.

Now, reduced to observing through a screen, Gus' heart hammered, his breath was rancid, and his head throbbed. The smell of Sebastian Carlton's aftershave was forcing him to take shallow breaths through his mouth and he could feel his chest tighten. He hoped he'd be able to control himself... at least for a while longer.

Alice entered and sat down opposite Zarqa, who had her social worker by her side. With a small smile, Alice introduced those present for the video and began. 'Zarqa, you've not been charged, and you have declined a solicitor, is that right?'

'Yes.' Zarqa glanced at the social worker, who smiled reassuringly.

'You understand why you're here?'

Zarqa nodded, and Alice reminded her she needed to speak.

'Yes, I did it.' Her response was barely a whisper.

'What did you do, Zarqa?'

The girl studied her fingernails. 'I spray-painted the mosque.'

Alice's mouth fell open, and she took a quick sideways glance at the camera. 'You spray-painted the mosque?'

With a puckered brow, Carlton looked at Gus. 'Didn't see that one coming, did you?'

Gus shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. 'I thought....' He cast his mind back. He'd seen Jo Jo's name flash on her phone and taken a punt. She admitted doing 'it', said Jo Jo hadn't been there. Then all the drone stuff found in Jo Jo's room had convinced him of their involvement in stalking him. The pulse at his temple throbbed and his vision blurred as he focussed on Alice's response.

'Okay, you spray-painted the mosque. Who was with you?'

'Nobody. Did it on my own.'

Alice leaned closer, a small smile on her lips. 'You want to add something, Zarqa? It'll be better for you if you tell us everything at once. You know, anything of interest to the police. Any other crimes...'

Sniffing, Zarqa's eyes flicked up and to the left. Then, wiping the back of her hand over her nose, she nodded. 'I've got some weed.'

Gus tried to process what had just occurred. Weed... weed and spray-painting a mosque. Was that all she'd done? Okay, it had been a pretty vile slogan, and she'd be punished for it,

but... Then he remembered Jo Jo and the drones, and he knew things were never that easy. Zarqa could still be a barefaced liar. He'd seen it before, kids looking them straight in the eye and lying. They were masters of the art of deceiving adults. He placed a hand on the mirror, wishing he could see right into Zarqa's mind.

Then from nowhere, the Alice and Zarqa in the interview room shimmered, black dots punctuated his vision and Gus blinked. He grabbed the chair back and cursed. Why did this have to happen now? Sweat dappled his brow and then his chest shrivelled into a tight knot and his breath came in heaving pants. Staggering as dizziness overcame him, he struggled to reach the door, banging into furniture, knocking past Carlton. Fuck! Vomit rose, stinging his nostrils and throat. Blindly, he sought to locate a receptacle... anything...

A hand was on his back, firm and soothing. Someone thrust a bin under his chin. 'I've got you, Gus. I've got you. Slow breaths now... slow and easy.'

Vomit splattered into the bin and Gus was, at once, embarrassed and grateful for Sebastian Carlton's calming presence. He owed him big time.

## CHAPTER 74

Compo was in his element doing all things techie and was excited to get cracking, dissecting every aspect of Jo Jo's computer and mobile. He'd already finished with Zarqa's, which had revealed little. There were flurries of unanswered texts from Mo and Naila to her, and many to Jo Jo, but apart from that, Zarqa's online presence was minimal. The only Facebook post she'd done recently was to Betsy Freeman's wall. She dedicated her Instagram to her artwork, with few personal images. He settled down, headphones on, The Kinks' 'Waterloo Sunset' blaring on repeat and a supply of snacks and drinks within reach.

He started with the phone because that was the easiest thing to do. It was a battered old Nokia with a cracked screen and limited data. Jo Jo had given permission for it to be accessed and Compo sifted through his social media accounts. *Instagram* and *Facebook* were Jo Jo's favourites, although on *Facebook* he was a bit of a lurker rather than an active *Facebooker*. He had a modest number of *Instagram* followers, which surprised Compo. He was used to seeing thousands on a youngster's account, but Jo Jo, it seemed, wasn't your typical selfie king. On *Instagram*, more of Jo Jo's interests became apparent. He followed some drone enthusiasts and sometimes posted photos of a drone he'd modified.

When going through the lad's texts, Compo noted that Jo Jo and Zarqa were frequent communicators. After sifting through them, Compo discovered nothing more incriminating than a few cryptic messages to bring 'it' and an arrangement to meet up. He forwarded them to the team along with the communications leading up to that date, all of which appeared innocent enough. After they'd sprayed the mosque, Zarqa had contacted Jo Jo, but he'd shut her down, pronto.

However, he discovered a few texts from an anonymous sender. They were infrequent, yet the most recent was sent earlier this week. When he opened them, Compo soon realised that someone was blackmailing Jo Jo. This matched the information the lad had given Gus, and the attachment confirmed that he was being extorted for his webcamming activities. Bastards! Compo's anger soared as he watched the footage. That poor lad, barely sixteen! Although Jo Jo's online activity could never be eradicated, Compo vowed to bury it as deep as possible and to drill through the layers of encryption until he found the perverts managing the site. For now, though, he focussed on the task at hand. The blackmailer didn't ask Jo Jo for money, but requested he adapt a very specific drone. A drone capable of capturing the images of Patti and

Gus. Compo's heart rate increased. It was likely the texter used a burner phone, but Compo would continue to probe.

There was nothing more he could learn, so he printed copies of the threatening communications and set up a triangulation request to locate where the sender was when they sent the text. Almost immediately, the information that it was unregistered bounced back. Still, if he could narrow down its location, it may come in useful further down the line.

The next step was Jo Jo's hard drive. Compo had seen the photos of the lad's room and was aware that some of the content would be disturbing. An hour into it and Compo felt sick. Jo Jo had a Bitcoin account, which allowed the lad to finance his drone interest, but, as Compo went deeper, he discovered the full extent of Jo Jo's exploitation. Images of the boy performing various sex acts using a variety of sex toys had gone viral on the Dark Web.

As he ventured into the depths of the Dark Web, Compo turned and flung his half-eaten sandwich in the bin. Appetite lost, he switched his music – sunsets had no place in this abyss - to 'People are Strange' by The Doors. Somehow, in Compo's mind, Jo Jo had become the tortured soul of Jim Morrison and the discord of the song suited his mood. As he delved deeper beneath the surface, he discovered how extensive the tangled network of people accessing Jo Jo's web services was. What was worse was that the lad's Dark Web controller was using remote access technology to record *all* the boy's activities, not only the ones he was being paid for.

Watching Jo Jo fling himself onto his bed and punch his pillow before covering his face with it as he sobbed made Compo's skin crawl and the insidious comments from the voyeuristic bottom feeders compounded this.

<p>Buttcomber: A tub of Vaseline and I'll give the lad something to cry over... hell, never mind the Vaseline. I'd go bareback on him.</p> <p>Freshbaiter: Don't cha love it when they cry? Bet he's ready for the big boys.</p>
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The comments during Jo Jo's 'shows' were offensive, and Compo was relieved the lad wouldn't see those. His only regret was that in order to monitor the low lives that skulked beneath the surface, Compo would have to leave these forums live until the Vice Department could monitor them. The worst part was when Compo unearthed a clip of Jessie, hair all mussed, in her pyjamas and innocence written all over her face, as she looked at someone just out of shot. She held a butt plug and nipple clamps in her hands. The five second image had

gone viral. Users with names like *Cumraider* and *Vio-hate-her* were bidding for more footage of Jessie. As nausea crept up Compo's throat, he thought he'd never eat again. Those sicko predators were offering tens of thousands of pounds in exchange for that little girl's innocence.

It wasn't so long ago that Compo had been Jo Jo's age and in similar circumstances. He knew how hard it was to survive when you were the kid on the outside looking in. Jo Jo hardly had a chance, yet here he was doing whatever he had to, to keep afloat... to hold his little family together. If there was even the slightest possibility of finding evidence in the lad's devices to exonerate Jo Jo then Compo would unearth it.

Gus came in and Compo stood, glad to be away from his computer. His skin was itchy and despite realising it was a reaction to the filth he'd just sifted through, Compo couldn't shake the unclean feeling. He'd shower soon. 'I've uncovered loads of stuff, Gus, but nowt that implicates the lad in those murders. He wasn't friends or in contact with either of the victims on social media. There's nothing at all, unless he had another device. I found zero evidence to link him to anything other than the mosque graffiti, other than that he bought drones and drone parts.'

Although this didn't move their murder investigation forward, it was good news for the boy. Gus slapped Compo on the back. 'Good work, Comps. What did you find out about Jo Jo's drones?'

'None of those seized from Jo Jo's house could grip a mobile phone and angle it to take those images of you and Patti. Sid's been looking into that, but his initial report on the seized equipment lists a jammer mechanism. That would be what Jo Jo used to jam the mosque cameras. Two of his drones could have been adapted for that purpose.'

Gus nodded. 'We found nowhere else he could keep them. Both his and Zarqa's school lockers were clear. Jo Jo admits to building two drones for an anonymous blackmailer and accepts that his fingerprints will be all over them. Perhaps he's being set up as the fall guy. We need to locate the blackmailer and the drones.'

Compo nodded. 'I have evidence supporting Jo Jo's blackmail claims and I'm about to study the specs and capabilities of the ones he built. That will firm up evidence against our blackmailer. If I pinpoint the phone's location when the texts were sent, it might provide a lead. At the very least, the fact that a third party anonymously requested modified drones is incriminating.'

Compo had heard from Carlton about Gus' panic attack and was pleased to see his boss smile, however briefly. 'You're brill, Comps, you know that?'



To hide his pleasure, Compo turned to his workstation with a shrug. ‘Dun’t look like Jo Jo posted the images online, either. S’ppose he could’ve used another device, but... well... it’s inconclusive.’

‘So, we’re no further on with that?’

Compo shook his head. ‘I’m getting closer. It just takes time. It’s sifting through the layers, that’s so time consuming, but we’ll get there.’

‘Yeah, I only hope we’re not too late. Who knows what they could plan next?’

‘No idea... but.’ He pressed a few keys, bringing up his earlier findings on the screen ‘This isn’t pleasant, Gus, but you need to see it, before I forward it on to Vice. Jo Jo’s webcamming has gone viral, and it’s attracting all sorts of vermin from under the floorboards.’

## CHAPTER 75

I'd never been in the Belle Hill Estate before and I'm fucking shitting it. Not that there aren't any Asians here. It's just that none of them are like me. Everybody I pass has a look about them – one that says 'don't fuck with me'. I thought I was tough at school, but this is some other level. Even the little kids on their bikes and skateboards stare at me with attitude, their grubby faces snarl at me in silence. My heart thunders, and I wonder if it'll explode. The way some of them glare at me, I almost wish it would explode.

I deepen my voice and approach one of the bigger lads. He's passing a football from hand to hand and staring right at me, his eyes like acid on my skin. Inside I'm saying, 'Show no fear, Kiran,' outside I'm barely staring the kid out.

'I'm after Razor. Know where he is?' I'm trying not to look like bricks are about to fly out of my arse, but the other kid's smirk tells me I've failed. He doesn't even attempt to intimidate me. Just keeps passing the ball back and forth, back and forth. The slap of leather on palms taunts me, and I want to grab him by the scruff of the neck and march him into the nearest flushable toilet. But even I know that's in my dreams.

'Who's asking?'

I bulk myself up. I'm double his size but feel like a pygmy beside his attitude. He snorts at my efforts, and I step towards him. Before I can take another, six guys fall in behind him. I was so focussed on the kid, I hadn't noticed them approach.

'You really wanna try that, eh? Come on then, let's see what you got.'

Things are getting out of control and I can't stop it. I only want to see Razor... to explain about my brother, to ask him to take the stuff back. I've got some of the money. Maybe that'll get him off my case for a bit. I was already sweating when I arrived, but now it's dribbling down the inside of my cargo shorts. For a second, I wonder if I've pissed myself. The kid moves closer, his mates keeping pace behind him. He tosses the ball backwards and one of the littlest kids catches it, while another passes him a baseball bat.

He takes another step towards me and it's then I see glints of metal in his mates' hands and hear the thud of wood hitting the pavement in a trial swing. I drop to my knees and curl into a ball, hands over my head, ready to take the beating that's coming.

The laughter is weird, and I tense... waiting... nothing happens. Then something splatters on my back. The stench of ammonia rises in the air making my eyes smart and then there's more laughter followed by a staccato...

‘Enough!’ And I hear a zip being pulled up.

I lie where I am, soaked with piss, scared to move, shitting myself. Their taunting voices fade, and I can hear the familiar slap, slap, slap of the fucking football... but it too is growing fainter. When it’s out of earshot, I uncurl, roll onto my back and open my eyes and wish I’d stayed where I was... or better still, never left my cushty little street in Clayton.

The sun haloes the person, casting sparks of light that almost blind me, making it hard to recognise him. He steps forward, raises a foot, and whams it into my stomach and I’m curling up again, the acidic remnants of chai burning my throat as it spews onto the pavement.

‘That’s for being a prick. You don’t go down without a fight... ever. That right, lads? And you never, ever let kids piss on you!’

It’s only then I realise Razor’s got two mates beside him; Goyley and HP. For a single stupid delirious moment I consider asking HP where his scar is, but stop myself. Razor nods to his thugs and they each hook an arm through mine and yank me to my feet. My knees wobble and I nearly topple over, but Goyley yanks me up again with a laugh. ‘Fucking know this one, eh, Raze?’

Razor doesn’t answer, just looks at me, his hand extended. ‘Money!’

I shake my head and wish my legs would stop shaking. ‘I told you, my brother died... got murdered, like.’

Razor shrugs. ‘Not my problem. Just after my dosh.’

Desperate, I glance round. ‘I’ve got your stuff. It’s all there... every bit of it.’ I fumble down the front of my pants where I’d hidden it and offer the padded envelope to Razor.

He takes it and I think I’m free. I sigh and risk a half smile, but Razor’s not done with me. ‘You owe me interest. Give me what I’m owed.’

The colour drains from my face and it’s at that point I realise that I truly am a knob. What was I doing, thinking I could play with the big lads? I swallow. ‘How much?’

‘Two grand... and we’re quits.’

‘*Two grand...?* But I...’ I bend down and fumble in my trainers and bring out the folded notes I’d withdrawn on the way. Surely, he’d take that, and we’d be quits? He’d got his stash back, after all. ‘Two hundred, that’s all I have.’

Razor signalled. HP stepped forward, took the notes, and licked his index finger before flicking through them. ‘Yep, two tons.’

Razor turns and begins walking away, and I swallow my relief. ‘You messed me around... but... we’re all square now.’

He raises a finger and drags it across his throat. I barely have time to understand what it means when Goyley grabs me and stabs my stomach. A warm trickle of blood oozes through my fingers. As their footsteps retreat, my last thought is, *How are my parents going to cope with two dead sons?*

## CHAPTER 76

Still wobbly after his panic attack, Gus sat opposite Jo Jo in one of the interview rooms dedicated to minors. Soft chairs, cushions, and coffee tables intended to make it less stressful for the kids. Gus didn't know about Jo Jo, but right now, his stress levels were through the roof. It was hard to focus, and he was glad that the chill from the cold bottled water between his hands grounded him a little.

Jo Jo's solicitor was a short, bulky man with a receding hairline, and beside him, Jo Jo tall and gangly, looked like an overgrown puppet with invisible strings that jerked at his angles when he moved. The lad's feet tapped a rhythm on the tiled floor and his lips were flaky and raw where he'd been gnawing at them. Despite Zarqa's denials of anything worse than the mosque defacement, denials that Alice told him were convincing, Gus was obliged to detain her, pending further investigation. So, for now, Zarqa was in a family room.

Gus studied the boy. His spotty face was streaked with dried up tears and despite the hint of 'teen boy spray', Gus could smell Jo Jo's fear filling the room. In spite of his suspicions, Gus liked the teenager. How could you not like a lad who tried his damndest to keep his family together? Who was prepared to do unpalatable things in order to protect his much younger sister and his invalid mum? Gus doubted he'd have been able to take on such a responsibility at sixteen and he wanted to rage against the self-satisfied adults who, so blithely, disparaged an entire group purely because of their age; 'Teenagers this, teenagers that'. He and Patti frequently discussed how easily some folk could spout vitriol about the flaws of teen behaviour without once considering the problems and temptations they faced. However, Gus had to remain professional and tease out any additional information the lad might have.

With Carlton and Alice watching proceedings from the other room, Gus was both nervous and relieved. At least if he lost it again, they would come to his rescue. Alice had offered to conduct the interview, but Gus had refused. The interview with Zarqa had taken it out of Al. Questioning suspects was draining at the best of times, but questioning a kid was worse and interviewing one you knew – was almost unbearable. Still, Zarqa had denied involvement in anything other than the mosque attack and that was a bonus. Combined with the evidence they had already garnered, Gus remained hopeful that they were guilty only of defacement of a religious building, and, although serious, it could have been much worse. With a sigh, Gus set up the equipment, completed the necessary protocols, and looked at the boy. 'You okay, Jo Jo?'

Foot tapping halted, Jo Jo met Gus' gaze. 'How's me mam... and Jessie? How's Jessie? She okay?'

Gus' heart contracted. He'd been dreading these questions. 'Jessie's fine, Jo Jo. She's with a foster family in Bradford and she's fine. Your mum...' He hesitated, feeling like a coward for allowing the pause to do half of his work for him.

Jo Jo frowned, waited. Colour blanched from his face, and he gripped the edge of the table. 'Mam... What about me mam?'

Gus bit the bullet, wishing he was anywhere but here in this room. 'I'm afraid your mum's taken a turn for the worse, Jo Jo. She's on a ventilator in the BRI. She's got an infection. They're doing everything they can for her.'

Jo Jo slumped in his chair and closed his eyes. The lad's rasping breaths as he processed the information were almost too much for Gus to bear. Instead of looking sixteen, Jo Jo now looked like a lost twelve-year-old. Finally, he spoke.

'I did this. It's all my fault. I should've got the doctor in sooner, but I was scared... scared they'd take Jess away... split us up. Now this has happened.' Jo Jo fell to the floor, gasping for breath, hyperventilating.

Shit, Gus had been prepared for a panic attack... just not Jo Jo's.

'Interview terminated. Medics, right now!'

He knelt beside the boy and schooled him through the panic attack. There was no way they'd be interviewing Jo Jo in the foreseeable future, but what they could do in the interim was collate more evidence to either corroborate Zarqa's and Jo Jo's innocence or prove their guilt.

Surely, Compo could do that. If anyone could pinpoint Zarqa and Jo Jo's whereabouts at the time of both murders, it was Compo. Officers were trawling through CCTV near the murder locations and the mosque. Although Bradford had a proliferation of CCTV, the areas around Smith Lane and in the middle of Lister Park were 'dead' areas.

Never mind, Gus had faith in his team. They'd keep going.

## CHAPTER 77

‘Call’s come in, Gus. Kid knifed in Belle Hill!’ Taffy’s face was flushed, and Gus suspected it wasn’t just the heat that was making it so. He’d spotted the shy smiles exchanged between Taffy and the police officer, who left the room as Taffy entered.

Gus had set up an alert for knifings in Bradford. That discounted the frequent machete attacks that were becoming more common throughout the city. He’d narrowed the parameters to knife attacks, as that seemed to be his killer’s preferred murder weapon.

‘Same MO as ours?’ Gus jumped to his feet. This could be what they needed to exonerate Zarqa and Jo Jo. As both were in custody, if this was another *Snapchat* attack, that would mean the killers were still at large.

As he tanked after Gus, Taffy filled him in. ‘They reckon it’s a drug-related attack. A neighbour phoned it in, anonymous like. The boy was lucky, because there was an ambulance two streets down called out on a prank call. They stopped the bleeding and the kid’s on his way to hospital.’

‘Right, we’ll head to BRI and see what he can tell us. If our killers are responsible, it could be a breakthrough. Mind you, this is a vast change in MO. Both Betsy Freeman and Pratab Patel were killed at night in a secluded area. But you never know, maybe they’re decompensating. Carlton said that was a possibility. Kid got a name?’

Taffy flicked through the notes he’d taken and slowed to a halt. ‘Fuck, Gus, you’ll never guess who it is.’

Startled by Taffy’s use of the ‘F’ word, Gus frowned. Taffy wasn’t a swearer. ‘Spit it out.’

‘It’s only bloody Kiran Patel.’

Gus took a moment to work out why that name was so familiar to him. ‘You mean Pratab’s brother... Kiran.’

Taffy frowned. ‘Unless it’s someone else with the same name. Says he’s from Clayton, though. And it’s too much...’

‘... of a coincidence. Yeah, you got that right. Wonder what Kiran was doing over in Belle Hill. Not like it’s anywhere near his neck of the woods, is it?’ Gus bit his lip. ‘You get over to BRI and I’ll head to the crime scene. See if we have any similarities.’

The knowledge that Belle Hill was Jo Jo’s estate, combined with the victim’s link to their ongoing case, worried Gus. There had to be some connection. What was the likelihood of a murder victim’s sibling being attacked within a week of his death, never mind on the same

estate as one of their prime suspects; it was all very incestuous and Gus was sure he was missing a key element.

The CSIs had erected a tent, and the police had cordoned off the area. Gus greeted the officers in charge of maintaining the integrity of the outer cordon. He signed himself in, and under cover of consulting with his officers, Gus observed the lookie-loos who lined the tape, bantering with the uniforms, moaning about their civil liberties and demanding information they knew they would never receive.

‘You got someone photographing the crowd?’

The younger officer nodded. ‘Yep, we’re doing a photo trawl every ten minutes. Chances are the scrote that did this is hanging around. They like their moment of fame, don’t they?’

That was true. In the distance, Gus spotted Jez Hopkins chatting to some spectators, his photographer trailing behind. As he caught Gus’ eye, the reporter raised an eyebrow and grinned. Gus scowled and turned away. Hopkins wasn’t one of his favourite journalists, yet Alice seemed to like him. He wondered if Jez knew she was back. Gus wouldn’t share anything about Alice. If she wanted him to know she was home, she’d tell him herself.

Gus saw the lad they’d taken in earlier loitering toward the rear of the crowd. Goyley or something, if he remembered correctly. He was with another big lad and a skinny lad, who Gus recognised as Razor McCarthy. Their body language showed that despite his lack of inches, it was McCarthy who called the shots. ‘Get a photo of those three lads over there, will you? That’s Razor McCarthy, leader of one of the gangs on this estate and his goons. Keep an eye out for Hammerhead. If I were you, I’d question them. Not much happens on Belle Hill without the say so of either Hammerhead or Razor.’

As he approached the inner cordon, Gus saw Sid and a bulky DS deep in discussion. As Gus approached, Sid raised an arm in greeting. ‘Didn’t expect you to turn up here. This doesn’t look like your case. No phone, no positioning of the body, stab wound to the gut, not the neck, broad daylight... feels more gang than anything else.’

Gus shook hands with the officer and introduced himself before addressing Sid. ‘You’re right, but I’m interested in the victim. He’s my first victim’s brother and you know what they say? No smoke without a gallon of petrol and an arsonist.’

Laughing, Sid waved him through. ‘There’s not much to see, and we’re done here.’ The three of them walked towards the tent, and Sid swept the flap open. ‘All that’s left is that.’ He pointed to a pool of blood on the floor, before raising his voice to the crime scene photographer. ‘Here, Jen. Let DI McGuire see the crime scene photos, will you?’ He turned to Gus. ‘There was no evidence of cable ties or anything. He’d been beaten up, and some arse had pissed on



him. But no real similarities to your kids... though, it is strange, isn't it? Two brothers attacked within a week of each other. It's the parents I feel sorry for.'

Gus flicked through the images and had to agree with Sid. Apart from the victims being brothers, there was nothing to link the attacks and that worried Gus.

What the hell was happening in Bradford?

## CHAPTER 78

If there was one thing Gus hated doing, it was packing the damn dishwasher but, fair was fair. Alice had cooked a curry, so cleaning up afterwards was his job. He'd opened the kitchen window as wide as possible and the back door too, but even with the desk fan in the corner of the room, the air remained still. He welcomed the break from Alice and Patti. It didn't sit well with him that Zarqa and Jo Jo were still in custody. Mo and Naila had blanked him, refusing to answer any of his calls... he couldn't blame them, but it still hurt. DCS Bashir had given him permission to take Jo Jo to visit his mum at the BRI and she'd shot right up in his estimation for that. The kid had looked petrified when he saw the machines hooked up to his mum, but he'd held it together, chatting on to her, pretending he'd been at school and Jessie was at a friend's. It broke Gus' heart to drag the lad away. As the equipment wheezed and beeped, Gus worried that this might be the last time Jo Jo would see his mum.

Alice and Patti were in the living room and the murmur of their voices punctuated with the odd burst of laughter kept him company. The idea that they may well be making ever increasingly lavish plans for their wedding put him on edge. He wondered if Patti was using it as a distraction from all the pressure at school with the press camped outside and the avalanche of emails from parents regarding her 'indiscretion'. Some people didn't understand that none of this was her fault. Someone invaded her privacy and yet she was the one getting the flak. She often lapsed into silence, deep in thought, and Gus wasn't convinced that her thoughts included him... or not in a good way. After this case, he told himself, he'd speak to Patti. Explain that he loved her, but that he wasn't in a desperate rush to settle down. After all that had happened, they could do with slowing things down. Marriage wasn't an essential for him. He'd done the all singing all dancing crap with Gaby and look how that had turned out. What he wanted was to share a commitment without the formality of a wedding. The whole wedding thing was too much, too soon, and he couldn't get his head round it. It felt more like a reaction to the invasion of their privacy and less about a commitment to each other.

So engrossed in his thoughts was he, that he only noticed the high-pitched humming noise when it was right outside the window. He glanced up and recoiled. His first instinct was to smash the drone before it took any more photos of him. He dived out the back door and ran after it, but as he reached it, it swung upwards, just out of reach of his flailing arms. Bloody bastard was taking the piss... taunting him.

Grateful for the open windows, he yelled, 'Al! Patt! Drone! Get out here.'

The drone hovered for a moment, then swooped down to release something from its custom-made grabber. The familiar blue envelope drifted to the decking, but Gus wasn't interested in that. He was determined to catch the drone. They needed evidence and he would not let it escape. It turned and flew towards his garden fence towards the woods. Gus had two options, follow it and perhaps nab the drone's operator or catch the damn thing. Although the first idea appealed, the inbuilt camera would alert the pilot if he was getting close to them. Instead, he sprinted to the fence, scrambled onto his compost bin and stretched towards the drone. His fingers caught one leg, but couldn't gain purchase. He lost his grip. The bloody machine was going to escape. So, he put one foot on top of the fence, with his arms extended, he stood in a crouch, steadying himself for a mere second before jumping at the drone arms stretched forward like Superman. His fingers gripped it, sending it tilting to the side, tugging away from him, its humming becoming strangulated as his hold tightened. He landed on the hard mud path in the woods below and with a twist and roll managed to protect the drone. Winded, he lay there, doing a mental inventory of his body. Feet... working, arms... working... neck... working. As he tried to get his breath back, he heard Alice and Patti yelling his name.

'I'm here.' He wished his voice sounded less tremulous. The voices grew closer, then the gate rattled, but, with the padlock on, they couldn't open it. Within seconds, Alice's face popped over the top of the fence, her worried expression replaced almost immediately by a mischievous one. 'Excellent dive, Gus... Didn't know you could fly.'

'Ha bloody ha. It appears I can't but...' He raised his hands outstretched before him... 'I can catch things that do. Go get the key from the kitchen drawer and let me in. Doubt I'll be able to climb back over.'

As Alice's head disappeared, he held the drone in front of him, and staring straight into the camera said, 'Whoever you are... you creepy perv. I'm on to you! You'd better watch out!'

He switched it off, placed it on the ground and struggled to his feet, acknowledging that a hot bath might be in order to deal with some of his bruises. His shoulder protested as he bent to pick the drone up. Carefully, hoping they might get some prints off it, he held it until Alice opened the gate. As he hobbled into the garden, he wished his body didn't feel like jelly and ignoring the twinge that accompanied each movement he smiled. 'What do you make of this?'

Alice inhaled. 'Well, if the stalker and the killers are related, then it looks like Zarqa and Jo Jo are telling the truth and they did only do the graffiti. This confirms Jo Jo's story and the texts Compo retrieved. However unlikely, they could be in cahoots with whoever controlled this monstrosity. Although I doubt it, we can't be sure it's not an elaborate plan to obfuscate things. Bottom line is, we can't let them go yet, Gus.'

They joined Patti who was on the decking staring down at the blue envelope. ‘You’ve got to get this bastard, Gus.’ She glanced around as if expecting a swarm of drones to appear over the horizon and despite the heat, wrapping her arms round her body, she shuddered. ‘Everywhere I go, I feel like someone’s watching me.’

Placing the drone in the plastic bag produced by Alice, he nodded. Patti was right. This was too personal. The only endgame he could imagine was one involving him... and, more than likely, violence. His earlier adrenalin rush faded, leaving a trail of anger that throbbed through him, slow and painful. His motives weren’t those of a police officer seeking justice, but of an injured individual seeking revenge. Still, he allowed the feeling to grow instead of swallowing it down like he usually did. Whoever was out there killing kids and toying with him, threatening those he loved and invading his space, had overstepped the mark. He wanted to hurt them and, as he accepted that thought, his fists clenched. Gus moved over and put an arm round Patti’s shoulders, pulling her to him, savouring the coconut fragrance of her shampoo. He loved her... desperately... but bad things happened to the folk he cared for... his thoughts flicked from Greg, the best friend he’d killed, to Alice whom he’d doubted, to Sampson, a colleague who’d died in the line of fire. Perhaps he didn’t deserve her... maybe he needed to release her in order to keep her safe? He held her tight, eyes closed for a moment longer. ‘You should distance yourself from me for now. Maybe stay at a friend’s house.’

Her head jerked up; her cute nose crinkled like it did when she was annoyed with something. ‘No bloody chance. We’re in this together... and... now we’re engaged, our relationship is legit.’ She pulled out from his embrace. ‘I’m not running from anyone... especially not a damn psycho who’s killing my students and threatening my... fiancé.’ Her lips quirked at the last word and Gus felt like a tosser. What was wrong with him? Was he really such a commitment phobe?

‘When you lovebirds are done with the sappy doo dahs, can we crack on with some *actual* police work?’ Alice had donned gloves and popped the letter in an evidence bag. ‘Come on, let’s crack on.’

Gus cupped Patti’s face with his hands and dropped a quick kiss on her lips. ‘This is about me being able to concentrate, yeah? If you’re at Chrissy’s, I’ll know you’re safe and I’ll be able to focus. I need you to do this for me.’

For a moment, he thought she was going to argue, but at the last minute, she reconsidered. ‘Okay. I’ll give Chrissy a ring.’

‘But you’ll wait here until I have an officer to escort you.’

Patti smiled. ‘You realise that if this stalker is savvy enough to orchestrate two murders and infringe your privacy with their infernal drones, then chances are they’ll be able to follow me wherever I go.’

She was right, but Gus wanted her away from him, hoping the stalker would focus on him. He could feel the frustration rolling off her. ‘There is something you could do. We’re going through the pupil interviews as quickly as we can, but maybe you could narrow it down for us. Ask your staff if they noticed any odd behaviour, particularly among the older kids. I don’t think someone with this level of hate would have gone unnoticed.’

Patti frowned. ‘You suspect one of my pupils, don’t you?’

‘We’re still narrowing things down, but we’d be fools to ignore such big coincidences. You being the head teacher, me being the detective, two victims – both from your school, both of a similar age, and *Snapchats* sent to your students,’ he paused for breath. ‘And that’s even without Sebastian Carlton’s profile.’

## CHAPTER 79

### *Zodiac*

**A**aaaah. Who the hell does he think he is? I play the scene again on my phone. His face right up to the screen. Those unusual blue eyes of his with the dark rim round the iris, flashing – ice flames sparking from them. Who knew blue could be so hot? His dreads bounce round his face, like a mane. That’s what he’s like... a lion... a lion with a mane bouncing about.

‘Whoever you are... you creepy perv. I’m on to you! You’d better watch out!’

Who does he think he is? Perv? He’s angry. Spitting the words out.

Shit! Shit! Shit! He’s got my drone. I pace the living room, glad that I’m on my own. I slop vodka into a glass, top it up with Pepsi and take a long swig... Aah! Better! – Not much... but it’ll do. Don’t care if she finds the bottle. Not like she’s a proper Muslim, anyway.

I scrape my fingers through my hair, not caring when my scalp bleeds. What to do? What to do? If I could, I’d do another one tonight... no probs. But after all that family stuff with Leo, that’s impossible... best to let Pisces have a bit of time to recover too. Pace them out. Why’s all this happening at once? It’s getting near the end now, anyway. But no. I won’t let them push me. I’m setting the agenda, not them.

I pick my phone up and play it again. Torturing myself... yes, I know, but, so what? I’ve got to see him!

‘Whoever you are... you creepy perv. I’m on to you! You’d better watch out!’

Repeat!

‘Whoever you are... you creepy perv. I’m on to you! You’d better watch out!’

Repeat!

'Whoever you are... you creepy perv. I'm on to you! You'd better watch out!'

Aaaaaaaaah!

I throw the phone against the wall. Those tramps of his need to get it! Yeah. That's what I'll do. Kill the fucking tramps and I fall onto the couch, laughing.

That'll teach him. That'll teach *My Dearest Detective Inspector Angus McGuire*.

## CHAPTER 80

**Y**ou'd think by Compo's expression that Gus had presented him with a million pounds rather than a chunk of plastic resembling a miniature alien spaceship. Compo bounced around, desperate to get hold of the drone, wittering on about, 'battery life' and 'distance waves'. All things that Gus guessed were enlightening, but not anything he wanted to get to grips with. All he wanted were some decent fingerprints, and some of Compo's magic to tell him who'd been controlling the damn thing.

On the plus side, Compo had some good news. The spray cans found in Zarqa's room chemically matched the paint on the mosque and the style of writing matched with graffiti work Zarqa had done at school. Alongside that, Compo had obtained CCTV footage of Jo Jo buying the cans. So that part of their story held up. And according to the time recorded, they were in the process of graffitiing, half an hour before Karim found Pratab's body. This made it impossible for them to be the killers.

An uneasy combination of guilt and happiness settled over Gus. Whilst relieved that Zarqa, although guilty of a hateful crime, wasn't a stalker or a murderer, guilt at suspecting her of either churned his stomach. Why was it so difficult for him to have faith in his loved ones? Some might blame the scars left by his ex-wife, or even past traumas. But Gus knew it was worse than that. It was a flaw within his psyche. A flaw that made him spoil every relationship he had through lack of trust. But this wasn't about him. This was about his best friend's family and he had some grovelling to do.

Gus considered driving Zarqa home, but then reconsidered. Mo and Naila wouldn't forgive him for a while, if ever, and Zarqa and her parents had a lot of things to discuss, so he delegated Taffy to take her back home, before dropping Jo Jo at his mother's bedside. The news from the BRI was that she was unlikely to survive through the night and Jo Jo wanted to be with his mum. After Taffy volunteered to stay with Jo Jo, his social worker had agreed. Gus had never been prouder of Taffy, who had cancelled a date to be there for Jo Jo, saying, 'That poor kid's gonna miss his mum every day for the rest of his life, so I can surely miss one date.'

They were in Sid's lab. The CSI manager had come in as a special favour and Gus had already chalked up a bottle of the finest malt for him, but that could wait.

'Any prints, Sid?'

The CSI shook his head. 'Tut tut tut. I've told you before about your impatience. This has to be a joint venture between me and Compo here, if we're to retrieve anything.'



‘Eh?’

Sid’s sigh was exaggerated, and Gus wanted to hurry him along, but he knew it would do no good.

‘According to Compo, this creature is a basic drone with adaptations. This means that it’s not only the outer casing that needs printing; it’s all the added extras too. I suggest that I print the casing. Compo can disassemble the creature bit by bit, and I’ll take prints as we go along. That way you’ll have my forensic input and Compo can glean information from the drone.’

Despite finding it a little creepy that Sid referred to the inanimate object as ‘the creature’, Gus realised that what the CSI proposed made sense. If only he could shake off the *Dr Who* vibe that Hissing Sid’s words had evoked. Last thing he wanted was the damn drone coming to life and floating about Sid’s lab saying ‘exterminate’ in a squeaky robotic voice.

Three hours later, by which time Gus’ muscles had stiffened and his body was protesting, Compo and Sid had finished. The prints Sid had isolated had been sent to the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System to find matches. With Sebastian Carlton’s suspicion that their killers were youngsters, Gus suspected that they’d be lucky to find a match, however, when they found the killer, the prints might be the difference between a successful prosecution and a failed one... and you never knew, maybe their perpetrator had got in bother before.

Compo was as excited as Barbie at a sleep-over and had been mumbling under his breath as he worked. He now turned to Gus. Without his usual beanie, his hair was flat, making him appear even younger and more childlike than usual. It was as if his mum had patted his curls down from crown to brow. Compo hadn’t had a mum. He’d been brought up in a series of foster homes, where his eccentricities had left him a target. Gus felt a flutter of appreciation for his friend and smiled.

‘Go on then, Compo, hit me with it... but go easy on me, eh? Techie whizz kid, I’m not.’

Compo waved a hand for Gus to join him at the counter where all the components of the drone were laid in an orderly line. This was so different from Compo’s usual chaotic way of working, that Gus was impressed.

‘This is a budget drone, a Yuneec Typhoon H – one of the cheapest on the market at around two hundred and fifty quid. Its flight time is less than thirty minutes and the control range is only a mile.’

How the hell could kids afford that sort of money – from a paper round? Drugs?

Compo continued, ‘This is a different base from the drone that dropped Betsy’s phone. From the CCTV it looked more like a Phantom Obsidian... costs a lot more. Lucky to get

change from a grand for that. I'd guess both have been adapted and whoever's responsible has some excellent knowledge of how these things work.'

Bone tired, stiff, and bruised after his dive to catch the drone, Gus wanted to go home, but before he did, he needed to see what the letter had revealed.

Sebastian Carlton arrived at the lab in time to witness the envelope being opened. The font, envelope, and tone were identical to the others and, as expected, there were no fingerprints. The CSI opened it and slid the contents onto a sterile tray. As usual, there was an A4 folded sheet. However, Gus could tell from its bulk that there was also something else. He braced himself for another image of him and Patti in some compromising position. Relief washed over him when instead it was a photo of him talking to Jerry and Dave in Lister Park. According to the forensic expert, they had printed the previous snaps on a home computer with bog-standard printer ink and Gus suspected the same would be true for this one.

'This perp takes pleasure in getting up close and personal to you.'

Gus could have forgiven Carlton's enthusiastic tone, if the other man hadn't been rocking back and forth on his heels when he stated the damn obvious.

'Can you remember when this was taken? Did you notice anyone in the vicinity?'

Gus bit back a sarcastic comment. *Gosh, never thought about that, Prof!* He was tetchy because he was tired and there was no need to take it out on the professor. He remembered chatting to Jerry and Dave on... Monday. Had it been Monday? Or maybe Tuesday? It was frustrating to know that while he'd been engrossed in conversation, his stalker, the killer, had been nearby. Hell, he'd probably passed them and not given them a second glance.

Carlton looked at Gus for a moment. 'You want to try a cognitive interview?'

Gus glanced from Carlton to Compo. The short answer was no! The last thing he wanted was to put himself under Carlton's influence. Then he remembered how kind the man had been during his panic attack and, with a sign to the CSI to wait for them, he nodded.

Carlton guided him over to a chair and made him sit before he dragged another one over and positioned it in front of Gus. With Compo hovering by his shoulder and Carlton's knees brushing his, Gus couldn't have been any more uncomfortable.

He relaxed his shoulders, exhaling and, as per the professor's instructions, he closed his eyes and placed himself in the park.

'What are you chatting about?'

That was easy. 'Their phones. How they enjoyed sleeping out in the sunny weather. How worried they were about Zarqa being out after dark.'

'The park was busy, then?' Carlton's voice was low, conversational.

‘Yeah, I passed loads of people; the power-walkers, the joggers, kids on their way to school.’

‘Turn your head in the direction the photo was taken. What can you see?’

Gus frowned. In his mind, he turned to the left and looked across the pond toward the boating pavilion. ‘The path’s almost empty... a couple of old Muslim men with walking sticks. I’ve seen them before. They always say hello. There’s someone getting up from the bench, swinging a bag onto their shoulders. A rucksack? They’re walking towards the play area. Hold on... They stop, glance round, and then they’re off again.’ Gus’ heart pounded. He didn’t know where that memory came from. Couldn’t remember seeing that person earlier. He screwed his lids closed, focussing, willing them to turn around so he could see their face. ‘Shit! They’re too far away. Can’t see who it is. Not sure if it’s a boy or a girl. They’ve got a cap on. Shorts and a blue T-shirt!’ Gus’ eyes sprang open and met Carton’s smiling gaze. ‘I can’t see their damn face!’

‘You did well, Gus.’

‘Not really... how does that help? Might not have been that person who took the photo.’

‘Oh, I think it does. That’s why you noticed them. Your subconscious made you. Now, this gives us someone to cross reference with your friends and with the staff at the café and boating pavilion. Any of them may remember the same person, but with more details.’

Gus shrugged. Despite his earlier doubts, he was disappointed. So near and yet so far away.

‘Did you get a sense of this person’s age?’

‘A kid... late teens... early twenties, I’d say – but who knows?’

Sebastian stood up, smiling at Gus. ‘Well that’s consistent with my existing profile, isn’t it?’

*Yeah, but who knows if your profile is right?* Gus stopped himself from saying the words. Instead, he moved over to where the CSI had been watching the cognitive interview with interest. ‘Let’s see what my stalker’s got to say for themselves this time.’

The CSI unfolded the letter and laid it flat so they could all see.

My Dearest Detective Inspector Angus McGuire,  
It’s becoming more and more of a delight to watch you. Are you enjoying the show so far? I must admit it’s been a fascinating project for me. How are your tramp friends? Pity they didn’t turn up a little earlier the other night, isn’t it? Who knows what might have happened?  
Anyway, just wanted to keep in touch... let you know I’m thinking of you.  
This is not the end...

Watch this space!

‘This person is aware that you know Jerry and Dave well. They’ve also confirmed that they are aware of Jerry and Dave’s role in finding Betsy. This is a definite sign that your letter writer is involved in these murders.’ Said Carlton

Confirmation of something they already suspected, but nothing fresh. ‘How does that sit with your profile, that more than one person is involved?’

Carlton studied the letter. ‘This letter is personal to you, Gus. Your stalker knows you and you know them. They may have only come across you in passing, but in their mind, they’ve magnified a connection to you. The letter is their baby... it’s separate to the killings, but linked. *You* are their obsession.’

None of this was helpful... not now, not to help catch the killer. Meanwhile, who knew who the next target would be?

Carlton was talking again. ‘If there are two perps, then this one is the leader... the manipulator. The other is just their pawn. The escalation of the stalking incidents intimates that the killings may increase too. We have to be prepared for another attack very soon. It’s time to get your lovely Nancy and the indomitable DCS Bashir in front of the camera. You need to issue a warning. This could all speed up quickly. With this sort of spree killing over a short period, the endings are normally violent, unpredictable, and sudden. We can’t risk any more dead kids in Bradford this summer, can we?’

## CHAPTER 81

Leo

Me: You see this crap on the telly? You know what it's about?

I'm hunkered down in a chair, minding my own business, ignoring the drama... the crying and shit that's going on around me. Rather be anywhere else but here, but I'm not allowed. It's like they're glued to me. Can't breathe without them being all over me. Wish I was at home, not stuck in this hellhole. Really want a cig!

Can't believe *Look North*. Mehmoona's mum on the box telling us to keep safe. Not to let the teenagers go out alone. Keep us indoors.

*We suspect that there is a danger on the streets of Bradford and while the police work to...*

I tune out for a moment, wondering if I can make my escape... but no. She's back, sitting next to me, crowding me.

*... anything to report at all, please contact us on 07...*

My phone vibrates and I stand up. 'Need the loo.' Surely, they won't follow me there too? But no. She's distracted and so I sneak away.

Can't stand the stink of these places... all bleach and stuff. Catches in my throat. I lock myself in a cubicle and relax. First space I've had all day, but it won't last for long. Have to be quick. I look at my phone. Pisces! Group text. Aw crap!

Pisces: You see the news? I'm scared. We gotta stop.

Should I wait for Zodiac? I peer at my mobile willing Zodiac to reply. Nothing!

Me: Don't be a div. We're okay. Stop worrying! Later!

Pisces: What if they know? Mehmoona's mum said they were closing in.

Me: Rubbish. Go to bed. We'll talk tomorrow. Later!

Despite my words to Pisces, I'm nervous too. Unsettled. Wish Zodiac would reply.

## CHAPTER 82

Gus hadn't expected to see Katie for a while. He'd hoped she'd give him some space and not hassle him, but he was wrong. He came downstairs when the doorbell rang and glanced at the CCTV. His new home security had been great... as long as he remembered to switch it on. Katie stood, looking all wan and waiflike, and Gus' stomach contracted. She was in 'I'm a victim' mode. She was like a ten-year-old in her knee-length shorts and strappy top. When she looked up at the camera, the huge black bags under her eyes shocked him. Her cheeks were hollowed out and her arms looked skinny and pale. The deterioration in her physical appearance since he'd seen her only a few days ago prompted him to open the door. He felt a right dick for his earlier thoughts. Her hair was the only thing about her that looked healthy - and that was weird.

'Shit, Katie. What's wrong?'

Katie, a slight smile teasing her lips, stepped into the hallway. 'You're not saying you care, are you?'

Her words seemed hollow as opposed to the jovial way he thought she'd intended. Her eyes filled up and Gus stepped forward, sweeping her against his chest. 'You've got to tell me what's up,' he whispered, scared of her reply, yet trying to keep upbeat. Whatever was troubling Katie was serious... very serious. 'I can't help you if you don't.'

Katie pushed away from him, took a scruffy tissue from her pocket, blew her nose, and stepped towards the kitchen. 'You know me. I'm not doing owt without a cup of Yorkshire Tea in my hand.'

Thanks to Alice, he had milk that wasn't completely out of date and ginger nut biscuits. As he made the tea, he observed his sister from the corner of his eye. Close up, she looked more gaunt than she had on the camera. If Gaby had punished his sister for his refusal to father their child, he'd kill her. He'd bloody kill her. He dropped the used tea bags into the bin. Leaving a trail of dark droplets on the work surface, he worked himself into a fury. Gabriella was a problem. She was selfish, manipulative, and a pain in the backside. He couldn't work out what Katie saw in her. He'd long since learned the truth about his ex-wife. It seemed, though, that his sister was as in love with Gaby today as she'd been the day Gaby left him and moved into Katie's flat.

He sat opposite Katie and, for want of anything better to do, opened the ginger nuts and grabbed a couple before pushing the packet towards Katie. ‘So, you gonna tell me what’s up? Gaby taking it out on you because I said no?’

Katie blew on her tea but placed the cup on the table without drinking. Sounding tired, her eyes flitting to a point beyond Gus’ shoulder, she said, ‘I wish you and Gaby would just get on you know? Put your differences behind you.’

Gus could rage about the way Gabriella had treated him on numerous occasions, but something in his sister’s expression stopped him. Instead, he hunched over the table and, with an inexplicable dread weighing down on him, dunked another biscuit he didn’t want into his mug.

‘I’m not very well, Gus.’

His heart faltered. He heard the words, but he wanted to thrust them away. Bundle them up and throw them into the garbage. Something about Katie’s calm expression told him it wasn’t just a sore throat she had. He tried to swallow, but somehow, a chunk of broken glass had stuck in his throat and he couldn’t. His heart rate increased, and his breath came in pants. Still not looking at her, he forced himself to slow his breathing sloooooow, sloooooow.

Katie met his gaze, her dark eyes full of shadows and doubt, and right then it clicked that this was serious... really serious and he had to step up to the mark. He opened his mouth to speak, realised his mouth was too dry and took a quick gulp of his drink... he tried again. ‘What’s wrong?’

Katie smiled and raised her hand and whipping off her wig, she threw it on the kitchen table. ‘Big C. Ovarian.’

Gus stared at the riot of dark curls lying like a discarded poodle on his table. A wig, a bloody wig! He’d thought she looked different the other night, but had been too wrapped up in his own anger to wonder why. He lifted his eyes to Katie. ‘You’ve started treatment? You’ve started treatment, and you didn’t tell me.’

Her voice was sharp. ‘This isn’t about *you*.’

That was true. It wasn’t about him. Still, it hurt that she hadn’t confided in him... asked for his support, shared her anguish with him. As if she read his mind, Katie continued, ‘I was furious with you for not letting me in when Greg died, you know? So angry and frustrated and let down. I wanted to help you, but you shut me out and I couldn’t understand why. Now I do. It’s hard enough coping with it myself without sharing it with the universe. I want to curl up with Gaby and let the rest of the world pass by without having to interact with it.’



That was exactly how Gus had felt. He nodded, understanding, yet hurt, that he hadn't been there for her. 'I would...'

She reached over the table and squeezed his hand. 'I know you would. But I wasn't ready.'

'Mum and Dad know?'

'Last week. I told them last week.'

Again, he was the last to know. He shoved that aside. 'When were you diagnosed, Katie Bear?'

Her shrug denied the severity of the situation, but her appearance said otherwise. 'I had to kick off with Chemo a few weeks ago. They want to shrink the tumour before... you know... the hysterectomy.'

The word bounced around the room, knocking the air from it. With no words to speak, Gus reached over and gripped his sister's hands as she spoke.

'I wanted to... well, we wanted to ask you about the baby, before we told you about this. Didn't want it to look like we were guilt tripping you...'

He had refused... not surprising, was it? Yet now, looking at his sister, it all seemed different. The words stumbled out of his mouth, 'What's your prognosis?'

Katie again lifted her cup, this time taking a minuscule sip. 'Well, I'm not planning my funeral yet...' She pursed her lips. 'We've no idea. I've just completed my third lot of chemo... but we just don't know.' She fidgeted in her chair. 'What you're really asking is, why do I want to have kids, when I might not survive?'

Gus shrugged. It was what he'd been thinking but couldn't put into words.

'She's my soul mate, Gus. We want to have a baby... a family. I'm going to get through this, but Gaby will be the one carrying the baby. If I don't make it long-term, I want the child to be linked to me. I always have. I've always wanted to have a baby... more than one, if I'm honest, but Gaby's doing it for me. She's making that sacrifice.'

Was there a slight inflection on the word she? Gus couldn't be certain, yet here she was, and he knew she was playing her last card. That was how Katie worked. He played his own trump card, yet an inevitability he hated accompanied it - Katie always won at cards. 'DNA doesn't make a family, Katie. Love does that. You don't need me for that.'

'No, you're right, DNA doesn't. But this way, it won't be so bad when they whip out my womb. It'll be almost as good as carrying my own baby. Please do it for me, Gus. Please.'

And there it was. The double trump!

## CHAPTER 83

**W**ith Katie's visit still foremost in his mind, Gus had gone into work. He'd not slept well the previous night, half expecting to be called out to a third murder. When none had come, he'd determined to make the day count. He'd gone back to Patti's school, taking Sebastian Carlton with him, hoping someone would have something for him. But they came up with nothing. He'd spent hours looking at CCTV in the streets around the park... again zilch. They'd got a hit on a fingerprint from the drone. However, it had been in a sealed record and Nancy had yet to get back to him with any information. He had hinted to Compo that he'd turn a blind eye if Compo could access the information in other ways. They needed a name. True, the fingerprint might belong to a factory worker, but it had to be eliminated.

He'd gone to Bradford Royal Infirmary where the Patels were visiting Kiran. The lad looked likely to make a full recovery. It seemed so unfair that one family could have so much to contend with all at once. It looked to Gus as if Mr Patel was withering away before his eyes and his wife seemed older, quieter. Her face bore wrinkles that hadn't been there before. When he'd arrived, Mita had been talking to another girl in the smokers' shelter. The girl looked a little older than Mita, and Gus recognised her from Patti's school. She was one of those spotty, nervous girls who couldn't quite meet your eye. He'd smiled at Mita and been pleased to see her habitual scowl. At least Mita hadn't lost all of her personality. Kiran, predictably, had refused to implicate anyone in his attack and claimed he couldn't remember how he got to the estate. The attack had all the hall marks of a drug gang warning and Gus only hoped Kiran had learned his lesson – for his parents' sakes, if nothing else.

The incident room had been unnaturally quiet, with Alice, Taffy, and Compo focussed on their tasks. With the atmosphere heavy, Gus wanted to scream at the lack of leads. Instead, he sent Alice to collect food and had decided to go for a jog, when Compo slammed his hand down on his desk.

'This doesn't make sense, Gus.' Compo had pushed his headphones back, so they were dangling round his neck. 'I've traced the server that uploaded the images. The ones of Pratab and Betsy as well as those of you and Patti, but...' His frown was tight across his forehead and combined with the little flick of fringe that flopped there, he looked like a confused four-year-old. 'I've checked it three times now and I'm coming up with the same result every time.'

‘I trust you, Compo. If you’ve found something, I’d bet anything that it’s correct. So, what is it?’ Gus, reluctant to leave the faint breeze generated by his desk fan, got to his feet and sidled over.

A map showing row upon row of domestic residences was on Compo’s screen and a flashing light indicated that he’d identified which one housed the device that had uploaded the images of Pratab Patel’s and Betsy Freeman’s dead bodies. He smiled. ‘You located the computer?’

Compo blew upwards, wafting his fringe. ‘It’s proper weird. I just don’t get it.’

‘Okaaay.’ Gus wasn’t sure what to say. Compo, hunched over the keyboard as he frantically typed, stared at the screen after each flurry of activity. Whatever the lad had found, it had thrown him, and Gus hoped it had nothing to do with Zarqa. Not when they’d only just sent her home.

Compo propelled himself backwards on his chair to make room for Gus and exhaled. ‘It’s the address. I’ve checked it, but it stays the same.’

Compo glared as if he expected the details to alter independently.

‘Look, Comps, I’ve no idea what you’re going on about... you need to clarify it for me.’

‘It’s Fieldgate Road!’ He looked up at Gus, his face stricken as if Gus would hold him responsible. ‘Number eighteen.’

For a second, Gus couldn’t work out what Compo was telling him. This information was bizarre. He opened his mouth to ask Compo if he was sure and then closed it again without uttering the words. He’d seen how distraught the lad was and had witnessed him trying again and again. ‘You mean...?’

‘Yep. Whoever uploaded all those images did it from her house... *that* house.’ Compo jabbed the screen with his finger. ‘Our killer has access to a PC at that address.’

Gus slapped his hand on the table, making Compo jump. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!’ Then, he spun on his heel and headed for the door, as Alice entered carrying an aromatic bag of burgers. ‘You’re with me. *Now!*’

Alice thrust the bag onto the nearest table as he spoke to Compo. ‘We need a team there, pronto. Taffy, grab a pool car and a couple of officers and Carlton. Bring him too.’

## CHAPTER 84

### *Zodiac*

**I**t's only a matter of time. I always knew it would come to this. Now they've got the drone, they'll get my prints, and all that stuff in Birmingham will come out. That sidekick of Gus' will unseal my juvie record and they'll know. *She* won't be able to cover it up this time. No calling in favours from her colleagues. No burying her head in the sand. No more pretending last time was a mistake. She'll always wonder if she was to blame... if she could've done something different and that's good. Let her wonder! Let her suffer! She deserves it for not appreciating me... not seeing my specialness as something to be proud of, something unique *she* covered up for the sake of her glorious career. What now, though? I thought Gus would have been a worthy opponent, but he's been slow to figure it out... even he can't stop me, nobody can! They can keep their kids in all they like. No one is going to catch me until I'm good and ready. And then, I'll still prove how clever I am.

Still, I'll get off lightly... just like last time. After all, I didn't kill anyone and sending a few letters, uploading a few pics to the Internet, is nothing. Well... they coerced me, didn't they? That's the beauty of it... I'll be able to convince them that Pisces and Leo led little old me astray. Anyway, it's time for the endgame. Time to draw things to their natural conclusion.

It has to be today... tonight... NOW!

Me: *Lister Park! You bring the stuff!*  
Leo: *On it. Will slip away. Later*  
Me: *Tonight, bring the girl. Last one... then it'll all be over!*  
Pisces: *Can't! No more. Just can't!*  
Me: *Yes, you can. You know you can. You've done it before and this one was your choice. Remember? You chose her.*  
Pisces: *Changed my mind. Let's not do this anymore!*  
Me: *It's the rules. Just do it.*

If anyone was going to mess it all up, it was Pisces. I wait for the reply. It takes a while, but when it arrives, I grin.

Pisces: *Okay. Last one... no more.*

I laugh and punch the air. Course there will be no more. That's the plan. No more after tonight. Shame Pisces and Leo don't know what I've got in mind. I grab my rucksack, pop my cap on, and leave the house.

Tonight's gonna be a good night!

## CHAPTER 85

**A**s Alice drove, Gus phoned Nancy to bring her up to speed. ‘We’ve identified the killer, Nance. I need you on this one. It’s sensitive.’

He could hear clothes rustling, followed by the flush of a toilet. *Please don’t have just answered the phone when you’re sitting on the loo!* He dismissed the thought and continued, ‘Thing is, we think the killer or one of them, if Carlton’s profile is right, is Mehmoona Bashir... the boss’ daughter.’

He braced himself, expecting some sort of argument. Instead, Nancy came through for him. ‘Okay, I’m on my way. Secure the girl. Who knows what’s going on in her head or what she’s got planned. We have to keep the boss safe.’

He flicked a grin at Alice and hung up, but straight away, his phone rang again. *Compo!*

‘You’re on speaker, Comps, what you got?’

‘She’s on the move, Gus. Soon as you left, I started tracking her phone and the DCS’ too. The boss is still at home, but Mehmoona is moving. Looks like she’s heading in this direction.’

Alice pulled into the Co-op carpark, did a U-turn, and parked illegally on the roadside, engine still running.

‘We’re on Duckworth Lane, facing towards the roundabout. Can you tell how she’s travelling?’

‘At the minute, she looks to be on foot, nearing the BRI now.’

‘Right, I must keep this line open. Call back on the radio and patch Taffy, Carlton, and the back-up team into this. We need you to co-ordinate all of this. We can’t afford to lose her... not now. I need to speak with Nancy. She’s heading up to Bashir’s house as we speak, and I think that’s the best place for her. She can prepare Bashir for the worst.’

Gus hung up and again it started ringing. Mo! Shit! Not now! Much as he wanted to build bridges, now wasn’t the time. He pressed decline, hoping that his friend would understand when he explained later. But it rang again almost immediately.

Meanwhile, Compo was on the radio, tracking Mehmoona’s movements. ‘She’s cut up towards Smith Lane.’

Alice did a quick U-turn and headed back towards the BRI and, accelerating through an amber light, drove up Little Lane. ‘If she continues this way, we’ll be able to nab her on Toller Lane.’

Alice's phone buzzed on the hands-free. Naila! And Gus' phone vibrated in his hand. Mo again! Shit! Mo and Naila both trying to contact them. This couldn't be good.

'Yep, Mo. What's up?'

'Zarqa's gone. She took a call and then left. Snuck out the back door. Thing is, her phone's switched off and I can't track her.'

*Aw no! Zarqa, what are you playing at?*

'I'm busy right now, Mo, but as soon as I can, I'll call back in. In the meantime, check if Compo knows where Jo Jo is. He gave him one of his old phones to be going on with. Zarqa will probably be with him.'

Well, that's what he hoped, anyway. Last thing he needed was Zarqa getting in the middle of this thing with Mehmoona.

'Shit boss!' Compo's frustration sizzled over the line. 'Mehmoona's phone's gone dead. Last position was on Smith Lane. She could have gone in any direction from there. There're loads of side roads.'

'Never mind, Comps, you've done your best. Put out a BOLO for her and direct the back-up to scour the streets in the vicinity. Alice and I will drive round... we might be lucky and spot her.' Gus slammed his fist on the dashboard. 'Shit, where do you think she's heading?'

But Alice was already turning onto Scotchman Road. 'Carlton thought she was threatening Jerry and Dave, yeah? We know she hangs about the park and they do, too. What do you reckon? Lister Park, worth a try?'

'Definitely. Go for it.'

As they drove past two primary schools and the Manningham Sports Centre, Gus kept a keen lookout. It was dark now and, in this area, there were a fair share of teens, not all of them recognisable by gender. What if they were wrong? What if she wasn't heading to Lister Park? What if she had her eye on a victim elsewhere? No way could there be another teen killing on his watch.

On North Park Road, Alice parked up, and they got out of the car. Gus radioed his position to Compo and requested back-up to both the Oak Lane and the Emm Lane park entrances. The humid night air preyed on them as they put on their protective gear. Heavy and cumbersome, sweat meshed the fabrics to their clothes and robbed them of air. Alice grinned as she fastened her stab vest. 'Lot of good these'll do us... this killer aims for the throat.'

But Gus noticed her fingers fumbling with the Velcro and registered the tell-tale tremor in her voice. Alice was as nervous as he was. Mehmoona's unpredictability, plus the dark and the

possibility of at least one accomplice, was worrying. A surge of adrenalin pistoned through his body, increasing his heartbeat, and he knew he was as prepared as he could be.

At night, Lister Park had a different, more malevolent feel to it. Gone were the family groups and in their place were looming shadows and hidden, unlit areas. Gus and Alice climbed the knee-high wall and entered the park, keeping to the shadows themselves.

‘Can you see anyone?’ Alice’s voice was a whisper breaking through the evening heat.

‘No. We’ll split up. You go towards the Botanical Gardens and I’ll head towards Cartwright Hall.’

As they moved off, Gus hesitated and then turned back. ‘Hey, Al.’

She glanced towards him.

‘Be safe... yeah.’



## CHAPTER 86

### *Zodiac*

Couldn't have planned it better if I tried. They're all there. I take a moment to watch them in the bandstand with the moonlight illuminating them like shimmering shadows. They're in high spirits... none of them have any idea what's going to happen tonight. As I climb the steps, I see that they've done as I asked. They've piled all their phones in a little heap in the middle of the circle and Leo has lit a candle, just like I instructed.

Most of them think we're here to think about Pratab and Betsy... but I have other plans and even Leo and Pisces don't know them yet. Talking of Pisces – there she is, all miserable and wan, like someone stole her favourite toy. She's edged closer to Jo Jo, but he's not interested. He looks distracted, like he's got something else on his mind. Dozy cow can't even tell he's gay! Story of her life. But, hey, at least she did as she was told and brought Zarqa with her. Leo's come up trumps... she always does. Two bottles of voddy and some weed. Just enough to get the party started. I climb the steps and someone bumps into me from behind.

My heart hammers and for a second, I think they've caught me. I know it won't be long. But it's just that tosser Karim, with his stupid bloody dog. *Who invited him?* He barrels past me, laughing and joking, the dog whimpering, and he settles down beside Zarqa.

It's almost time. I plonk my rucksack down and sit next to it. Leo's passing round the voddy and Jo Jo's rolling a joint. The bitter smell of bud fills the air as he lights it, inhales, and then blows out a smoke ring. Leo's getting giddy. Bet she started drinking before she even left home. Not surprising really. When this goes down, she's going to pay for what she did. I admire her – in a way – it takes guts to kill your own brother. Right until the last minute, I thought little Mita Patel would back down. Seemed she'd been on the receiving end of her brother's cruel taunts and tricks too many times. I mean, what sort of brother sets up a recorder in his sister's bathroom and then uploads the clips to *Facebook*? Bet the Patels didn't tell Gus what a prick their son actually was. It didn't take too much encouragement on my part to push her in that direction. Hell, even she thinks it was her idea.

Pisces is hanging onto Jo Jo's every word. Desperate to impress. Stupid cow can't even inhale properly. I lean over and prod her. 'Stop fucking coughing. You're going to get us caught.'

She looks at me like she's only just noticed I'm here. I lower my voice. 'You know your job.'

Her eyes are wide, pupils dilated already. She shakes her head, and I pinch her arm. 'You have to. It's your rules.'

I sneak the blade out of my rucksack and slide it across the floor to her. She doesn't notice my glove. Nobody does.

I nod to Leo, giving her the sign, and she jumps to her feet, light as a feather. 'Let's play a game, guys. Hide and seek.'

Everyone moans. They all want to chillax and get stoned and blasted. But it won't work then. I have to split them up. Need to direct them.

'Yeah, let's play.' I make a quick assessment and then speak. 'Karim, you're it...' and with a slight nod towards Jo Jo, I give Leo her instructions – Keep Jo Jo occupied.

Pisces is paler than ever, but she's got the knife in her hand. I can see it outlined in her pocket. She'll do as she's told. I grab Zarqa and Pisces by the hand and drag them to their feet, running down the stairs and off towards the Mogul Gardens. 'Start counting, Karim.'

Behind me, Jo Jo and Leo head in the opposite direction to the Botanical Gardens. I keep hold of Zarqa and Pisces, dragging them behind. Zarqa pulls against my grip, but Pisces is compliant. 'Down to the fountains. Quick. He'll never find us there.'

We're at the Mogul garden steps, just out of sight of Cartwright Hall CCTV when it happens. 'Police. Stop where you are.'

I hesitate, only for a second. Gus' voice, I'd recognise it anywhere. A quick glance at Zarqa tells me she's recognised it, too.

I scream, 'Knife, knife. She's got a knife!' Pisces looks at me, glances around, and then looks down at her hand, only then realising that it's her I'm yelling about.

Zarqa stares at her. 'Shit, not you? Surely not you?'

It's better than I could have imagined. I can hear footsteps running towards us and I push Zarqa. She falls sideways, stumbling for a moment before righting herself. I grab Pisces' arm and wrap it round me, positioning her hand with the knife at my throat. 'Help, help!'

Then Zarqa's on her feet, hands out in front of her. 'Take it easy, Claire. You don't have to do this. Let Mehmoona go!'

But Pisces can't let me go. I'm holding her arm tight to my skin. I press a little more, letting the blade nick me and the pain when it goes in feels good. As the blood trickles down my neck, I allow my voice to quiver. 'Help me, Zarqa. Make her stop.'

Zarqa's looking beyond my shoulder and I know Gus is there. 'She's got a knife. She's already drawn blood.'

'Okay, okay.' His voice is low, calming. 'Let's just slow down. Let her go. Nice and easy.'

Pisces complies. But I can't let that happen. Zarqa steps nearer, and that seems to waken something in Pisces. She tries to push me away, but I'm bigger than her. I twist and propel her towards Zarqa, throwing myself on the ground. It's like it's happening in slow motion. Pisces, hand still raised, blade pointing right at Zarqa, moves closer. At the same time, Zarqa's moving to meet her. I smile. It's going to happen. Right there in front of Gus, Pisces is going to stab Zarqa.

A few things happen at once. Then it's blurry. Thundering footsteps from behind me and a strangled. 'Nooooo, Zarqa!'

From nowhere, another figure dives on Zarqa and all three of them are on the floor, blood spurting everywhere, and that bloody dog growling at me.

What an end game. I just hope Leo's doing her job!

## CHAPTER 87

Shadowy shapes combined with unfamiliar night-time noises set Gus on edge. Mehmoona could be behind any of those trees and knowing how personal things had got, every rustle was a potential threat. Sticking to the darker areas, Gus made his way down the side of the tennis courts, his eyes darting from side to side, straining through the dark, looking for movement, his ears tuned to distinguish human sound against the inevitable animal activity. He jumped as a fox leapt out of one of the metal bins, dragging a fish and chip wrapper in its teeth and as it ran off, Gus took a moment to still his thudding heart and steady his breathing, before continuing with his search.

He reached the top of the hill past the bowling green before he heard the first sign of human activity; a low laugh, voices. *But is it her?* He paused, sweat dripping from his brow, trying to decipher where the sound was coming from. The bandstand or farther away? The night's quiet made sound travel over a longer distance. He crept forward, peering ahead, willing himself to see human figures. But all he could see was the bandstand at the bottom of the slope. He scanned the surrounding area, shapes forming into trees and bushes as his eyes became accustomed to the environment.

As he listened, the voices ebbed and flowed through the semi-dark, punctuated by the odd high-pitched giggle, low male rumblings, and the occasional yelp of a dog. Still, he wasn't sure where these sounds were coming from. *Was it beyond the bushes near the boating lake?* He repeated the scan, forcing himself to home in on the darker areas... no movement! Then, from the corner of his eye, he spotted a mass of activity accompanied by voices, louder now... excited. He jerked his head back. A group of amorphous figures stumbled down the bandstand's stairs. They must have been sitting down, out of view. Two of the figures ran in the direction of the Botanical Gardens and Gus hoped Alice would hear them coming. The other three headed towards the museum building. Gus ran after them.

As the moon slid from behind a cloud, he spotted them silhouetted at the top of the steps leading into the Mogul Garden. *Zarqa! Mehmoona and another girl!* His heart hammered. There was only one reason for them gathering here in the park. Unconcerned with stealth, he ran after them, wishing he wasn't carrying the added weight of the stab vest. He flashed his torchlight over the scene, illuminating the moving figures one by one.

'Police. Stop where you are!'

One of them yelled, 'Take it easy, Claire. You don't have to do this. Let Mehmoona go!'

*Not Zarqa!* Gus sped up only to stop abruptly at the scene. Claire had grabbed Mehmoona and held a knife to her neck. *Shit! Have I been wrong? It isn't Mehmoona?*

Mehmoona was in tears. 'Help me, Zarqa! Make her stop.'

Zarqa looked petrified, her eyes wide and staring straight at Gus, yet she took a step closer. 'She's got a knife. She's already drawn blood.'

There was nothing he could do. It was too risky, and he lowered his voice, schooled it to be calm, conversational, 'Okay, okay, let's just slow down. Let her go. Nice and easy.'

Zarqa moved closer. *What the hell is she doing?* Claire threw Mehmoona to the ground and, knife pointing at Zarqa, she dived towards her, arm extended and then there was blood everywhere.

'Nooooo, Zarqa!'

Gus lunged forward, dropping his torch, but before he could reach them, another figure dived into the chaos, pushing knife girl to the ground. A familiar dog pranced around the group, barking. *Trixie-Belle?*

Desperate to reach Zarqa, Gus dragged the boy off. The two girls lay on the concrete. Zarqa's hand still wrapped round both the other girl's and the knife shaft. The blade protruded from Claire's stomach.

Gus pressed two fingers to her neck and felt a pulse. He glared at Karim. 'Give me your T-shirt. Now! Somebody phone 999.'

Zarqa struggled to her feet, her face pale. 'We left our phones in the bandstand. That was the rule – No phones.'

Relieved that Zarqa was talking and brushing herself down, Gus wanted to gather her up and hug her, but he was too busy bundling up Karim's T-shirt and wrapping it around the weapon. 'Press down on this. But don't remove the blade.'

As he phoned for an ambulance, uniformed officers appeared, shining their torches on the scene. Trixie-Belle, distraught by the activity, began yelping. Karim, hands covered in blood, bare-chested, and smelling of vodka, called the dog to him with a nervous glance at the officers. 'Shit! I'll be in trouble big time!'

Mehmoona jumped to her feet and ran over to Zarqa. 'Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You saved my life.'

Gus studied the two girls. Zarqa shuddered and pulled away from the other girl. *Was Moona being too effusive?*

It was then that a scream rent the air. *Alice!* Gus jumped up and ran towards the Botanical Gardens, yelling over his shoulder. 'I need the injured girl accompanied to hospital, and the

others taken to The Fort. You two with me. Make sure you take all of them, even Bashir's daughter.'

Raised voices, yelling... *but where was it coming from?* His gaze swinging from side to side, welcoming the torchlight of the two officers, Gus searched for movement. Then, another yell. This time from the near side of the boating lake. He increased his pace, running down the hill until he saw two figures standing behind a park benches with another two sitting on it. Closer now, Gus, recognised both standing figures; Mita and Jo Jo! *What the hell! Mita!* And as he neared, he recognised Jerry and Dave on the bench.

Mita had yanked Jerry's head back and now held a kitchen knife at his throat. *Not another fucking knife!* Jerry, eyes wide, mouth opening and shutting like a stranded fish, hands flailing by his sides, was choking, she was holding him so tight. Dave turned around but was stilled by her harsh, 'Stop right there or I'll do it. You know I will, you smelly old tramp.'

Close enough now, Gus could see that she'd nicked Jerry's neck. 'You don't have to do that, Mita.' He kept his voice low, almost intimate. 'You tell me how we can sort this out and I'll see what I can do.'

He glanced at Jo Jo, who stood behind Mita. The lad's mouth was slack, his fists clenching and unclenching by his side. 'Step back, Jo Jo. Move away.'

Mita, flung her head back and laughed. Gus' heart sank. Whatever her plan was, negotiation didn't seem to be part of it. But negotiation was unnecessary, for Dave flung himself to the side and jumped to his feet. Mita jerked towards him, the blade leaving Jerry's throat and that was all it took. Dave jumped towards her and with the heel of his palm whacked her under her chin, jerking it backwards.

With a scream, her hands flayed, until Jo Jo sprang to action and circled her from behind. Gus jumped forward, grabbed her wrist, and twisted until she dropped the weapon.

Struggling and squealing, Mita fought as the officers cuffed her. As Gus wondered how the hell they were going to get to the bottom of all of this, Alice arrived from the opposite direction, panting. Gus shook his head. 'Good job I didn't need the cavalry.'

## CHAPTER 88

### SATURDAY

Leo

**S**till feeling a bit stoned. Can't believe it went down like that... not really. Pigs weren't supposed to be there. Just as well. Pisces was getting on my nerves. Moaning all the time. Was never sure she'd be reliable... and she stinks. Can't stand that! Dying for a cig, but they've taken them.

The sofa's lumpy. S'posed to be all child friendly, but in reality, it's hard, and it smells a bit, like someone'd spilled milk on it or something. The walls are covered with photos of big bright animals, grinning at me... no, not grinning... leering. Bastards are taunting me, laughing at me for getting caught. Sooo tired, head's hurting now too, voddy's made me dehydrated, and I need to sleep. Could do with a chokkie bar. I giggle. Got the munchies... Maltesers, that's what I fancy... or a Dairy Milk. Wonder if they still sell Creme Eggs. 'Can I have some water?'

The pig stares at me, one eyebrow raised... waiting for something else.

I sigh and smile, fluttering my lashes and say in an exaggerated tone, 'Puleeese.'

I wait until she hefts herself off her immense ass and add, '... and a Creme Egg.'

She looks at me like I'm something she's brought in on her shoe and ignores me. *Snooty cow!* I glare at her as she waddles to the door and speaks to the guard outside. Hope it's my water she's asking for and my chocolate. When she turns around, the fat cow leans on the wall, arms folded under her boobs. What sort of police officer is she? Would like to see her trying to run after a suspect... Thud! Thud! Thud! The dinosaurs are coming! I giggle and stretch my legs out on the couch, resting my head on the arm. Head's really sore now... I close my eyes. And then...

'Ahem. Feet!'

*Bitch!* I ignore her. Keep my eyes closed. I hear her thumping over... Thump! Thump! Thump! Here come the dinosaurs again, still I ignore her. I can feel her peering over me, some manly perfume hanging in the air, making me feel sick.

'Feet.'

I want to open my eyes cause I'm feeling giddy now, but I don't. 'Yeah, got two of them.'

She inhales, loud and rattly. 'Take. Them. Off. The. Couch.'

Oooh, Temper! Temper!

Before I can move, the door opens. *Thank God! Gasping for a drink!*

‘Mita! Mita! What are they saying about you? Tell us they got it wrong.’

Crap, crap, and crap! Why did they have to bring her here?

I slide my legs round and peer up at my mum. She’s all hands fluttering and tears. Looks a mess. Bags under her eyes, stain on her sari. Her face is all scrunched.

I smile, making it reassuring and soft.

Her face smooths over, relief flooding into her eyes and I blurt it out...

‘Pratab was a knob, and I killed him.’

A flutter of confusion flits over her, she takes a step towards me, stops. Her hand drifts up and covers her mouth. ‘Mita! Why would you say that? That’s horrid.’

I stand up, move towards her, and bare my teeth in a snarl. ‘Because it’s true and I would’ve killed the dirty tramp too if I’d got the chance. Truth is, I’d like to kill you too.’ And I lunge for her, but fatty’s there, dragging me back, pinning my hands behind my back, yelling, ‘Help!’

And as I strain against her grip, snarling and spitting at her, another officer storms in and drags my mum from the room.

I relax my body, stop fighting. ‘Can I have my Creme Egg now?’



## CHAPTER 89

It had been a long night and a longer day. Five teenagers at The Fort, one teenager in the BRI, anxious parents, lawyers, a boss who had fallen to pieces and who had become a witness; and Gus was no further in making sense of things. The only certainty was that there would be no more dead teens and no more macabre *Snapchats*.

Zarqa, Karim, and Jo Jo had provided straightforward accounts of the previous evening. Then in the early hours, Gus had broken the news to Jo Jo that his mother had died. Jo Jo had nodded once and looked down at the floor. Gus hadn't known what to do, but Alice spoke to Naila and between them they'd got Jo Jo some breathing space, before any final decisions were made about his future. At least until after his mum's funeral, he could stay with Mo and Naila. Zarqa had confessed to the Imam at the mosque and after a sizeable donation from Mo, he was prepared to overlook the spray-painting incident.

The atmosphere was heavy. No one had slept well and the reality of the events of the previous night were still sinking in. Gus looked round at his team, which included DCI Nancy Chalmers and Sebastian Carlton. 'DCS Bashir has taken a leave of absence in the aftermath of last night's events. She's been cooperative and her statement, while illuminating in some respects, also casts doubts about the finer aspects of the killings. Compo has applied for a court order into the specifics of Mehmoona Bashir's juvenile record, but in the meantime, her mother has furnished us with various facts.'

Gus cleared his throat. Conducted by himself and Nancy, the interview of their superior officer was heart-rending. He respected the quiet dignity with which Bashir conducted herself throughout, while being incredulous that such an experienced officer could be so blind to the truth. He nodded at Taffy to write up the facts. 'Extrapolating from her statement – the full transcription is in the files – the details are as follows:

Mehmoona, in Birmingham, was implicated in instigating a campaign of bullying which resulted in one girl attempting suicide on three separate occasions and another girl succeeding. The girls who perpetrated the bullying all cited Mehmoona as the ringleader, however no direct evidence was found linking her to any of the actual bullying.'

Alice tutted. 'Hence the sealed juvie file.'

'Exactly.' Gus sighed. 'It seems DCS Bashir pulled in some favours on her daughter's behalf and moved to Bradford. She believes that her marriage breakdown and the subsequent estrangement of Mehmoona from her father were contributing factors in the girl's behaviour.'

Compo spluttered and sent crisps flying across his desk. ‘Loads of kids have terrible experiences. Doesn’t mean they bully other kids into committing suicide and they don’t progress to killing people.’

‘That’s true, but let’s try to focus. This investigation is a minefield. Any suggestions, Prof?’

Blinking myopically, Carlton shrugged. ‘For now, the same approach you’d use for any other investigation. You need to target the weakest link, exploit it, get all the information you can and then regroup to come up with a strategy to coax Mehmoona to confess.’

‘Yeah, like that’ll be easy.’ Taffy’s tone was despondent and Alice, who was next to him, punched him on the arm. ‘Don’t be a wuss, Taff. We’ll start with Claire. The doctors at the BRI say she’s up to being interviewed. Then, if Mita hasn’t lost all grasp on reality, we’ll progress to her. We’ll do this.’

Gus smiled. Alice’s optimism was just what they needed right now. ‘Okay, Taffy, you’re with me at the hospital. Let’s see what Claire Stevens has to say.’

## CHAPTER 90

Claire Stevens' mum looked as pitiful as her daughter. Her acne-scarred face told Gus that Claire's complexion was an inherited condition. She was emaciated and seemed to have not quite grasped the seriousness of the accusations against her child. Gus sent the duty officer off for a break and chatted to the mother while they waited for Claire's solicitor to appear. Moments later a young, fresh-faced woman with a wide smile and optimism oozing from every pore, breezed in, introducing herself as Claire's representative and saying her client would cooperate.

Gus turned his attention to the young woman who was almost as pale as the bedsheets. Her wound had missed all major organs, and she had said it was an accident. Zarqa had claimed self-defence. Claire's lips quivered, and tears seeped from her eyes and ran down her face. Her mother, twitching and shaky mopped them up. Gus suspected Claire was barely aware of them.

Although he'd seen Claire holding the weapon to Mehmoona's neck, Gus pitied her. He had a hard job believing that she could have planned any of this. He gestured to Taffy to pull up a chair and set up the recording equipment. Introducing those present, Gus hoped he'd judged the weakest link correctly. 'Claire, can you tell me what happened last night?'

Claire glanced as if for reassurance, not to her mum, but to the solicitor who nodded. 'I didn't try to kill Mehmoona. She was holding my hand to her neck. She gave me the knife, and wanted me to stab Zarqa like I did Betsy. I told her and Mita I wanted to stop. It were bad enough before when we weren't killing anyone, but then Billy sodding Clark - Tosser killed hisself, I wanted to stop. But they said no. Said they'd hurt me... hurt me mam.'

'Who killed Pratab, Claire?'

'That were Leo. I mean Mita. We all have code names. Mehmoona is Zodiac, Mita is Leo, and I'm Pisces. Mehmoona found a place we could have a headquarters. It was all a game... that's all it were supposed to be... a game.'

'Who was the leader?'

'Zodiac... Mehmoona. She made us do everything, though I think Mita liked it. She was happy to kill Pratab.'

'How did you communicate? We have no evidence of the three of you being in contact.'

'Mehmoona gave us burner phones. We only used them to text or phone each other.'

*That was more like it.* Something concrete they could use. 'Where is your phone now?'

'Mehmoona made us chuck them in the lake last night. Said she was destroying evidence.'

Shit! Wonder what the chances of retrieving info from waterlogged phones is? He turned to Taffy. ‘Get the divers on it. We need those phones.’

Gus turned back to Claire. ‘What sort of evidence was on the phones, Claire?’

The girl shrugged. ‘Dunno, texts and stuff. Mehmoona recorded what we did to Pratab and Betsy. She recorded stuff in the headquarters too. She were always filming.’

‘Why did you kill Betsy, Claire? You must have known that was wrong.’

Claire sniffed, her bottom lip quivering. ‘I hated her. Betsy made everyone hate me because of my spots, because my mam’s a druggie, because I smell... not my fault the house stinks.’

Wide-eyed, Claire’s mum sobbed. ‘I’m sorry baby. So sorry. I tried to get clean, but it’s too hard.’

Claire’s solicitor exchanged a glance with Gus before handing the woman a tissue. ‘You need to keep quiet Mrs Stevens. Let the officer ask his questions.’

When the mum had calmed enough, Gus continued. ‘So, that’s why you killed Betsy?’

With a shrug, Claire looked for confirmation from her solicitor before replying. ‘Didn’t want to kill her. Thought we’d just frighten her.’

Gus had his doubts about that. Mita had already killed Pratab, so no jury would believe Claire’s claim that she hadn’t thought she’d be expected to kill Betsy. Regardless of that, Claire had been the one to kill her. He knew they had bullied her. No doubt she was heavily influenced by the other two, but still, she *had* taken a life.

The doctor came in, frowned at Gus, and said, ‘You need to wind this up. She needs to rest.’

‘Just one more question. Where is this headquarters of yours?’

The address she gave was close to Lister Park. A series of small shops fallen into disrepair. No different from the sort of places he, Mo, and Greg had used as dens when they were young. Only difference was they weren’t planning murders.

## CHAPTER 91

Sipping coffee in the observation suite, Gus reflected that interviewing the girls had been the easy bit. Straightening out their stories would take a lot more work.

Sebastian Carlton walked in and pulled up a seat next to Gus. ‘Ready?’

Gus was far from ready. He’d spent the last ten minutes wondering if this would work. Mehmoona was in the interview room with her solicitor. If they didn’t break her soon, convicting her would be more difficult. Of course, they had sufficient evidence to link Mehmoona to the killings, but unless she admitted guilt, there would be a big court case, which would put the families through hell. Gus wanted to avoid that if possible. Besides, the thought of Mehmoona grandstanding and playing to the gallery nauseated him. They had to extract a confession. ‘Just waiting for the others.’

And as if on cue, the door opened and in trooped the rest of the team and Nancy. Gus waited until they’d settled in front of the one-way mirror before nodding to Alice and Nancy. They’d agreed that Gus should not be on the interview team considering the evidence that she was his stalker. Carlton agreed that having Gus present would only feed her ego. Instead, he had suggested that two female officers might provoke her more as she seemed to enjoy the male attention. That decided, they’d planned their strategy.

When Alice and Nancy entered the interview room, Gus studied Mehmoona. *Why had she focussed her attention on him?* He barely remembered the few conversations they’d shared. Yet, if Carlton was right, the girl sitting opposite his colleagues, with her dip-dyed hair and insolent expression, was a stalker and the ringleader of a murder team. *How could someone so young be capable of manipulating her friends into killing?* As Alice completed the formalities and switched on audio and video recording, Gus could sense that Carlton was equally focussed on Mehmoona. When the door first opened, her head jerked up, a smile on her face, eagerness written all over it. However, that faded when she saw Nancy and Alice and she slumped in her chair.

Carlton gripped Gus’ arm. ‘You see that? She’s pissed off. Let’s keep her that way, eh?’

Nancy, looking as different from Mehmoona’s mother as was possible, made a show of smoothing down her floral dress and patting her hair. Her bracelets jangled as she rested her loosely clasped hands, on the table. She looked like anyone’s grandmother and that was what Carlton had suggested, in order to subvert the girl’s expectations at every turn.

Nancy sighed. ‘Well, my dear. What sort of bother have you been getting yourself into?’

Beside her, Alice glowered and Mehmoona cast a quick glance between the two of them and a sly smile flitted across her lips. Gus relaxed. So far so good. She was falling for their trick.

Lip trembling, Mehmoona, looked down. 'This is all a huge mistake. I've not done anything wrong. Zarqa saw Claire attacking me. I don't understand why I'm still here.'

Alice snorted and rolled her eyes, but Nancy angled herself away from Alice and reached across the table, resting her hand on the girl's arm. 'We've had Zarqa's statement and we know you're an innocent party in all of this. Gosh, even Gus saw the girl attack you.'

Alice shuffled a bit in her chair and cleared her throat. 'With respect, DCI Chalmers, there is evidence that...'

Nancy turned towards Alice, straightened her shoulders, and stuck her chest out. 'Excuse me, DS Cooper. When I want your input on this, I'll ask for it. Please don't interrupt again or I'll replace you with someone more competent.'

Mehmoona's solicitor glanced between the two officers. 'I'd like a word with my client please, in private.'

Gus held his breath. This was the point when everything could go wrong. Their strategy relied on Mehmoona's narcissism being allowed free rein. If the solicitor intervened, they might fail. The solicitor suspected their intentions, but if his client refused to accept his advice there was nothing he could do.

Nancy rolled her eyes and shared a smile with the girl. 'Really?'

She made to stand up, but Mehmoona jumped in. 'We're fine here.' She glared at her lawyer. 'I don't need you telling me what to do.'

'But...'

The solicitor didn't get his sentence out before she cut him dead.

'Enough. You're being paid to do what I want, and I want *you* to shut up.'

Under his breath Carlton muttered, 'Classic narcissist.'

Blinking, the man glanced between Nancy and his client and then shrugged.

Nancy pulled her chair closer and, elbows on the table, chin resting on her steeped hands, nodded her approval. 'So, all this stuff with Gus... I get it. He's hot, isn't he? And it all got a bit out of hand. We might be able to make that go away. You just need to tell us all about the other stuff, you know, with Mita and Claire?'

Again, with the trembling lip. Nancy kept her smile in place and passed a tissue across the table.

'I was lonely. No friends.' She paused and blew her nose. 'Mum dragged me here, didn't let me see my dad. It was all too much.'

Nancy nodded. 'I can see that. Moving to a new city, a new school, can't have been easy. Especially not in your GCSE year. I bet it was hard to make friends...'

Something flickered in Mehmoona's eyes as she grabbed hold of the prompt Nancy had offered. 'It was soooo hard. Most of the other kids were bitches. That Zarqa was a stuck-up cow. I didn't fit in with my Brummie accent and the only two girls who showed any interest in me were Claire and Mita.' She shrugged. 'What was I supposed to do? I was lonely and my mum was never home.'

Sincerity shone from Nancy's smile. 'Of course you were lonely. What was your mother thinking, working all those hours and not helping you settle in? That was irresponsible of her. No wonder you were drawn to the wrong crowd. Not that you'd realise that at first. I mean, Claire looks like she wouldn't say boo to a goose and Mita is from a respectable family. Last kids you'd expect to go off the rails.'

Mehmoona's smile was eager. 'Exactly. They seemed so nice and I was so lonely.' Her voice hitched on the last word and Nancy reached over and patted her hand.

'God, that kid's good.' Carlton's expression was a mixture of horror and awe as continued observing.

'To begin with, I thought it was all a game. You know, just a laugh. Not real. Then Mita started saying we should do stuff for real. I refused.' She looked right at Nancy, 'I was soooo scared. Didn't know what to do and didn't want to get in more trouble, especially after that stuff in Birmingham. My mum would have been furious. She'd have hit me, locked me in my room, starved me...' Mehmoona's sobs would have been convincing if not for the wealth of evidence against her and the other girls' statements. 'I should've told someone, but I was scared they'd kill me. That's what they said... that they'd stab me. And I believed them. They were evil... really scary. Both of them. Not just Mita, but Claire too. They were like the Wests or someone like that.'

Nancy smiled. 'Don't you worry yourself, dear. We already know that Mita and Claire are the ringleaders. You just got caught up in it all.' She gave a little giggle that made Gus's estimation of her acting skills increase. 'There's no way a simple girl like you could've masterminded all this.'

Nancy's smile widened, but Mehmoona's jaw clenched.

Gus laughed behind the reflective mirror. 'She didn't like that did she. Didn't like being called simple one bit.'

Carlton rubbed his hands together and leaned forward. 'Come on Nancy, love. Keep up the pressure and you'll have her.'

Nancy was in her element now. Her tinkling laugh grated on Gus, so he wondered what effect it would have on Moona as she continued setting the bait. ‘No. It’s quite clear to us... and she’s confirmed it, Mita was the mastermind. All of it, Pratab Patel’s death, Betsy Freeman’s death, it was all her idea. You were simply a pawn.’

Mehmoona paled and a flash of something - anger? - licked over her face. Gus was on the edge of his chair. The girl had gone still, a frown fluttered across her forehead, then her lips pursed. But Nancy continued. ‘Of course, they will rave about Mita for years to come. Psychologists will interview her and, no doubt, compare her to The Yorkshire Ripper, or perhaps even The Zodiac Killer.’

Carlton and Gus exchanged glances. This was their final thrust. They hoped that by equating Mita with Zodiac, the serial killer Moona herself identified with, she’d crack.

Mehmoona glanced at her solicitor, drummed her fingers on the table. The atmosphere in the observation room was electric, waiting for the knife to fall, whichever way it would. Carlton’s leg was bouncing up and down, Gus’ heart was hammering. *Bring it home, Nance, Bring it home!*

‘A nice respectable girl like you could never in a million years dream up such a plan...’ Nancy patted Mehmoona’s arm again. ‘No, dear. This took brains and deviousness and daring to execute.’

Gus held his breath. *Come on, come on, go for it!*

The silence in the interview room went on for too long. Carlton’s leg stopped thrumming, Gus’ chest tightened, then... Mehmoona laughed.

‘Idiots. All of you, idiots. That fucking Claire couldn’t plan a shag in a brothel. Course it wasn’t her. It was me. I planned it all... I set them up...’

She jumped to her feet, her eyes wide, fists clenched and, as Alice and Nancy smiled at each other, she roared, ‘Bitches!’

Gus collapsed onto his chair, exhaustion overtaking him while Carlton, Taffy, and Compo did a dance which involved a lot of high fives and whoops.

They’d rattled her... and the rest was easy as the entire story spewed out in all its sordid glory.



## CHAPTER 92

Hissing Sid motioned Gus and Alice into the gang's headquarters. Both suited up, Gus stood by the entrance as Alice moved into the small room and turned in a complete circle. He'd visited the room earlier, but everything had been so rushed, he'd been unable to digest what he was witnessing. He'd left the CSIs to process it because he had so many statements to take and so much information to untangle back at The Fort. As the interviews had progressed, Sid had fed findings and images back to the station so they could use evidence from the headquarters in the interviews. The pieces were knitting closer and closer together, but it would take time to document everything. As soon as they'd gathered all the evidence and forwarded it to the Crown Prosecution Service, Gus's job would be done, although he surmised that the repercussions from this investigation would stay with him for a long time.

This time, he wanted to absorb the entire room where so much chaos had been planned. Once Mehmoona started talking, she wouldn't shut up, so Gus had a good sense of the three girls escaping here, getting drunk, smoking weed, and Mehmoona manipulating and leading the other two on a destructive journey, culminating in the deaths of two teenagers and the destruction of their families.

Mildew hung in the air, heavy and oppressive, making the atmosphere even more cloying. Was it the stench of evil? It was the sort of smell he'd easily dismissed in the dens of his childhood with his friends. Now though, it clogged up his throat and made his eyes itch.

The space was full of contrasts. Brightly coloured cushions scattered on scraggy rugs. Small makeshift tables fashioned from old boxes with tealights on top, stood beside each cushion. A sheet of stained plywood covered a larger one in the centre. An empty bottle lay on its side in the middle, its neck pointing accusingly at Gus, making him remember the girls' description of the game they chose to select their victims. The floor was littered with cigarette stubs and spent spliffs, sweet wrappers, empty cans, bottles, and dirt. However, what was most interesting, were the walls.

Here, Gus could track their progress from malicious bullying, to the more sinister acts of character assassination. The list of names, the newspaper articles... all of it spoke of organisation and planning. What had these girls been thinking? Carlton, after intense scrutiny and analysis of their interviews, suggested they each had their own distinct triggers and Mehmoona had developed the knack, even before her arrival in Bradford, of preying on her

contemporaries' vulnerabilities. At great length she'd described how she saw each of the two girls, talking of them in disparaging ways. Gus of course had used this to drive a wedge between the girls to get to the truth.

They were all scheduled for in-depth psychiatric assessments and, with the amount of evidence, plus each girl's confession, Carlton had told him they would serve time in a juvenile detention centre, followed by psychiatric rehabilitation and, depending how they responded, they may be released with new identities in the future.

Gus took a last look round the room and had a desperate urge to escape the malevolence that seeped from the walls. He was being fanciful, he knew, yet his skin prickled. His head buzzed and the laughter of three young girls plotting and planning various revenges against people who had slighted them, echoed back at him. At what point had they decided to commit murder? To take the lives of those they sought revenge against? Had it all been, as Mehmoona insisted, a game led by her to prove her superiority to the other girls? And if so, what had flipped in Mita's and Claire's brains to make them susceptible to this degree of violence?

Images retrieved from their dumped burner phones by Compo were damning. Three girls, drunk and egging each other on to kill. Laughing and joking and taking selfies as they did so, was sickening. Gus pitied any jury that had to see that. He tried to balance the outpourings of support for Betsy and Pratab's families online, with the images of the murdered bodies that had gone viral and the filth that lay just under the surface of the Internet. They kept popping up, despite Compo and the IT specialists' attempts to block them and what was more disheartening, were the sheer number of views and shares they gained. Were there really so many sick, heartless people out there who took gratification from the snuffing out of a human life? What sort of society was this if dead kids were amusement fodder?

Pratab's mum, in particular, had taken great comfort from the online support. Yet, Pratab himself hadn't been completely innocent. Comps had found an image that Pratab had posted outing Jo Jo and there were others - bullying texts, malicious *Facebook* posts, cruel *Instagrams*, all among normal, jolly everyday posts. Doctors had admitted Mr Patel to Lynfield Mount Psychiatric hospital when the enormity of everything prompted him to attempt suicide. Betsy Freeman's mum was a wreck and was drowning her grief in alcohol combined with pills. Gus suspected it wouldn't be too long before she would join her daughter.

Then there was Jo Jo's abuse. *Poor kid!* Not only were there images of him all over the Dark Web, but he'd lost his entire family, his home... his innocence. They'd found a hidden camera in his bedroom. Initially, Jo Jo had blamed Razor McCarthy. In interview though, Mehmoona had admitted to planting it, after finding out Jo Jo was a drone expert through some of his

*Instagram* posts. The delight on her face as she'd described entering the lad's home, looking down at his mother as she slept, stealing one of Jessie's beloved stuffed animals, before finally finding the key and breaking into his room, was creepy. It was as if she expected to be congratulated on her ingenuity. Her plan had been to steal a drone, but after seeing Jo Jo's equipment, she formulated a different plan.

Her glee, when she described the things she saw Jo Jo doing, had made Gus want to vomit. He still didn't know how Nancy and Alice had sat through those interviews so calmly. Each time they came out, they seemed to shrink. Their control during questioning stripped right back the moment they left the room. Gus had applied for mental health support for both of them. No way would he allow them to internalise any of this. Mehmaona Bashir's warped mind was baggage they didn't need to carry. Later, he, Carlton, Alice, and Nancy had got very drunk and although it didn't help them forget, it at least gave them a temporary reprieve from exposure to the malevolence of Mehmaona's twisted mind. Unfortunately, catching evil didn't make it go away.

Gus and Compo had discussed the unseen evil of social media... the persuasive and abusive stuff that was unmonitorable and the sick minds that exploited that weakness. Compo admitted he had an online friendship group which kept him sane when he was investigating this sort of shit and Gus was glad the lad had that support system. The more he found out, the more Gus wanted to punch walls. If he could crawl into the Dark Web and physically catch these child abusers, he would be unable to hold himself back. Gus' anger was ever present - roiling and snarling inside him, making him jumpy and snappy at everyone. He jogged every spare moment he had, trying to banish the tension, trying to evict the tightness in his chest that had taken up permanent residence. Nothing worked. He was a stick of dynamite just waiting to explode.

Compo was working to pinpoint the john who'd lured Jo Jo in, but he reckoned that all they'd achieve, would be some 'under the radar' phishing to hit the bastard where it hurt... his wallet. Gus turned a blind eye to Compo's activities, hoping that he and his online friends could make the pervert's bank accounts inaccessible. It wasn't a solution though... just a temporary band-aid... but it would have to do... for now.

Alongside all of that, the violation of his own and Patti's privacy was making him paranoid. He'd seen how quickly those images had gone viral and he wondered how they could ever stop the flow of unseen evil now the world had become so small. He'd got Compo to reinforce his home PC security, had deleted all his own social media accounts, not that he used any except *WhatsApp*. However, it was Patti who suffered most in the aftermath of the posts of their sex life going viral. The media was still on her case the whole time. Journalists camped outside her

school every day, hassling pupils and staff alike. Thank God it would soon be summer break. Her position at the school was becoming more and more untenable. Initially they'd thought the media attention would die down, but then news of the arrests hit the press. As usual, he, the male, was getting off lightly whilst she was on the receiving end. Jez Hopkins' request for an exclusive interview for his rag had been ignored. Little creep!

They'd agreed to maintain a discreet distance for now because they were both so busy dealing with their respective work obligations and because they didn't want to refuel media interest. Space away from Patti had made Gus wonder if the events surrounding their relationship would forever taint it. And therein lay a problem. As much as he cared about Patti, maybe even loved her... it just wasn't enough to make him prioritise their relationship. But Patti and his relationship was a discussion for another day.

Overwhelmed by everything the room symbolised, Gus walked out into the heat, stepped out of his overalls and yelled, 'See you back at The Fort, Al.'

Then he was off, jogging as fast as he could through the dense humidity, hoping that he'd be able to exorcise the demons chasing him, but knowing that no matter how many runs he did, they would catch up with him at night.

## *EPILOGUE*

### *SIX WEEKS LATER*

**G**us looked at the screen and smiled. Carlton hadn't bothered to dress up for the occasion. His specs were held together by masking tape and his yellow T-shirt vied with the *BBC News* studio lighting for dominance.

*... and today we have Professor Sebastian Carlton from the Forensic Psychology Department at Leeds Trinity University. Professor Carlton has worked with the FBI's behavioural analysis department and more recently was a consultant on Bradford's The Snapchat Killers case.*

*Professor Carlton, isn't it unheard of for three girls to work together to perpetrate the acts of murder we witnessed earlier in the month? Could you give us some insight into these unnamed girls' psyches?*

*... what interests me most about this case is the dynamic between the girls. The alpha teen is a fascinating study. She exerted an unparalleled influence over the other two. However, what I found particularly interesting is that the Beta teen absorbed some of the Alpha's qualities... her desire to dominate... to lead... to be in control. This is...*

Gus switched the TV off and grabbed Bingo's lead. 'Come on, boy. Let's go see Zarqa and Jo Jo.'

Bum wriggling in excitement, Bingo's tongue lolled from his mouth and he emitted a round of over-excited yelps. Gus ruffled his head. 'You love playing with Mo's kids don't you, Bingo? And your mate will be there too. Karim's bringing Trixie-Belle, someone for you to play with.'

Gus called the trio *The Survivors Gang*. They'd been through a lot, Jo Jo and Zarqa more than Karim. Jo Jo still mourned his mum, but Naila had worked wonders and got him and Jessie a foster home together. He was a regular visitor with Zarqa at Gus' house, and he had a good feeling about Jo Jo's future. Taffy had been there for him during his mum's death and since then he'd spent long hours discussing all things techie with Compo. All of it did the officers as much good as it did Jo Jo.

It was Karim who lifted them from the darkness when they thought too much about everything that had gone down. Karim, whose humour and sensitivity forced them to engage with life. Even Mo was all right with the lad dating Zarqa... how could he not be? Karim had done exactly what Mo himself had done at around the same age; put his own life at risk to save the girl he loved.

It pleased Gus to see Mo and Zarqa interacting again. Mo was losing that haunted look and, although they still had some sticky moments, the future for Mo's family looked a lot better. Naila and Gus had smoothed over their differences too, although she'd made him promise to talk about his 'trust' issues with his psychiatrist and, over the weeks she'd held him to it. To the point as ever, Naila had told him, 'You can't keep erecting these barriers or you'll end up a lonely old man.'

That was a direct reference to the demise of his relationship with Patti. Unable to take the ongoing media circus and the endless snide comments from students, not to mention some less than supportive emails sent by parents who questioned her authority now their Jane, Jaffer, or Jasdeep had seen her boobs, Patti had resigned from her post at the school and travelled to Jamaica to reconnect with her mother's side of the family. Their parting had been amicable, yet neither of them felt able to consider the possibility of a future together. In his less depressed moments, Gus accepted that if they couldn't withstand the first real crisis they faced as a couple, then they couldn't have hacked it long term.

At night though, when neither he nor Alice could sleep, he admitted to her that he questioned his ability to connect with people, to commit himself fully. That was the point Naila and Compo had made - he was damaged. He knew it all stemmed from killing Greg and losing Greg's son, Billy. That was when the blanket of despondency had first descended. When he stopped trusting others or believing in himself. He'd thought Patti would help him exorcise that once and for all, but he'd been mistaken.

The single bonus was that he and Alice had grown closer. They'd both learned the hard way that evil wasn't always right there in your face. That it was a shapeshifter with no set form; malignant and remorseless. Alice living with him was his salvation and, he suspected, it was hers too. She'd put her house in Saltaire on the market saying it held too much negative energy and Gus was in no hurry to evict her, for despite their pain, Alice brought life to the house.

With Bingo dancing at his feet, Gus yelled up the stairs to his lodger. 'Come on, Al, or we'll be late.'

As he waited for Alice to appear, his phone rang. *Katie!*

Why couldn't she just leave him be for a while? Typical Katie, wanted everything her own way, right there and then. He dismissed the call, which was almost immediately followed up by a text:

Katie: You're not being fair keeping us hanging on like this, Gus. You need to let us know your decision!

*Fair? Fair?* Nothing that had happened in the last month was fair.

Filled with the desire to run from the house and throw the phone into the boating lake so he'd never hear from his sister again, Gus' chest tightened. Then, inhaling, he counted to ten, before walking through to the kitchen where, with controlled deliberation, he placed his phone on the table. For the foreseeable future, Gus didn't want to engage with anyone other than his friends. He'd decide when he was good and ready, and Katie and Gaby could like it or lump it. He was fed up with being expected to do what everyone else wanted. For once, he was going to make sure his decision was right for him.

Seconds later, Alice bounced down the stairs, thrust her arm through Gus' and together they walked to the park, Alice's good-natured chatter a contrast to the tears he'd heard from her room the previous night. *Two broken souls together, that's what we are.*

Halfway round the boating lake, a frantic, 'Gus, Alice' boomed from their right. Gus spotted Mo and three of his daughters in one pedalo with Naila, Jo Jo, Zarqa, and Sabah in another. They appeared to be having some sort of race with Karim who was running along the edge of the lake with Trixie-Belle beside him. Bingo began straining at his lead when he saw his friend.

'DI McGuire, DI McGuire.' Karim skidded to a halt in front of them. 'Got some news for you. Mrs Brown's moving into sheltered housing and they don't allow pets, so I'm getting to keep Trixie-Belle. That's great innit?'

The lad's beaming face made Gus smile. Maybe they could bottle Karim and prescribe him on the NHS. The lad was a real tonic. He reminded Gus of Mo. 'Great news, Karim, but remember you can call me Gus now, you know.'

The two dogs fussed and sniffed each other, and Karim tugged on Trixie-Belle's lead. 'Aw shi... I mean, yeah. Forgot like. Gus it is.'

'Talking of names. What you gonna do about her name?' Gus inclined his head towards the Rottweiler with the unlikely name.

Karim grinned. 'Got that sorted. Gonna call her TB, you get it?' He raised his hand for a fist bump and Gus obliged.

‘Great choice.’ He turned and yelled to the kids on the boats. ‘Ice cream?’

Judging by the excited yells, that would be a yes.

*This* was one of those times he needed to savour. So, Gus allowed the happiness to wash over him like a balm and tried to enjoy the moment. After all, he knew only too well how short-lived it could be.



## Part Two: The Critical Exegesis

### Chapter 1: From Inadvertent Researcher ... to Creative Writing PhD Practice-led Researcher ... to Creator of expansive narratives ...

#### 1.1 Introduction

Governments and research institutions use the following UNESCO statement to define research:

Creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including the knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008, p. 405)

Despite my reservations regarding the dated and exclusive use of ‘man’, which I will replace with ‘people’, I posit that both the creative element of my PhD, my crime novel *Unseen Evil*, and my accompanying academic thesis ‘increase the stock of knowledge [...] of [people], culture and society’ by demonstrating the need for expansive narratives in the wider publishing industry and within the Crime Fiction (CF) genre in relation to the absence of the teen voice. *Unseen Evil* uses my research pertaining to contemporary ‘people, culture and society’ to devise ‘new applications’ by giving voice to diverse teen lived experiences for the extensive adult CF audience, thus highlighting the issues faced by this multi-disenfranchised group.

My creative choices were informed by research into diversity and inclusion in the publishing industry and within the CF genre, teen experiences, and appropriation of voice. Engagement with authors, readers and teens through interviews, combined with my personal lived experiences and absorbed knowledge, contributed to the creation of *Unseen Evil*. Creative practitioner Katrina Finlayson in *The potential of the exegesis and the challenge of symbiosis* (2017) posits that: ‘The exegesis anchored the creative components [of her research]; it situated my individual story within a broader context’ (p.7) Like Finlayson, formulating my research findings within chapters 2 and 3 of the exegesis reinforced the

importance of *Unseen Evil* in bringing teen lived experiences to an adult CF audience.

Through combining the creation of *Unseen Evil* with a research driven exegesis I could illuminate previously overlooked issues, namely the lack of expansive narratives, within CF and exemplify how this could be remedied in practice.

The influences which guided my thought processes throughout the creation of *Unseen Evil* are akin to Ann Patchett's idea of the creative mind as a 'compost heap':

I am a compost heap and everything I interact with, every experience I've had, gets shovelled onto the heap where it eventually mulches down, is digested and excreted by worms and rots. It's from that rich, dark humus, the combination of what you encountered, what you know and what you've forgotten, that ideas start to grow. (Patchett, 2014, p 40)

With Patchett's metaphor in mind, Chapter 1 explores my own layers of 'rich, dark humus' cradling a lifetime of haphazardly scattered seeds which nestle, dormant and safe, until a specific water droplet or a particular ray of sunshine stimulates their growth. It is from these slowly awakening seedlings, each carefully nurtured according to its own particular needs, that my ideas grow, flourish, and entangle to guide my creative choices. This chapter considers three contributory creative influences on *Unseen Evil*; My reflections as an inadvertent investigator, knowledge gained as a creative writing PhD practice-led researcher, and my practice as a creator of expansive narratives.

## **1.2 Inadvertent Investigator**

Prior to the formalisation of *Unseen Evil*'s concept in the form of my PhD proposal (2017), the seeds of its origins germinated and were subconsciously fertilised by many different, but equally significant, stimuli. I attempted to trace these stimuli retrospectively and concluded that lived experiences – whether direct, anecdotal, or viewed as an interested bystander through a variety of channels such as media, literature and suchlike – had combined to create the 'rich, dark humus' from which the seeds of my imagination grow. However, these

creative seeds do not grow in isolation, but become an entanglement of roots and shoots, which interlink, cross-seed and eventually flower into creative projects. This form of autobiographical reflection or ‘auto-ethnography’ is described by Louise Tondeur as ‘a suitable methodology for an investigation of practice research [...]. It is an authentic approach to writing practice, where – very often – several “selves” collide.’ (p.1)

Auto-ethnography allows for incidents, observations and emotions from different parts of the author’s life to collide and produce an amalgam of these experiences which may shape future actions, thoughts, and opinions. Whilst Tondeur utilises this practice in writing about the self, it translates equally well as a platform to produce expansive narratives.<sup>1</sup> This form of reflective practice validates the contribution of years of rumination, occasional snippets of inspiration, overheard dialogue, visceral responses, arbitrary linkages of events, thoughts and emotions, all tempered by space and reflective time.

Two seedlings which have periodically piqued my interest are child/teen killers and serial killers, as will be explored in the following sections.

### **1.2.1 The Child/Teen Killer**

Over the years I nurtured the nestling seed pods until they split open to reveal fragments of ‘dormant’ memories pertaining to child or teen killers, each of which vied for purchase in the humus and strived to grow and feed my imagination. Each visit to these seedlings revealed firmer roots, additional sprouts and emerging leaves which jostled for my attention. The strongest seed was the 1993 murder of toddler Jamie Bulger, by two ten-year-old boys. Many elements of the murder impacted on me. Having just miscarried, I felt that my plans to start a family were tenuous. Meanwhile, this event played out on my TV and in the newspapers,

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<sup>1</sup> **Expansive Narratives:** those which include representation of disenfranchised and marginalised groups in a responsible, non-stereotypical and non-exploitative way.

prompting a plethora of visceral responses. Each one sparked an internal battle of emotions, vacillating between empathy with the Bulger parents, a combination of anger, sympathy and confusion about the ten-year-old killers and their families, and outrage at how the media sensationalised this tragedy. I attempted to comprehend how two such young children could commit such an act. Alongside this, the dilemma faced by the legal system in considering how to deal with the young offenders was divisive. Indeed, a similar incident in Norway twenty months later was handled very differently and, as reported in *The Independent* (Karacs, 1914) and *The Guardian* (James and Macdougall, 2010), the perpetrators' names were not released and nor were they tried as adults.

My confusion was tempered by fleeting, yet frequent and disturbing, thoughts of: 'What if those children were mine?' 'How would I react if I'd been Jamie's mum?' 'How would I continue after such a devastating experience?' 'What went wrong in those ten-year-olds' lives/psyches that drove them to commit murder?' and 'How should society deal with these situations?'

The persistent belief that there were not one, but three child victims in this case, remained with me and I still ponder why these tragedies occurred, whether they were preventable, and if similar events can be avoided in the future. I am uncertain how effective the punishments meted out to Bulger's killers, or any other child killers of our time, are. That two children killed together, combined with an inability to 'make sense' of their motivations, sowed my interest in aspects of the child/teen killer that are explored in *Unseen Evil*; the concept of Nature v Nurture, group compliance and peer pressure, drug use, mental ill health, social disadvantage and social media (SM). My research findings regarding contemporary youth murder in the UK, consolidates my conviction that illuminating contemporary teen

lived experiences can play an important part in addressing some of the issues they face. (see Chapter 3)

Subsequently my fascination with the subject of child/ teen killers led me to research extensively around the subject through the following media: Adult CF novels, Young Adult (YA) novels, Film and TV dramas, Documentaries, True crime books and News articles.<sup>2</sup> In BBC's *Written In Blood* series, CF writer Alex Marwood explains how her interest in the Jamie Bulger murder prompted her to write *The Wicked Girls* (2012). She states that the premise behind *The Wicked Girls* was: 'If you did something really horrendous as a child, would you recover as an adult?' (2017) *The Wicked Girls* reunites, as adults, two young girls convicted of murdering a toddler, and explores how their very different treatment in the penal system has impacted upon their adult selves.

My blog *The Crime Warp* reviewed Simon Lelic's CF novel, *The Child Who* (2012), which explores the circumstances of a young boy who perpetrates horrific acts resulting in the murder of a classmate.<sup>3</sup> My review noted that:

This novel explores the tragic repercussions of the solicitor's decision to defend the boy on his own family, the victim's family and the murderer's family. It is a sad commentary of society's inability to prevent these tragic events happening and also

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<sup>2</sup>**On Child/Teen Killers in Adult CF:** *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (Shriver, 2009), *A Line Of Blood* (McPherson, 2015), *The Killing Boys* (Delaney, 2021), *The Child Who* (Lelic, 2012), *The Wicked Girls* (Marwood, 2012), *The Fourth Monkey* (Barker, 2017). **On Child/Teen Killers in YA novels:** *Genuine Fraud* (Lockhart, 2017), *Two Can Keep a Secret* (McManus, 2019), *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* (Jackson, 2019), *Five Little Liars*, (Morgan, 2020), *Allegedly* (Jackson, 2017). **On Child/Teen Killers in TV & Film Fictional Dramas:** *The Return*, (Criminal Minds, Amazon, 2013), *Wire in The Blood: Nothing But The Night* (Amazon, 2005), *Secrets and Lies* (ABC 2015-2016), *The Bad Seed* (Warner Bros, 1956), *13 Reasons Why*, (Series 3, Netflix, 2019). **On Child/Teen Killers in Documentaries/true films:** *Daniel Bartlam*, (Crime and Investigation, 2017), *The Child Killers: Written In Blood* (CBS Reality, 2017), *Psychopath with Piers Morgan* (Netflix, 2019), *Beaten For Being Different* (Channel 5, 2017), *Britain's Young Serial Killers* (Channel 5, 2016), *The Boys Who Killed James Bulger* (Amazon, 2002). **On Child/Teen Killers in News/news articles:** *Angela Wrightson: Teenage torture killers keep anonymity* (Casciani, BBC, 2020), *How Can Anyone Be So Evil* (Corless, Daily Mirror, 1993), *Why little angels become monsters*. (Coward, Observer 1993), *Teenagers sentenced to at least 20 years for Spalding murders* (Addley, Guardian, 2016). **On Child/Teen Killers in True crime books:** *Children Who Kill* (ed. Cavadino, 1999), *Children Who Kill: profiles of pre-teen and teenage killers* (Davies, 2006), *Kids Who Kill: True Stories About Children Who Became Killers and Murdered Others* (Scott, 2016), *Inside the Mind of a Teen Killer* (Chalmers 2009), *The Wicked Boy: An Infamous Murder in Victorian London Bloomsbury* (Summerscale, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> The Crime Warp review of *The Child Who* (Lelic, 2012): <http://thecrimewarp.blogspot.com/2012/12/the-child-who-by-simon-lelic-i-was.html>.

the state's inability to ensure the 'protection' of the child murderer whilst meting out a punishment acceptable to the society as a whole. (2012)

The novel explores how the press and the public vilify the duty solicitor for representing the child killer. In this, it exemplifies Stanley Cohen's 'Moral Panic' where the solicitor, as the perceived defender of the killer, becomes 'vulnerable [...] to the [media- fuelled] furies of a fully orchestrated moral panic' (1999, p.591) and in this is reminiscent of the Bulger case. What makes the novel so compelling is that it explores the psyche of the killer, through the solicitor's eyes, in a way that demonstrates the child's vulnerability without minimising the horror of his crime. Lelic considers the wider picture and thus mirrors ongoing debates about how our society responds to these aberrations that, although rare, occur often enough to be notable.

With social disadvantage, family background and peer influence a recurring factor in teen crime, I considered my personal experiences as a teacher in inner city Bradford, where I witnessed the harsh repercussions of poverty and how families respond to their circumstances in very different ways. The children I taught were the same age as Jamie Bulger's killers and, no doubt, that influenced my thought processes at the time. My teaching experiences were, at times, poignant and uplifting, heart-breaking and frustrating, challenging and redemptive. Witnessing very young children being used by their parents as drug runners, others locked in cellars as a punishment, children suffering cigarette burns inflicted by older siblings, incest and child abuse, was juxtaposed with the determination of loving families striving to transcend their economic situation and do their best for their children. It fascinates me to consider what the children of these different and varied circumstances might have become. How would they be affected as older teens or adults by their childhood experiences? How would they react to life's trials and tribulations?

### 1.2.2 Serial Killers

My fascination with the ‘serial killer’ precedes my curiosity about child killers. Growing up near Glasgow, the Scottish serial killer Bible John (BJ) was my childhood bogeyman. Active from 1968-1969, when I was five years old, BJ was never captured and so was tantalisingly scary. Throughout my formative years, hypotheses and conjecture about BJ were visited and revisited in the tabloids and in whispered conversations behind the bike sheds, or on the streets. As both reader and writer, the serial killer novel and real-life serial killers fascinate me. The first serial killer novel I read was William Marsh’s *The Bad Seed* (2015) which is about a child serial killer in the 1950s. I first read this in the late 1970s. Tartan Noir crime fiction writers have explored his eerie presence throughout my lifetime; Ian Rankin’s *Black and Blue* (2008) explores the BJ theme when a copycat killer surfaces and Liam McIlvanny’s *The Quaker* (2018) is a fictional account of the investigation into BJ. Many other crime fiction authors have explored real-life serial killers in their work; Val McDermid’s *A Place of Execution* (2010) was influenced by Myra Hindley and Ian Brady and Mark Billingham’s *The Killing Habit* (2018) explores an ongoing real-life serial cat-killing case.<sup>4</sup>

The roots of my fascination with serial killers were further embedded when I moved to Bradford to study in the mid-1980s, a mere few years on from the Yorkshire Ripper attacks. I had followed the investigation and felt visceral outrage at the police failure to capture him and their disregard for the lives of those of his victims who were sex workers. A stone’s throw from my halls was the site of one of his attacks. It was both horrifying and fascinating to walk the same ordinary and unthreatening cobbled streets as Peter Sutcliffe and his victims. When I moved to Heaton twelve years later and discovered that I passed the

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<sup>4</sup> **Crime Fiction influenced by real serial killers:** *The Long Drop* (Mina, 2017), *The Black Dahlia* (Ellroy, 2011), *The Search* (Linskey, 2017), *Love Like Blood* (Billingham, 2018), *Dead Like You* (James, 2010), *Watch Me* (Clarke, 2017) *The Chalk Pit* (Griffiths, 2017).

Sutcliffe home *en route* to my kids' school, I was again struck by the sheer normality of an area that had housed such a violent killer. By chance, I made friends with a fellow parent who grew up next door to Sutcliffe. The ordinariness of the street, his home and, according to my friend, Sutcliffe and his wife, was chilling and prompted questions around motivation and psychopathy.

My childhood knowledge of BJ, my developing taste for serial killer novels and my proximity to Peter Sutcliffe's home all entwined on my mulch heap and in 1999 I wrote a short story from the point of view (POV) of BJ's children, in which I explored the theme of Nature v Nurture. I played with the possibility that BJ had resurfaced in Yorkshire.

Over the years I'd managed to keep the knowledge of my ancestry quiet. After *she* died, there seemed no point in dragging it all up again and by then he'd stopped. Now, I wondered if he'd maybe started up again. Surely there couldn't be another man as evil as my Dad. Surely not. But there was and he was in Yorkshire and ... maybe it *was* my Dad. This time I was old enough to do something about it. The trouble was, I wasn't quite sure what to do. (1999)

From this point, my subconscious compost heap increasingly influenced my writing choices as more and more experiences were shovelled on and most of them revolved around the CF genre. As well as reading CF, I started a blog called *The Crime Warp* (2012) which reviews crime fiction, interviews CF authors and discusses issues pertaining to the genre. After my BJ short story, my focus became solely CF and specifically the police procedural, often with a serial killer antagonist.

### **1.3 Creative Writing PhD Practice-led Researcher**

Like many of the CF authors interviewed during my PhD research and as evidenced by statements, articles and comments by notable CF authors (see Chapter 2), my main aim in writing CF is to explore, through narrative, societal injustices that I feel should be illuminated. Including my PhD novel, *Unseen Evil*, I have written eleven CF novels exploring a range of subject matter including child trafficking/paedophilia, racism, homophobia, drug



lords/turf wars, homelessness, mental health and poverty. In addition to exploring societal issues, a major consideration for me is to represent wider society by using expansive narratives to represent a diverse society. This stems from my own lived experience. I am from a Scottish working-class background, live in the North of England, have a mental health disability, am married to an Indian, and have dual-heritage children, two of whom are gay. Coupled with this, I became increasingly aware that the CF genre, whilst illuminating a range of ‘issues,’ still does not represent the diverse society we live in. Furthermore, I realised that although I addressed various issues through my writing and ensured that my characters were representative of wider society in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, disability, social advantage/disadvantage, I was guilty of not addressing these issues as they pertained to diverse teen lived experiences. Several of my novels contain significant teen characters but they are side-lined by the main, adult-focused plot.<sup>5</sup>

The following section will consider my writing process and the methodology employed in the creation of *Unseen Evil* by discussing and analysing the creative choices made in order to incorporate the teen voice within my existing series of adult CF novels and the implications of the findings derived from my teen interviews on my writing.

### **1.3.1 Methodology**

A pre-requisite of the CW PhD is that the doctoral research contributes to new knowledge beyond ‘local’ research which provides factual information pertinent to the authenticity of the storyline to ‘global’ research. (Kroll & Harper, 2013) In *Unseen Evil* my aim was to highlight the absence of the teen voice in adult CF (local research), whilst demonstrating the need for expansive narratives within the publishing industry and the CF genre, in order to illuminate the challenges faced by marginalised groups and to demonstrate how this can be achieved

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<sup>5</sup> **Previous Novels Featuring Teen Protagonists:** *Unquiet Souls* (2019), *Uncoiled Lies* (2019), *Untainted Blood* (2019), *Uncommon Cruelty*, (2019)

(Global research). As Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper argue ‘...writers ‘performing’ as researchers make a contribution to knowledge by speaking to that part of the writer and reader’s mind that is self-aware’(p112). It is the transference of knowledge and understanding gained through academic research combined with reflection on the creative choices made in writing *Unseen Evil* that constitutes a contribution of new and improved insights. *Unseen Evil*’s focus on inclusion and on offering insight into teen lived experiences contributes to wider representation of marginalised groups within the CF genre, which is the most influential literary genre. Research conducted for my exegesis supports a contemporary movement of literary figures who struggle for equity in the publishing world and who fight for representation for diverse marginalised groups. (see Chapter 2)

Craig Batty and Allyson Holbrook, acknowledging the methodological variances in the manner of research, describe the CW PhD as:

not simply an artefact plus an exegesis: it is a singular research question (or proposition) that is undertaken via the modality of practice and some aspects of ‘traditional’ research resulting in one work (a thesis) that presents itself in various ways. (p3)

Batty and Holbrook acknowledge the symbiotic nature of the creative and the academic and in creating *Unseen Evil* I demonstrated how CF can contribute to the inclusion of marginalised groups through expanding the narratives with inclusion in mind, whilst my academic research demonstrates the reasons why it is important to do so. It is the combination of these two elements that demonstrates that ‘a theory or idea that is explored and executed partly through practice [can be] clearly evidenced via a product (e.g. research-led practice).’ (p3)

When researching *Unseen Evil* I conducted interviews with CF authors and elicited conversations via social media with CF readers to further understand the impact of the genre on both authors and readers and to ascertain how closely my personal viewpoint aligned with

my co-writers and my readers. I also conducted qualitative interviews with teens, to assist in the creation of my teen characters. This contributed to my academic research discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

The methodology employed in making creative choices is difficult to encapsulate. My creativity metaphor acknowledges the importance of a carefully nurtured, though often dormant, variety of seed subconsciously gathered along my life's path and augmented by more recent influences such as academic research, world events, and recent experiences. *Unseen Evil* is the culmination of a lifetime of influences germinating and sprouting, their stems intermingling to strengthen my commitment to create novels which promote expansive narratives. In this, I identify with Freshwater and others' beliefs that 'Auto-ethnography is a research approach that privileges the individual. It is an artistically constructed piece of prose, poetry, music or piece of artwork that attempts to portray an individual experience in a way that evokes the imagination of the reader, viewer or listener.' (2010, p504) In writing *Unseen Evil*, as well as utilising autobiographical experience, I also incorporate elements from my academic research, shared stories and observed events and my reactions to them to inform my narrative. Returning to my metaphor of cultivation, my research has provided the trellis upon which *Unseen Evil* has grown.

Drafting, redrafting, reflecting and researching my creative output in a continuum of critical analysis, ends only when I, as my own creative director, am happy with the outcome. The option to return and re-engage with individual elements of the process is ever-present. In so doing I am able to guide my work in new directions, or to re-explore a road already travelled. Ultimately, in order to share the product of my creativity, a point is reached where I commit to my existing creative choices and proceed to the next question. This is similar to the varied methodologies employed and cited by other creative researchers. Nicola Boyd

(2009) supports the Converging Strange Loop Research methodology which, with a specific goal in mind, engages the writer in a series of creative activities which are refined and explored in subsequent 'loops' until the researcher is satisfied with the outcome. O'Leary's Cycles of Action research model supports a cyclical observe/reflect/plan/act methodology until the creative practitioner reaches their goal. (Koshy 2009)

Many creative practitioners/researchers describe their methodology through metaphor which serves a satisfying purpose in accommodating a creative response to an academic demand, thus the creative process remains varied, fluid and individual. Elizabeth Flanagan's (2017) process incorporates the metaphor of climbing a lighthouse's spiral staircase and includes temporal pauses to allow different forms of reflection to take place. This process may retrace steps already taken, move to new territory or adapt existing knowledge. Emily Sutherland (2008) suggests 'research involves moving from one question to another in a pattern akin to a spiral staircase, which takes us towards our goal via a circular path and not always one forward step at a time.' Both these metaphors involve circular movement, consolidation and reflective pauses. Whilst either of these may sometimes apply to my creative process, in addition I am concerned with the influence of external and internal factors such as mood, environment, current affairs, mental/physical wellbeing, or weather, and I acknowledge that these stimuli will fluctuate in importance and could impact upon me in varying ways at different times due to the vagaries of human emotion. This led me to question the purpose of identifying the creative process in such an academic way when creativity itself is such an individual experience. If it is to further the practitioner's understanding of their craft, then the benefits are immeasurable. As a writer who normally writes in an organic way, with little plotting, the process of taking pause to identify where my ideas germinated, created an awareness of the dormant mulch of influence held in my own

mind. These reflective pauses allowed smaller seedlings to strive for light and brought them to my attention. Long forgotten memories, conversations, and events jostled for dominance and, depending on that moment's external and internal influences, their place in my creative thinking was cemented – but only in that specific moment. In a different set of circumstances, a different creative process might have occurred. In his essay, *The Workshop* (2014), Graham Mort uses remembered snapshots in time to exemplify the influences for his poem 'Abed,' saying; 'Hold on because this is my method, the sideways approach, crabbing through history, scrumping for windfalls ... this is my fuckwitted way with words'. (p.7) The inference is that individual creatives should develop their own creative method and that their methods might change, adapt and evolve according to the circumstances of that 'snapshot in time'.

Concluding his essay, Mort says, 'The last time I went back the workshop had disappeared.' (p.6) This refers to the influence of environment, time and memory on creative output, whilst acknowledging the transitory nature of creativity. This resonates with my own creative process which resembles an idea taken from the world of music, where composer Anthony Brandt (2017) considers 'bending, breaking and blending' as integral aspects of creating. In developing *Unseen Evil*, I acknowledged the sprouted 'child killer' seeds, but rather than accept the limitations of existing narratives around child killers, I trained those seeds to bend and grow in a new direction by creating a team of teen killers. I took the serial killer seeds and pulled them up by their roots, breaking them before replanting them to grow into my teen killers and, in doing so, I was able to blend the Bulger killers' seeds with those of Bible John, The Yorkshire Ripper and all the other killer seeds jostling for light.

According to scientist David Eagleman and composer Anthony Brandt in *The Runaway Species*, 'Brains seek a balance between exploiting previously learned knowledge and

exploring new possibilities' (2017, p22) It is the combination of 'exploiting' the rich dark humus of my life experiences and coaxing the seeds therein to 'explore new possibilities' that drives my creativity.

### **1.3.2 Incorporating the Teen Voice within the Confines of the Existing DI Gus McGuire Police Procedural Series**

My PhD novel, *Unseen Evil*, is the sixth book in my DI Gus McGuire police procedural series set in Bradford. Recognising the lack of expansive narratives within the CF genre, as well as being aware of the adverse effects of lack of inclusion on wider society, my novels incorporate 'the outsider'. However, I have become increasingly aware of the detrimental effect lack of inclusion and representation has on society as a whole and on disenfranchised groups in particular (see Chapter 2). One of the most disenfranchised groups are today's teenagers. This group is vastly diverse in terms of gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, social advantage/disadvantage, disability, class and more, yet they have scant economic or political clout to direct debate, effect change or influence policy to benefit their lives (see Chapter 3). This prompted me to consider how I could use the influence of the CF genre to illuminate issues pertaining to teen lived experiences through my adult CF series. When using the term 'teen voice' throughout this exegesis, it should be considered to include the diverse range of teen lived experiences rather than a singular amorphous teen voice representative of the entire group.

*Unseen Evil* is written from various POVs, with the adult chapters being from DI Gus McGuire's third person limited viewpoint and the teen chapters being written from the POVs of the teen protagonists. With teen digital Technology (DT) use and misuse an important component of twenty-first century teen experience and which the adult CF readership rarely sees represented from the teen POV, *Unseen Evil* considers how social media and the digital age teen experience can factor into their lives.

The main teen characters (Zodiac, Leo, Pisces, Zarqa and Jo Jo) are written in the first person present tense whilst the two secondary teen characters (Karim and Haider) are written in past tense in the third person limited viewpoint. As illustrated in Figure 1. 47% of the narrative is from the POV of the teen characters whilst the other 53% is from the POV of the adult detectives. This serves to maintain the Gus McGuire series continuum whilst offering insight into teen lived experiences.

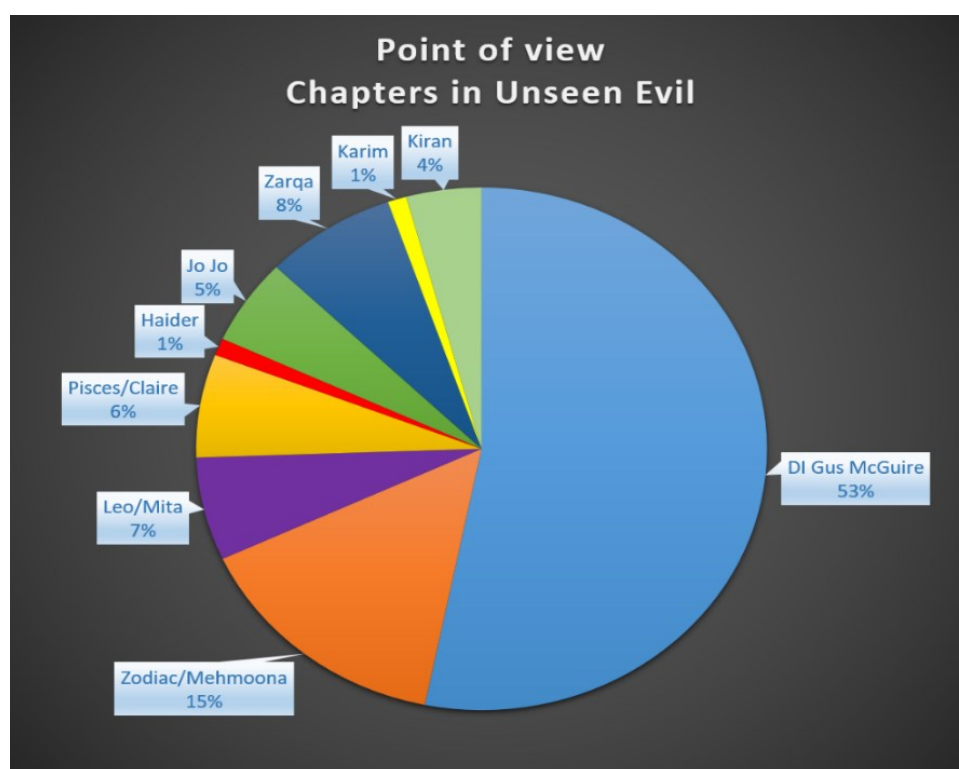


Figure 1: % of chapters from POV of each character

### 1.3.3 Outcomes of Teen Interviews

In order to create authentic teen voices and to discover more about the digital age teen, I conducted interviews with ten young adults between the ages of 18-23.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of these interviews was threefold. Firstly, to discover more about teen DT usage, their preferred SM platforms, their awareness/understanding of potential use/misuse of DT and to gain

<sup>6</sup> **Appendix 1:** Ethical approval confirmation, Teen consent form, Participant information sheet.

understanding of teen group dynamics, specifically those which might influence teens to commit a crime. Secondly, to familiarise myself with teen vocabulary and thirdly to acquire insight into teen conversational topics. Valuable information was ascertained which, when combined with academic research and creative reflections, influenced my creative choices.

The interviews revealed that all participants used Facebook/Messenger and nine of them also used Snapchat and Instagram, with SM sites such as YouTube, Twitter, Showbox, Letterbox and Tumblr being used either sporadically or by only a single participant. Information garnered from interviews is summarised and discussed below in the context of creating *Unseen Evil* and the location of references within *Unseen Evil* are annotated by page or chapter:

<p><b>Benefits of Social Media (SM) usage.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping in touch with family/friends.</li> <li>• Seeing friends/family member’s faces (with Snapchat).</li> <li>• Connecting to people with similar interests.</li> <li>• Browsing videos.</li> <li>• FB groups help in organising social life.</li> <li>• Advertising stuff.</li> <li>• Group chats.</li> <li>• Keeping up to date with media.</li> <li>• Learn stuff.</li> <li>• Become more open minded.</li> <li>• Develop yourself.</li> <li>• News stories.</li> </ul>
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Figure 2: Teen Interviewees responses to question on benefits of SM usage

*Unseen Evil* focuses mainly on Snapchat and Facebook usage and, although as a CF novel the focus is on the misuse of DT, it is important to recognise the benefits too. In *Unseen Evil* the benefits of SM are demonstrated through the teens ‘connecting’ with each other. Zarqa constantly messages Jo Jo, particularly after the graffiti incident, and this allows him to be her support system, although there is also the suggestion that this was their preferred means of communication in normal circumstances. (p.8) In a rare frivolous moment we witness Zodiac using an image altering app to share a selfie on SM. (p.16) Alongside that we see the



power of SM in expressing and sharing grief with the messages on Pratab’s timeline.

(pp.77,122, 186-186, 208) The power of the internet to allow users ‘to learn stuff’ is demonstrated when a distraught Claire/Pisces reveals information acquired via Google regarding post mortem changes in dead bodies. (p.78) DT also plays a significant part in the police investigation, from monitoring SM accounts, to vetting suspects, to tracking suspects’ mobile phones. A further positive use of DT is demonstrated through Gus supplying a phone as a lifeline to his homeless friends (p56, p 162).

The next question focussed on their perceived risks of SM usage and elicited the following responses:

<p><b>Perceived risks of SM usage.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cyberbullying/Cruelty/Bullying</li> <li>• Copying trends eg models, eyebrows, makeup, muscle building, body image.</li> <li>• Online grooming.</li> <li>• You don’t know who the person you interact with is.</li> <li>• Catphishing.</li> <li>• Mental health pressures (4 participants mentioned Instagram).</li> <li>• Insults.</li> <li>• Arguing.</li> <li>• Extremism (Brexit, politics, world issues).</li> <li>• Trolling.</li> <li>• You can project a fake self which might affect mental health.</li> <li>• Death threats.</li> <li>• You could behave inappropriately and do something you wouldn’t do in real life/ Not realising that something you do on SM can affect the rest of your life.</li> <li>• A platform to spread offensive views.</li> <li>• Take advantage of vulnerable people.</li> <li>• Can affect your self-esteem – ‘beautiful people’ (specifically re Instagram).</li> <li>• Sexting.</li> </ul>
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*Figure 3: Teen Interviewees responses to question on perceived risks of SM usage*

From the beginning of the novel, I wanted to embed DT use/misuse in the narrative because research, discussed in Chapter 3, identifies this as an increasing issue for teen SM usage. As a

result of the teen interviews I incorporated three of the identified risks mentioned;

Cyberbullying, online grooming and sexting.

Whilst all my teen participants identified ‘cyberbullying’, ‘cruelty’ or ‘bullying’ and ‘online grooming’ or ‘grooming’ as SM risks, only one mentioned ‘sexting’. Although not specified under cyberbullying during interview, wider research identified sexual photoshopping, sharing sexual videos/images and stealing online identities as specific SM ‘risks’ for teens.<sup>7</sup> I considered ways of illuminating each identified risk throughout the novel. The prologue introduces the teen killers and gives insight into their group dynamics, their motivations and the escalation of their crimes. It demonstrates cyberbullying, illuminating the consequences of the bullying for the victims, but also the dismissive and uncaring attitude of the Alpha teen (Zodiac). The group’s previous crimes are identified in the context of a game to get revenge on those they perceive to have wronged them. The consequences of their actions demonstrates the potential for misuse of SM. After news of Pratab’s murder hits SM, Zodiac is thrilled; ‘It’s is all over social media and I love it. They’re all chatting shit, every one of them and none of them knows it’s me... us.’ P.84. In Chapter 40, Detective Gus McGuire himself is subject to this form of online trolling when sexualised images of him and his partner are shared to various SM sites. (p136).

In Chapter 8 we learn that Jo Jo, desperate for money to support his family, is groomed to perform sexual acts for money via webcamming on the Dark Web (DW) (p.41). Jo Jo is unaware that his laptop has been remotely accessed and all activity in his bedroom, including his webcam sessions are being recorded and distributed for financial gain on the DW. We also learn that Jo Jo was the subject of sexting abuse by Pratab;

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<sup>7</sup> **On sexual risks for teens on SM see:** McHugh et al (2018) p.1175-1176, Akram & Kumar (2017)) Lloyd, J (2020), Salter, M et al (2018) Charteris, J. et al (2018), Ashurst and McAlinden (2015).

‘he wasn’t so wonderful when he tricked me into giving him a blow job in the lads’ toilets after school and shared an image of me leaving the bogs with a caption saying, “when you get your d\*\*k out for a pee and this poof offers you a BJ". I’d thought he liked me... *really* liked me.’(p86)

Questions concerning awareness of the DW, its risks and use are outlined below:

<b>Risks Associated with the Dark Web.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where criminals exchange information.</li><li>• Illicit deeds.</li><li>• Black-market stuff - human organ deals.</li><li>• Child porn/ Indecent images of children.</li><li>• Pornography.</li><li>• Buy weapons.</li><li>• Illegal drugs.</li><li>• Sex trafficking.</li><li>• Online grooming.</li><li>• Kill someone and upload what they’ve done.</li><li>• Everything against the law.</li><li>• Guns/drugs/sex crimes.</li></ul>
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Figure 4: Teen Interviewees responses to question on risks associated with the DW

When asked about their awareness of the DW three participants were unaware of its existence whilst the others thought it would be difficult to access. My own research has indicated that the DW is easy to access (Toves, 2018). The participants who were aware of the DW were unaware how it could impact their everyday lives and assumed that it was solely used for criminal activity of the sorts outlined above. Unfortunately, research indicates that lack of knowledge of its existence or how to access it is no protection from the DW’s risks.<sup>8</sup> *Unseen Evil* considers DW impact in terms of Jo Jo’s webcamming and the remote access of his laptop. It shows how Compo uses his DW knowledge to try to eliminate both the images of Jo Jo webcamming and also those of Gus which are being circulated using encryptions and rerouting to maintain their presence on the surface and DWs.

<sup>8</sup> **On DW Risks see:** *The Dark Web dilemma: Tor, anonymity and online policing* (Jardine, 2015), *The Cybersecurity Dilemma: considerations for investigations in the Dark Web* (Van Niekerk, 2018).

With *Unseen Evil* focussing on three teen killers (Zodiac, Leo, Pisces) working as a group and two teens (Zarqa, Jo Jo) working together to commit lower level crime, I was interested to discover the participants' views of what influences teen behaviour and, in particular, teen criminal behaviour.

<p><b>What Influences Teen Behaviour?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family/ Background/ Where they live/ Kind of people in area.</li> <li>• Friendship groups/Who you surround yourself with/ spend time with.</li> <li>• The media/SM.</li> <li>• FB Ads, Instagram setting trends to aspire to (eg. Beauty/body image).</li> <li>• Video Games.</li> <li>• Going out.</li> <li>• Teen Films - highly sexualised.</li> <li>• What they're exposed to.</li> <li>• Mental Health/ Self-esteem/ Sense of identity (specifically low self-esteem).</li> </ul>
<p><b>What Might Contribute to a Teen Committing a Crime?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upbringing/ Being brought up wrong way/ Friends/ Family/ No stable family/ being in care/Early socialisation to crime.</li> <li>• Social situation/ Social groups/wrong crowd/Friendship groups/Self-identity/ Peer pressure/Being in a gang/ Influenced by crowd/ Drink/Drugs/ Friends who take drugs.</li> <li>• Personal issues – suffered an injustice/discrimination.</li> <li>• Their personality traits.</li> <li>• People blame others/ don't take responsibility.</li> <li>• Feeling marginalised.</li> <li>• Not knowing boundaries around consent (specific to rape).</li> <li>• Unaware their actions are criminal in nature.</li> <li>• Uneducated.</li> <li>• Experimenting.</li> <li>• Music (Rap Music encouraging rape/crimes).</li> <li>• Influence at school (mentioned boy stabbing his teacher).</li> <li>• Lack of support network.</li> <li>• Hard to pinpoint influences.</li> </ul>

Figure 5: Teen Interviewees responses to question regarding influences on teen behaviour and what might contribute to a teen committing a crime

Creating authentic teen characters through expansive narratives in order to illuminate the issues faced by this multi-marginalised group was a major consideration in writing *Unseen Evil*. With a noticeable overlap in respondents' identified influences on behaviour in general and criminal behaviour in particular, I focussed on upbringing, friendship groups, and mental health when creating my teens. Alongside personal experiences and information gleaned through wider research, I incorporated some of the interviewees' observations to explore the different motivations of my teen characters whilst challenging some of the interviewees' perceptions. Zodiac has been brought up by a single parent in an upper middle-class environment. Her mother is a high ranking police officer and Zodiac has no financial concerns. Despite this, it is Zodiac who is the 'wrong crowd' and who influences her friends to commit crime. Jo Jo, on the other hand, is from a disadvantaged background. He is the carer for his invalid mother and younger sister, and he lives on an estate where two rival drug gangs are at pains to recruit him. However, despite his desperate situation, Jo Jo resists their threats and the crime he commits is with his friend Zarqa as a result of her hurt. I was particularly interested in two points highlighted during the teen interviews: self-esteem and marginalisation. In Claire/Pisces, I created a character with low self-image resulting in her vulnerability to peer pressure from stronger characters like Zodiac and Leo. As a marginalised character, bullied by her peers and subject to ridicule because of her poverty, Claire is a victim as well as a perpetrator in this narrative. She is one of the 'what if' characters, raising questions around what her behaviour would be if her circumstances were different and her opportunities less bleak. The similarities between her and Jo Jo's socio-economic background and the contrast in their responses to peer pressure is designed to be both poignant and thought-provoking and to highlight the dilemma of many potentially vulnerable teens living in similar circumstances when confronted by life-changing choices.

Whilst Claire/Pisces succumbs to her desperate situation and sinks lower and lower, Jo Jo fights to survive. He resists joining either of the gangs on his estate and shoulders the burden of responsibility for his sister and invalid mum.

The purpose of the second part of the teen interviews was to gain a bank of appropriate vocabulary to use in *Unseen Evil* in order to create authentic dialogue. The following chart shows the five most popular words used in each category as provided by participants in order of popularity in usage:

<i>Word Provided</i>	<i>Teen vocabulary</i>	<i>Teen vocabulary</i>	<i>Teen vocabulary</i>	<i>Teen vocabulary</i>	<i>Teen vocabulary</i>
<i>Suspicious</i>	Dodgy (7)	Weird/weirdo (3)	Sketchy (1)	Shady (1)	Creep (1)
<i>Ugly</i>	Ugly (6)	Dirty/Datty/Dutty (5)	Butters Sket/ Sket/Butters (4)	Mong/Minger/ Minging (3)	Gross (2)
<i>Stupid</i>	Idiot/ Fucking Idiot (7)	Thick (2)	Tard/Retard (2)	Daft (2)	Dumb/Dim (2)
<i>Good</i>	Great (7)	Ace (5)	Good (5)	Fabulous/Fab (4)	Sick (4)
<i>Attractive</i>	Fit/Fit as fuck/ (10)	Hot (10)	Gorgeous/Gorge (7)	Stunning (4)	Attractive (4)
<i>Excited</i>	Buzzing/Buzzin/ Proper/buzzing (10)	Excited/Well excited (7)	Happy (4)	Hyped (3)	Giddy (2)
<i>Person you Dislike</i>	Twat (7)	Asshole/Arsehole/ Arse whole/ Arse (6)	Prick/Prik (4)	Dickhead/Dick (4)	Nob/Knob/Cunt (3)
<i>Threatening/ Frightening</i>	Scary/Shit Scared/Spooky (10)	Awful (4)	Terrible (2)	Intimidating (2)	Naff (1)
<i>Swear words</i>	Fuck/ Fucking/ What the Fuck/ Fucker/Fuck Off (10)	Shit (7)	Dickhead/ Dick (4)	Bastard (4)	Nob head/ Nob/knob (4)
<i>Drunk/Stoned</i>	Fucked (5)	Pissed (5)	High (3)	Off their/my Face/Head (3)	Smashed/ Trollied/ Blazed (3)

Figure 6: Teen Interviewees' vocabulary choices

This information informed the vocabulary used in teen dialogue, the chapters from teen POV and SM messages. However, in deference to my adult audience, I chose to avoid using twat, retard/tard and cunt because, although my existing audience expect some swearing, those words would be considered unacceptable, regardless of their authenticity. To make my teen messages on Facebook and via messenger more authentic, I consulted various sites which

offered translations of teen SM acronyms.<sup>9</sup> On hindsight this would have been a useful addition to the teen interviews.

## 1.4 Creator of Expansive Narratives

### 1.4.1 Why Create Teen Killers

According to investigative journalist Leah Green in her documentary series *Kids Who Kill* (2017), 400 children have been convicted of murder in the UK in the past twenty years. Youth Justice Statistics (YJS) 2019/2020 confirm that 140 proven offences of the gravest violence against persons and sexual assaults were committed that year by children (10-17 year-olds). Heather Welfare's 2012 study considered the effects of traumatic childhood on twenty-nine 15-17-year-old men convicted of murder between 2009-2010 as being a contributing factor in their violent behaviour. Whilst some consider murder by young people a rare phenomenon, I view it as a worrying indication of underlying societal issues which must be exposed, discussed and addressed. Whilst murder is the ultimate violent act, it is the circumstances and accelerating cycles of violence leading to that act that concern me in writing *Unseen Evil*. The ultimate act of murder by teens is the 'perfect storm' scenario; it occurs when a series of elements, influences, and circumstances come together resulting in rare but devastating acts of violence. Therefore, as a pre-emptive measure, society, politicians, educators and influencers must insist that the indicators that precede and contribute to violence are addressed. YJS (2019-2020) state that 31% of offences perpetrated by children are violence against the person with a sharp object. In that year alone 4400 proven knife offences were committed by under 17-year-olds. It is the convergence of these

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<sup>9</sup> **On Teen SM Acronyms:** *Teen Slang, Emojis, & Hashtags Parents Need To Know* (Smart Social, 2019), *Police release list of secret slang, hashtags and acronyms teenagers use online in warning to parents* (SWNS, 2019), *Decoding teen slang* (Netsanity, 2019).



circumstances that *Unseen Evil* considers. The following table, although not exhaustive, exemplifies the types of murders committed by teens since 2000.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See footnote 2 and bibliography for documentary and newspaper sources.

Victim/ Age	Link to killer	Year	Attacker/s Name/s	Age	Manner of Murder	Social Media used?
Mabel Leyshon 90	Neighbour	2001	Matthew Hardman	17	Stabbed mutilation	Website research: vampires
Sydney Blackwell 72 Jacquie Blackwell 61	Dad Mum	2004	Brian Blackwell	19	Blunt force trauma Stabbed	
Joe Greedy 11	Neighbour	2006	Michael Hamer	17	Stabbed	
Cheryl Moss 33	Stranger	2006	Stuart Harling	19	Stabbed	Internet research: weaponry
Sophie Lancaster 20	Stranger	2007	Ryan Herbert Brendan Harris	15 15	Beaten	
Rosimieri Boxall 19	Friend	2009	TJ (Hatice Can) Kemi Ajose	13 17	Bullied till jumped from window	Texts Uploaded bullying
Sofyen Belamouadden 15	Rival school	2010	20 attackers	16 - 18	Knife attack	Rallied via social media
Rebecca Aylwood 15	Girlfriend	2010	Joshua Davies	16	Bludgeoned	
Jacqui Bartlam 47	Mum	2011	Daniel Bartlam	14	Beat with hammer Burned	
Katy Wynter 17	FB friend	2011	Tony Bushby	18	Stabbed	Cat fished Created fake FB identities
Elizabeth Thomas 17	Girlfriend	2014	Steven Myles	16	Dismembered Mutilated	
Ann MacGuire 61	Teacher	2014	William Cornick	15	Stabbed	
Breck Bednar 14	Internet friend	2014	Lewis Daynes	18	Stabbed	Groomed via gaming site
Angela Wrightson 39	Friend	2014	Unnamed Girl 1 Unnamed Girl 2	13 14	Tortured	Posted snapchats and selfies at crime scene
Dominic Doyle 21	Stranger	2015	Mitchell Ingham Conor Ward Ricky Lydham	15 16 18	Stabbed	
Marcel Addai 17	Rival gang	2015	4 x gang members	19- 25	Stabbed	Rap videos You tube rap challenges
James Attfield 23 Nahid Almanea 31	Strangers	2015	James Fairweather		Stabbed	
Leoandro Osemoke 16 Myron Tarde 17	Rival Gang	2016			Stabbed	Snapchat Online Rap challenges
Elizabeth Edwards 49	Mum/ Sister	2016	Kim Edwards Lucas Markham	14 14	Stabbed	

Katy Edwards 13	girlfriend mum/ Sister					
Jermaine Goupal 15	Rival gang	2017	Jounior Simpson Saskia Haig Elliott Samuel Oliver Rolands	16 18 17	stabbed	You Tube Raps Posted video of victim Social Media to rally Instabeef/ Cyber banging

Figure 7: Examples of murders perpetrated by teens since 2000

This sample of convicted teen murderers range in age from 13-19. Out of the 20 incidences, only four were perpetrated against strangers. The majority of the killings were by stabbing, 4 were gang related and at least 10 had some form of DT usage either before, during or after the act. Combined with research discussed in Chapter 3, I believe that issues faced by contemporary teens impact on the likelihood of them committing a violent act and that although not all violent acts lead to murder, nonetheless the propensity for violence to accelerate if left unchecked is enormous.

#### 1.4.2 The Responsibility of Writing the ‘Other’

Writing expansive narratives is a key consideration in my own writing; however, giving voice to the ‘other’ by representing marginalised groups with different lived experiences from my own, comes with responsibility. I like to consider it a personal sort of Hippocratic oath to ‘do no harm’ and many CF authors feel the same way. (see Chapter 2)

The most recent Twitter uproar regarding the portrayal of children of colour, disabled children and working class children in Kate Clanchy’s novel *Some Children I Taught and What They Taught Me* (2019) and the subsequent defence of the novel by Society of Authors President, Philip Pullman, (Clanchy, 2021, Pullman, 2021, Singh, 2021) serves both as a reminder of authorial responsibility when writing ‘the other’ and as a wakeup call that the

literary world still has work to do if it is to herald expansive narratives and make marginalised groups feel included (see Chapter 2). Sunny Singh, Professor of Creative Writing and Inclusion in the Arts, Tweeted: ‘You want to write minoritised people? Then learn to do it properly! Without patronising and recycling violent stereotypes and white saviouring. Else you are reinflicting earlier violence, retraumatising those you claim to help.’ (2021)

To ‘do no harm’ when creating diverse narratives involves research and continual reflection of what one has written and a mindfulness of one’s own privilege, biases and ingrained expectations, which may or may not be valid. Over the years my research into the communities I write has taken many forms; personal familial experience, observations from my teaching career, absorption in the diverse community in which I live, as well as reading literature around creating authentic and diverse voices.<sup>11</sup>

In her book *Writing Diverse Characters for Fiction, TV or Film*, (2017), Lucy V. Hay suggests that ‘the best diverse characters don’t feel “try hard”, nor are they box ticking exercises. These characters feel authentic, natural, and most of all relevant’ (p.131). I share her philosophy and strive to achieve this when writing my own expansive narratives.

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<sup>11</sup>**On creating diverse voices:** *12 Fundamentals Of Writing "The Other" (And The Self)* (Older, 2014) *Writing The Other* (Shawl & Ward, 2005), *Writing Diverse Characters for Fiction, TV or Film* (Hay, 2017), *Writing With Colour* Resource website <https://writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/search/description>, *How to Write Diverse Characters* (The Novel Smithy, 2020), *The Disability Issue* (ADCI, 2021), *The Fries Test: On Disability Representation in Our Culture* (Fries, 2017), *9 Tips for Writing About Characters With Disabilities*, (Larli, 2018), *Why I include disabled characters in my writing*, (Barclay, 2021), *How To Write LGBTQIA+ Characters: Gay Men*, (Manfredini, 2021), *How To Write LGBTQIA+ Characters: An Introduction* (Manfredini, 2021), *How To Write LGBTQIA+ Characters: Lesbians* (Manfredini, 2021), *Beyond the Closet: Writing Gay Characters* (Ford, 2018) *Why Working Class Characters matter in Young Adult Fiction* (Carthew, 2020), *Writing Diversity: Creating Working Class and Underclass Characters* (Puddephatt, 2018), *Working-class fiction has been written out of publishing* (Duffy, 2014).

### 1.4.3 How I created expansive narratives in *Unseen Evil*

*Unseen Evil* is the first of my novels which features narratives from the teen POV, incorporating their experiences of DT. My characters always represent the rich diversity of Bradford and *Unseen Evil* likewise represents teens from diverse backgrounds and explores narratives from their different viewpoints.

In *Unseen Evil*, I focus on documenting how the dramatic worlds occupied by each of the teen killers are created. By ‘dramatic world,’ I refer to both the wider setting of my novel (Bradford) and the narrower world the characters inhabit: a world that is influenced by, for example, the unique personal and socio-economic circumstances that combine to direct each character’s actions. *Unseen Evil* explores the notion that when the circumstances of each teen’s world collide, not only with the greater dramatic world, but also with each other’s individual dramatic worlds, a chain of events can be set in motion. The key elements of the novel explore teen use/misuse of DT, rising cases of teen mental ill health, social advantage/disadvantage and its impact on teen behaviours/motivations, the availability and effects of drugs, and an exploration of what might make teens kill.

The development of both storyline and characters is subject to drafting and redrafting in order to experiment with creating authentic teen voices and worlds for them to inhabit. As I tend not to plot rigidly, my creative process involves experimentation with ideas and voice through writing and researching, journaling and noting ideas as they occur. Creativity is nurtured through a range of activities, from researching, to creative practice, to creative thinking, to interactions and more. It doesn’t work in isolation but is the product of everything I encounter. From the mulch of life’s experiences, the occasional dormant idea can begin to niggle until it proves its worth through the creative processes of thinking, drafting and redrafting.

The focus of this PhD is creating expansive narratives and authentic teen voices in adult CF. The reasons behind that focus are discussed in detail in later chapters. However, in order to demonstrate the inclusion and development of expansive narratives in *Unseen Evil*, I shall outline the process leading to the creation of my teen characters.

#### **1.4.4 Creating Diverse Teen Characters**

My teen characters each have very distinct voices and experiences, and creating nuanced representations of these characters was both challenging and fulfilling. Like any character, these teen voices did not come to me as fully formed characters on the page, but rather developed over months of experimenting with their voices in order to get them just right. Prior to even writing a section in my teen characters' voices I had to get to know them and in order to do that a lot of time was spent thinking and building up a range of possibilities in my head. This is a less tangible process as it occurs in the time just before sleep fully envelops me. In this deep, dark humus, random, and some not so random, seeds are invisibly germinated and given the opportunity to sprout as my mind wanders, unhampered by the stresses of the day. Recording those thoughts is always a retrospective practice and so only the strongest, most fascinating seeds survive to fully grow to fruition. However, there are many much more tangible influences which contributed to the formation of my distinct characters.

In order to introduce a diverse and inclusive range of teen characters representative of wider society, I made some initial choices. I wanted to represent a realistic ethnic/cultural mix of characters and had already in *Unspoken Truths*, the prequel to *Unseen Evil*, introduced Zarqa's storyline regarding her biological father. With a view to including her in *Unseen Evil*, I introduced a scene with Mehmoona and her mother in *Unspoken Truths*. The other teen characters were completely new and undeveloped as I started work on *Unseen Evil*. Bradford is an ethnically diverse city with a sizeable Muslim community, which influenced my

decision to include four Muslim characters; Haider, Karim, Zarqa and Mehmoona. However, there are distinct differences between these characters. Haider is of Gujarati/Pakistani descent and sees the conflict between Western values and his visiting Pakistani relatives' attitudes to the West. He witnesses the prejudice his Pakistani relatives feel towards his Indian Gujarati mum and we get the sense that his family is more traditional than Zarqa's, Karim's or Mehmoona's.

Karim, on the other hand, is a bit of a lad, getting up to low-level tricks like smoking weed. He is of Pakistani descent. His parents are middle class, with no extended family nearby, and they hold very Western views. Zarqa is Gus' best friend's child and is of Pakistani descent, living in the heart of Manningham with a large family, but no extended family. Whilst from a family who observes Islam, Zarqa herself rebels against the religion and has inner conflict between her perceived views of religion and culture. Mehmoona is of Pakistani descent and the child of a single parent who is a police officer and whilst nominally Muslim, the religion does not have a priority in either her mum's or her own life. These differences between the Muslim characters serve to remind the reader that Muslim communities are as diverse as any other.

Bradford also has a sizeable Hindu community and to reflect that I chose to include a Gujarati Hindu family with professional parents, living in the area of Bradford favoured by many of the Gujarati community. Mr Patel has mental health issues and the family has an extended family support system. The Patel children are key characters: Kiran, the eldest, is in debt to drug dealers. Pratab is the first victim and information regarding his bullying and cyber bullying comes to light. Mita/Leo is one of the killers. Both Jo Jo and Claire/Pisces are white and from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, living on estates where crime features heavily.

In order to exemplify the process adopted in developing my teen characters I will consider the creation of Jo Jo.



Figure 8: Illustration showing the creative process involved in creating Jo Jo

This chart shows the various and diverse influences that converged in creating the multi-faceted character of Jo Jo. He lives with his invalid mother and much younger sister, which means that despite his youth he is the main care-giver for his small family. They live in an impoverished ex-council estate in Bradford where drug dealing and gangs are rife. Jo Jo is being pressurised to align himself with one of the two main drug gangs on his estate and constantly has to balance that with his desire to keep his mum and sister safe and to avoid social services splitting up his vulnerable family. Jo Jo's sexuality is a source of bullying for him. The first victim Pratab outed him and Jo Jo protects himself by emotionally distancing himself from others.

Many seedlings merged to bring Jo Jo to fruition as a character and influenced the creative choices I made, and I shall focus particularly upon personal experience, academic research, my teen interviews, literature, and passive research for the purpose of outlining my creative process. These different stimuli worked together to develop all aspects of Jo Jo's



character, from his home environment, to his aspirations, to his conduct and his thoughts.

This supports my creative metaphor of seeds germinating, sprouting, growing and intertwining as they bloom, hybrid style, into tangible rounded concepts which serve to create an authentic, three dimensional and complex character.

Being of working-class origins myself and living in council housing, with many friends' families relying on benefits and with my own parents in menial jobs with low incomes, juxtaposed with the huge, imposing detached homes that bordered our estate, I learned early on that more of my friends lived in poverty than in riches. I was lucky that my parents were employed. I went to school with children who smelled, whose clothes were tattered, who often only had a buttered bread sandwich for breakfast and/or lunch, who didn't have toys, whose relatives were in prison, whose parents were alcoholics, and whose dads beat their mums. Fast forward twenty some years and I'm teaching in inner city schools, in impoverished areas where families struggle to survive, and it's clear that some inequalities still exist. So, how could this not influence how I wrote Jo Jo?

Creating Jo Jo was an emotive and poignant experience. Drafting and redrafting his chapters wrenched both a raw and visceral outrage in me and a deep-seated desire to highlight his plight in order to honour the many voiceless teens in similar situations. I can identify specific memories from my time as a teacher that contributed to the development of Jo Jo and his environment: the child who presented with cigarette burns on their hand, identifying their older sibling as the culprit; those who confided that they were running drugs for older siblings and sometimes for their fathers; the mothers who turned up to collect their child whilst high or drunk. These negative memories were tempered by more positive ones: the fierce older sibling who would cover up for their absent parent when collecting their child; the mum who'd nurture her child and ensure they were fed despite having little money.

Whilst all of these memories contributed to creating and embellishing Jo Jo's environment, they did so in conjunction with other aspects of my research.

My academic research both offered ideas that became part of Jo Jo's journey in *Unseen Evil*, and justified/authenticated the plot ideas I developed. Jo Jo's expertise as a drone builder and computer geek became a crucial element in both the main 'killer' plot line and the sub plot around the mosque being graffitied. This skill set him apart from the thugs who live on his estate. Jo Jo has a skill which has the potential to aid his escape from his current situation; however, his economic and social situation as carer for his family is an obstacle. Whilst academic research into the sexual exploitation of children on the DW emphasised the vulnerability of teens to such online activity, it was a combination of three separate stimuli which led to me pursuing webcamming as Jo Jo's choice to support his family rather than succumb to pressure from the drug gangs. The first was C. J. Lyons' YA novel *Watched* (2014) which highlighted the world of the online predator and the vulnerability of the teen victim. The second was two adult CF novels, Stav Sherez's *Intrusions* (2018) and Chris Carter's *The Caller* (2017), which demonstrate the ease with which someone could gain access and control over a person's online life without their victim realising and how quickly images could be spread. The third was a documentary called *Webcam Boys* (2016) which highlighted the increase in young males performing sex acts online for money.

Whilst my research, my personal experiences, and the perceptions of my teen interviewees indicate a correlation between social disadvantage, peer pressure and making wrong choices on criminal activity, I wanted to explore this whilst not reinforcing stereotypical expectations that Jo Jo could be the main killer. He does commit a crime (the mosque graffiti) as a result of peer pressure, yet he is resolute in his resistance against joining

one of the two gangs on his estate. He is a teen faced with making choices – not only for himself but also for his family – in circumstances that no young person should endure. The above process exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between all stimuli used to generate creative thought as applied to the entire process of writing *Unseen Evil*. As a character, Jo Jo embodies all that CF is about. He is a multi-marginalised character as a teen, as working class, as socially disadvantaged, as caregiver, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and as a northerner.

Each creative exploration, and each piece of research I encountered whilst creating *Unseen Evil*, added to the mulch of dormant and semi dormant seeds, making the resultant humus richer and more diverse. Instead of a garden with a narrow defined layout, containing a single breed of flower, with a monotonous fragrance, this process fertilised the garden allowing varied and different seeds to thrive, culminating in an expansive garden filled with diverse narratives which represent the possibilities of society as a whole.

## Chapter 2: Expanding the Creative Narrative: Why It Matters<sup>12</sup>

*A realist painting of a life mosaic that includes more than one view* (O’Cinneide, 2019)

### 2.1 Why Diverse Narratives Matter

Research and analysis of my creative practice has reinforced to me as a writer the importance of representing wider society. I live in the ethnically diverse city of Bradford and I set my books there too. Although representing diverse ethnic communities in fiction and in the arts generally is imperative, I believe that expanding the creative narrative is wider than that and should incorporate representation of diversity in all areas. As world-renowned inclusion strategist Verna Myers says; ‘Diversity is being invited to the party ... inclusion is being asked to dance.’ (2015) Diversity is about removing barriers, smashing glass ceilings and implementing policy to facilitate more equitable representation, inclusion and participation in wider society.

From government to educational institutions, to private and public businesses, inclusion policies and strategies have become part of everyday life, with initiatives to ensure the equal inclusion and representation of people marginalised by ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class, age, disability and more. The 2018 Home Office (HO) document *Inclusive by Instinct* states that, ‘diversity is about recognising the value of difference.’. However, merely ‘recognising’ the existence of diversity does not equate to appreciating that diversity, nor does it guarantee that diversity is ‘valued’. Furthermore, passively recognising the ‘value of difference’ does not ensure that inclusion is achieved. For this reason, my research focuses on

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<sup>12</sup> A version of this chapter was previously published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Writing In Practice*; Mistry, Liz, ‘[Expanding the Creative Narrative: Why it Matters](https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wip-editions/editions/vol.-6.html)’, *Writing In Practice*, 6 (2020), 63-80 <https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wip-editions/editions/vol.-6.html>.

Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) in the creative industries, the publishing industry and CF specifically, because these industries play a key role in this. Inclusion, normalisation of diversity and the expectation that diversity is represented is imperative.

‘Inclusion is inviting you into the mainstream ... [about] having the opportunity to show what you are capable of doing.’ (Myers, 2015) This is about valuing diversity throughout the creative industries, about ensuring key influencers are representative of wider society, and it can be achieved through proactive policy strategies. In his address to the United Kingdom (UK) parliament regarding inequitable representation of marginalised communities, Idris Elba pointed out the need for ‘diversity of thought’ in order to emphasise the value of D&I. (2016) To ensure inclusivity throughout society, the potential of currently marginalised groups must be utilised, thus maximising opportunity for all. To this end, the HO’s 2018 statement ‘Inclusion is about ensuring we get the best from everyone’ backed by a promise to remove barriers and offer opportunities for under-represented groups is much more proactive. Its commitment to promote the potential of diverse communities is supported by a strategy to monitor inclusion. My own academic institution, Leeds Trinity University (LTU), like others, has a D&I Strategy and alongside reporting on the institution’s Gender Pay Gap since 2017, LTU also produced an Ethnicity Pay Gap report (2020) which included measurable actions to reduce the gap. Local government, the European Union, and businesses have inclusion policies with the aim of being representative of society and some have adopted strategies to reduce inequality in the workplace.

Referring to the Publishing Industry, Kit De Waal cuts directly to the heart of the issue saying ‘the more we reinforce the stereotypes of who writes and who reads, the more the notion of exclusivity is reinforced.’ (BBC Radio 4, 2017) In being exclusive, we leave people out, deny them opportunities, misrepresent society and, consequentially, miss out on

talent. As Patrice Lawrence at Winchester Writers' Conference (2018) observed: 'culture is ever changing and in the publishing industry, that should be addressed.' If we acknowledge that inclusion is beneficial and that representing under-represented groups is a good thing, then it follows that the publishing industry should become more inclusive. Therefore, it is important to consider what employing expansive narratives would mean for readers and authors.

For the reader, expansive narratives would include those stories that sometimes feature characters and storylines that reflect one or more of their identified characteristics; their class, gender, age, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and suchlike. More than that, in an expansive narrative, these characters would sometimes drive the narrative, be the hero, hold pivotal roles in the story and not be portrayed in a stereotypical or exploitative way. Likewise, expansive narratives would enrich the reading experience by sometimes reflecting and exploring plots, characters and worlds that are significantly different from readers' own lived experiences. It would be a true sharing of experiences.

For the author, employing expansive narratives offers choice and loosens creative restrictions. It allows the author to explore and create characters that do not share their identified characteristics, and to sometimes be more representative of diverse society rather than restricted by personal lived experiences, albeit with consideration of authorial responsibility, diligent research and sensitivity regarding exploitation and appropriation of voice. If expansive narratives were normalised, authors would not be expected to represent only their identified characteristics. Stella Duffy echoes this:

I want to write and read work that is as multifaceted as our society. I think it's vital we write widely and inclusively to help shift publishing from the mostly middle class, mostly white place it is now. Men need to write women knowing that they are writing from a place of privilege – that they are likely to earn more than women and are more likely to be reviewed. White writers need to write BAME characters knowing there

are many more white writers published. The same for straight people, and able-bodied people, middle-class people, and on.’ (2016).

In his parliamentary address Elba highlighted ‘the disconnect between the real world and the TV world,’ asserting that by ‘not reflecting the real world, too much talent is wasted.’ Elba’s theme was about changing mind-sets, being imaginative, being fairer, and holding the creative industries to account by benchmarking their progress on inclusion.

In 2017, the address was given by Riz Ahmed who explained the importance of bridging this disconnect; ‘Every time you see yourself in a magazine, on a billboard, TV, film, it’s a message that you matter. You’re part of the national story; you’re valued; you feel represented.’ Ahmed emphasised how enriching it is for *everyone* to have insight into lifestyles dissimilar to their own, to be able to share and normalise diversity, to broaden perceptions, to challenge misconceptions and to extend everyone’s imagined boundaries beyond the narrow confines of small microcosms. Ahmed concludes that:

The power of stories to allow us to relate to experiences that do not resemble our own is phenomenal. And every time we see those experiences, it reminds us that what unites us is far greater than what divides us. Culture is a place where you can put yourself in someone else’s shoes; and a one size shoe shop just doesn’t make any sense.

Both parliamentary addresses stressed the importance of including under-represented groups in film and television, but also how the stories we view on screen and, by extension, in our literature, shape our culture. The benefits they outlined were for all of society. Elba and Ahmed also considered the huge economic influence of the creative industries on culture. The Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 2018) reported that in 2017 the creative industries:

- contributed £101.5bn to UK economy.
- generated a significantly higher Gross Value Added than Sport, Gambling and Telecoms.

- had increased their economic contribution by 53% since 2010.
- were the second highest income generator in the DCMS.
- generated £6bn from the publishing industry.

These figures demonstrate that from film to television, to theatre, to literature, art and music, the creative industries are economically solid, and therefore have real potential to shape and direct a wider, more diverse, and therefore more representative narrative. Within this context, the publishing industry generates a sizeable amount of income through literature sales, again pointing to its potential influence in sculpting culture through its readership.

Culture plays a key role in shaping how people co-exist in societies. We encounter cultural influences in the form of narratives on screen, on radio, on social media, in galleries, on walls in the form of public and graffiti art, and in literature that we are encouraged to invest into socially, emotionally and cerebrally. Problems arise when the discourses offered through these avenues are unrepresentative of wider society. If cultural narratives exclude groups, they perpetuate a narrow perception of what and who is important to our society and cause alienation. As Ahmed points out, ‘when we fail to represent, people switch off. They switch off on telly, they switch off the ballot box, and they retreat to other fringe narratives, which is sometimes very dangerous.’ But it’s more than that; it’s about how individuals within society view groups with whom they may not identify. If diverse experiences are not part of the narratives we encounter culturally, then common understandings, shared experiences and appreciation of diversity is at risk. Ahmed continues, ‘what’s at stake here is whether or not we will move forwards together, or whether we will leave people behind.’ When non-inclusive narratives thrive at the expense of expansive ones, so too do misunderstandings, mistrust, disharmony, fear, and victimisation. Therefore, it is imperative



that we use all art forms available to normalise expansive narratives, thus eradicating the negative effects that result from exclusion upon both individuals and society as a whole.

E. V. Roberts and R. Zweig usefully define literature as ‘compositions that tell stories, dramatize situations, express emotions and analyse and advocate ideas ... literature helps us grow both personally and intellectually.’ (2012: 3). As a writer, the concept of literature being powerful enough to capture the essence of society’s morals and practices, to stimulate debate, to broaden horizons and transport us to other worlds, to share lived experiences and promote empathy, resonates with me. I believe that there is no more compelling argument than that for inclusivity in the publishing industry. The current disconnect between the people, groups and lives we are able to read about; what is published and accessible to readers, and the actuality of our rich, complex and diverse societal make-up, is not only symptomatic of lack of inclusion in the publishing industry, but impoverishes us all. With this in mind, I shall turn to the imbalance in representation of marginalised groups in the publishing industry, literature, and the CF genre specifically.

## **2.2 Inclusion in the Publishing Industry**

If more expansive narratives are to be published, the publishing industry itself must be inclusive and representative. However, recent reports on representation of marginalised groups in the publishing industry has revealed a lack of D&I. A number of reports have considered the make-up of the publishing industry as well as the demographic and cultural diversity of those authors signed, the sort of novels published and expectations placed upon authors to produce specific narratives.

Lee and Low Books’ *Diversity in Publishing Baseline Survey* (2015) compiled statistics relating to race, gender, sexual orientation and disability and discovered that:

- Over 75% of industry employees were white, women, heterosexual and non-disabled.

- At executive level the percentage of white, heterosexual and non-disabled employees increased to over 85%.
- The proportion of women in executive posts fell to only 59%.

The 2018 Publishing Industry Workforce Diversity and Inclusions Survey (PIWDIS) also reflects these figures and demonstrates a regional under-representation as well as under-representation in other marginalised groups. It highlighted that the industry has a higher representation of middle-class employees originating from London, with employees from Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the North of the England being under-represented. A disproportionately higher number of executive positions were filled by white male employees. The report also highlighted a sizeable gender pay gap, mainly attributed to policies surrounding unpaid internships. This trend is also reflected in those authors signed by the larger publishing houses.

This demonstrates the need for proactive strategies by the publishing industry in order to redress lack of representation.

### **2.2.1 Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) Representation**

Alison Flood's 2019 *Guardian* article criticised the lack of inclusion in the publishing industry, citing the (PIWDIS) 2018 figures (p.12). The PIWDIS figures showed that, despite the publishing industry being predominantly London based, where 40.2% of the population identify as BAME, only 11.6% of individuals working in the publishing industry identified as BAME. This is lower than ONS figures which show that 14% of the overall population identify as BAME. Although the 2020, PIWDIS (p.12) reported an increase in BAME employees to 13%, it is still significantly lower than the 24% BAME makeup of London where the majority of the Publishing Industry is based.

It is clear that BAME representation in the publishing industry is lacking. However, what is more damning is that in comparing the PIWDIS 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 figures there has been no significant increase in representation of BAME employees. This means that those making the decisions around which authors and novels are published are predominantly white. Although figures were provided regarding the role of women at senior management levels, no such figures were available regarding the roles of BAME employees (or any of the other under-represented groups) which makes it unclear how much influence for change those BAME employees had. Without clear analysis of the roles of BAME employees there can be no definitive analysis of the scope of their representation within the industry. Therefore, in order to achieve the Publishing Industry's aim of reaching 15% BAME employment by 2022 action is needed.

However, the ethnic make-up of the industry is not the only barrier to expansive narratives being published. Dr Anamik Saha and Dr Sandra van Lente's 2020 report *Re:Thinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* suggests that increasing the number of ethnic and racial minorities employees in the publishing industry will not necessarily lead to 'better' representation of racial and ethnic minorities in published books. They believe the industry needs to rethink how it attracts readers, address its assumptions about its readers, and actively invest in reaching out to diverse communities.

Considering signed BAME authors' experiences of the publishing industry, *The Writing the Future Report* (Spread the Word, 2015) highlighted that many barriers exist for them. Some BAME authors felt that they were expected to portray limited narratives of their cultures, whilst others felt their work was rejected because it didn't tally with white expectation of their writing and many felt they were shoe-horned into only representing BAME issues. This illustrates a real barrier to producing expansive narratives. If authors'

offered narratives are rejected, then their stories are devalued, ignored and shut down in favour of the narrow, imagined boundaries created by the most prevalent culture. If BAME narratives are judged and rejected by people who lack the 'diversity of thought' Elba and Ahmed called for, then we are very much in the remit of a shoe shop which offers only one size. Understandably, some of the authors interviewed expressed discontent at being limited to representing BAME issues in their writing. After all, the whole concept of CW is to be creative, to produce imaginative writing that explores different worlds, so why should any author be limited to exploring only their own world?

David Barnett, in his article *Unusual Suspect: the writers diversifying detective fiction* (2018), points out that most of the best loved detectives in fiction are white and male, from Sherlock Holmes, to Rebus, and beyond. Furthermore, whilst there are a some notable BAME authors in the industry this has not translated into a representative increase of inclusion of BAME characters in literature. This again raises the question of whose responsibility it is to ensure that inclusion and representation in our literature is equitable. Clearly, the need to employ more people from BAME backgrounds in the publishing industry at influential levels is imperative, as is the need to dip into a wider pool in order to redress the existing imbalance in authors represented. Alongside this, though, the content of published narratives must be scrutinised in order to ensure that wider narratives become the norm and that BAME authors are not restricted to writing only narratives representing their communities.

### **2.2.2 Working Class, Working Class Women and Older Women representation**

The BAME communities are not the only ones under-represented in both the publishing industry workforce and in authors published. Unfortunately, the PIWDIS reports (2017-2019) have no figures to correlate the class of employees. However, if we consider

indications like education, we see that nearly 50% of employees had a degree, 36% had another related qualification whilst only 14% had no formal educational qualifications. Although this gives a clear picture of educational attainment, it does not necessarily provide an accurate guide to class backgrounds of employees. The *Panic! It's an Arts Emergency* (2015) survey demonstrates that people of working-class origin are excluded from the creative industries. Specifically, workplace demographics showed that only 12.6% of those employed in the publishing industry identified as working class. In 2020, to gain insight into the class of their employees the PIWDIS employed the PamCo social grades system which uses the main earner's occupation during the employee's childhood to ascertain class. It was discovered that in 2020 only 22% of employees were from working class backgrounds which is almost 50% lower than working class representation of the entire population.

Some literary figures have commented on the barrier to publication for working class people, and specifically working-class women. Kit de Waal's article *Make Room for Working Class Writers* (2018) highlights the fact that the publishing industry is the least socially diverse of all the creative industries, regarding not only class, but also ethnicity, gender and age. She observes that, 'working-class writers, it seems, must endlessly regurgitate their own life stories – or versions of them – whereas middle-class writers can explore the world, the universe and beyond.' Furthermore, De Waal claims that lack of inclusion results in published working-class narratives losing their authentic voice as they are diluted to suit the narrow focus of the over-represented white, middle-class employees in upper echelons of the industry. This echoes the complaints of some of BAME writers and substantiates the need for a more diverse workforce throughout the industry so that the views of wider society can influence publishing choices. In her radio programme discussing *Where Are All the Working Class Writers?* De Waal refers to the barriers faced by working-class authors:

Real equality is when working class writers can write about anything they like – an alien invasion, a nineteenth-century courtesan, a medieval war. All we need is the space, the time to do it – oh yes, and some way to pay the bills.’ (2017)

Katy Shaw’s 2020 report, *Common People: Breaking The Glass Ceiling in UK Publishing*, evolved from a project involving working-class writers, the aim of which was to increase confidence and facilitate entry to the industry whilst compiling the *Common People* anthology of working-class writers. The project identified barriers for aspiring working-class writers in developing writing careers including:

- lack of confidence and imposter syndrome.
- lack of peer support networks and feeling excluded from middle-class dominated ones.
- inability to infiltrate existing industry networks combined with lack of social diversity among publishing representatives.
- not encountering people that mirror your lived experiences in the ‘gate keeper’ industry roles.
- feeling patronised and part of a box ticking exercise when participating in some inclusivity and diversity schemes.
- feeling inadequate because of Northern roots.

This indicates that the decentralising of the publishing industry would benefit working class writers, but also other marginalised groups. This is a view supported by some politicians, with Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, stating at the Northern Lights Conference:

Having a Strong and diverse literary scene is essential for the future of this country. It brings joy and enlightenment to countless readers and helps make our society more interesting, vibrant and outward-looking. [...] resisting the gravitational pull of London and the South East in publishing and literature is fundamental to the future. (2019)

Politician and government backing for increased inclusivity in the creative industries is supported by the 2021 parliamentary report *Creative Majority*, with MP Chi Onwurah stating that creative industries are ‘far too important to our identity and to our economy ... to be left in the hands of a privileged few.’ The *Creative Majority* report makes key policy recommendations including: increasing representation at influential levels, proactive inclusion, accessibility and recruitment strategies to allow marginalised voices to be heard, implementing incentives for creatives to remain in the industry and, perhaps most importantly, accountability of organisations to set goals, measure achievements and build grass root networks across marginalised communities.

### **2.2.3 LGBTQ+**

According to PIWDIS 2020, the representation of LGBTQ+ communities in publishing has increased from 8% in 2018 to 11% in 2020, which is higher than the national average of 3% stated by the ONS. However, whilst this is positive, there are areas within the industry in which LGBTQ+ employees are under-represented. Whilst 14% of employees who identify as LGBTQ+ are at entry level, this falls to only 7% at executive level. A truer measure of inclusivity in the workplace is employees’ openness about their sexuality/sexual identity, yet 24% indicated they were not open regarding their sexuality with colleagues, which is an increase of 5% since 2018 and is also 5% higher than national figures, despite the increase in LGBTQ+ employees.

### **2.2.4 Disability**

Although the number of disabled employees has risen since 2018 to 8%, this is still 11% lower than the national figure of 22%. Disability representation falls from 7% at employee entry level to 3% at executive level.

In 2021, Authors with Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses published *The Disability Issue* as a clarion cry to the publishing industry to strive for better disabled inclusion:

If words have power, then the people who publish, promote and sell them have the ultimate power. They, or rather you, choose who is heard and who is silenced and who is seen and who remains invisible. The choices you make don't just impact readers, they resonate across society [...] Publishing more diverse voices has brought positive visibility to many marginalised groups. The same needs to be done for disabled people. (p.5)

This report consists of interviews with disabled authors, articles on visible and invisible disability and the importance of narratives inclusive of disability, as well as action points for publishers to increase inclusion for disabled authors whilst ensuring the quality of disabled representation in published books, including:

- reviewing existing disabled author and illustrator representation.
- assessing accessibility to ensure inclusivity for all.
- checking how disabled characters are portrayed using the Fries Test.<sup>13</sup>
- building links with disability organisations, creating inclusivity schemes and implementing disability training in the workplace.

### **2.2.5 The Publishing Industry's Response to Inclusion**

Pre Covid, the publishing industry had begun to consider D&I more seriously. The Penguin Random House (PRH) inclusion policy opens with a bold statement:

Books shape the culture of society. They inspire TV shows, films, stage shows, podcasts and more. Yet too often culture is shaped by people who come from a narrow section of society. That needs to change. (2018)

It continues by pledging that by 2025 they will be representative of wider society in terms of employees and the authors they sign. To support this, PRH established various initiatives.

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<sup>13</sup> **The Fries Test:** Does a work have more than one disabled character? Do the disabled characters have their own narrative purpose other than the education and profit of a nondisabled character? Is the character's disability not eradicated either by curing or killing? (*The Fries Test: On Disability Representation in Our Culture* (Fries, 2017).



The #WriteNow project works with under-represented groups nationwide to create publishing opportunities. #PenguinPride, celebrates the LGBTQ+ communities, whilst educational initiatives involve schools throughout the country to make the publishing industry more accessible for young people.

The Harvill Secker and Bloody Scotland (2018) BAME prize for crime fiction offers a mentoring opportunity for members from BAME communities, the Harper Collins 4<sup>th</sup> Estate imprint offers a route to publishing for BAME authors with their annual short story prize and in 2021, Harper Collins, HQ introduced the Creative Inclusion Lab to encourage writers from under-represented communities. The Killer Women Mentoring Scheme (2019) funded by Arts Council England and the Working-Class Writers' Festival (The Bookseller, 2018) aim to encourage broader representation amongst authors. However, these initiatives have been met with mixed reactions. Author Lionel Shriver asserts that:

PRH no longer regards the company's *raison d'être* as the acquisition and dissemination of good books. Rather, the organisation aims to mirror the percentage of minorities in the UK with statistical precision ... literary excellence will be secondary to ticking all those ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual preference and crap-education boxes. (2018)

This infers that a more representative workforce, combined with greater inclusion of authors from under-represented communities and wider narratives reflecting the voices of those authors, diminishes the quality of literature published. It does not account for the possibility that dipping into larger, more varied pools of talent might increase excellence and revitalise an industry which has been slow to respond to changing culture. The implication that belonging to an under-represented group means that your narratives will be inferior to the existing cohort of non-representative authors is offensive and illustrates exactly why these inclusive policies and initiatives are necessary. PRH is first and foremost a commercial business which recognises that wider representation is economically viable. Beside which,

Shriver's comments are misleading, as the PRH policy explicitly states that, 'This is an ambition, not a quota. We will always publish – and hire – based on talent, first and foremost.' (2018) PRH's commitment to nurturing marginalised voices, rather than inferring their standards have fallen, indicates that they have widened the goalposts to allow marginalised voices to be heard. As author Abir Mukherjee asserts:

the playing field isn't level [ ... ] PRH [ ... ] is making it easier for hugely talented individuals from marginalised parts of our society to have their voices and their stories heard ... this is about better reflecting the world we live in and publishing books that appeal to a wider cross section of society, rather than tokenism or box ticking. (Flood 2018)

During the 2020/21 Covid pandemic, the international publishing industry swiftly and positively responded to the outcry of George Floyd's murder in the USA and the resultant Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations. Pan Macmillan UK's statement on BLM and D&I said:

We have watched the recent horrifying events in America with sadness and anger, and have observed the protests that have arisen worldwide in response. They have reminded us that racism and prejudice is still insidious in our societies and that this issue must be effectively addressed. There is an urgent need for individuals, and companies such as ours, to be better allies to the black community, to educate ourselves on black issues and to commit to sustained and effective action to oppose racism and ensure that it has no place at Pan Macmillan. (2020)

Many publishing houses have implemented new strategies to ensure increased employment of people from BAME communities and some removed barriers to employment and committed to sign more authors from BAME communities. This swift turnaround in policy due to public outcry during a worldwide pandemic demonstrates that actively addressing inequality of representation quickly and effectively is achievable in the short term. Therefore, this dynamic should extend to be inclusive of all marginalised groups. Despite this, greater analysis of individual publishing houses' D&I strategies reveal a significant disparity between mission statements, policy and measurable actions.

PRH has tracked the diversity of its workplace since 2017 and its 2020 D&I report offers detailed analysis of its current position in terms of D&I, by analysing annual surveys regarding employees' ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, disability and class. The year's achievements were itemised alongside a transparent action plan for work identifying measurable aims for 2021. Since 2019 PRH have produced Gender Pay Gap reports and in 2020 introduced annual Ethnicity Pay Gap reports. In 2021 they announced their intention to publish disability, sexual orientation and socio-economic pay gap reports moving forward. (Bayley 2021).

Hachette's *Changing the Story* report committed to a D&I survey of its workforce in 2020. Hachette has, since 2017, produced an annual gender pay gap report demonstrating a year on year reduction in the gap and in 2020 produced its first Ethnicity Pay Gap report complete with action points to reduce the gap. Both Pan MacMillan's D&I pledge and *Associated Action Plan* (2020) and Bonnier Books UK's D&I Action Plan include measurable actions based on current knowledge of their workforce's make-up. Harper Collins, has yet to publish findings regarding D&I or detail measurable actions to support their mission statement to increase D&I within the company.

Whilst these largely positive initiatives will lead to more diverse narratives, I would argue that, alongside this, there is a need to normalise expansive narratives in the fiction published. Although publishing a wider, more representative cohort of authors will expand the narratives available, the issue is larger than that. It is also about expecting a proportion of all narratives produced to be expansive which means not relying solely on authors from marginalised groups to write them, but to normalise diverse narratives from *all* writers. As De Waal, Elba and Ahmed argue, it is about removing barriers for under-represented groups to the creative industries, whilst ensuring that creative choice is not limited to expected

narratives. In the reports outlined above, writers from marginalised groups expressed annoyance at being expected to write certain narratives. It is only by encouraging all writers to embrace expansive narratives that this can be addressed.

As creatives, writers are more than able to develop narratives that transport readers to places they may never have visited, through the experiences of characters they may never have met, having encounters they might only be able to imagine: stories that may never be their own, and may reflect societies/lives they have never inhabited. It is the authors' very special skill – their job, after all. Therefore, how hard is it to be more representative of actual society in our narratives and to think and write outside the narrow box of the publishers', authors' and readers' cultural expectations? Clearly, to expect every narrative to be representative of all aspects of wider society would be unreasonable, but to be mindful of how we represent the worlds we create is integral to proper inclusion, and this requires us to be conscious of the possibilities available. To be aware that a diverse society lives beyond the confines of our own worlds and to occasionally dip into that pool to ensure that we are, as Ahmed said, 'not leaving anyone behind' whilst opening up access to wider worlds and experiences. However, this also means authors must be responsible when portraying characters outwith their lived experiences and be mindful of harmful stereotypes and 'othering' people.

### **2.3 Expansive Narratives in the CF genre**

Whilst the discussion above has centred upon the need for expansive narratives in the creative industries and literature in general, my CW doctoral research is specifically concerned with D&I in the CF genre and, because my PhD is practice-led, how that impacts on my writing expansive narratives. CF is the most popular genre in contemporary adult fiction:

- Nielson Book Research (2015) showed that seven of the top ten print books sold and eight of the top ten e-books sold were CF.
- The Publishers Association (2016) reported that, of the top 15 borrowed library books (2015-2016), five were CF whilst the others were children's books.
- Singh (2018) reported figures from The London Book Fair stating that in 2017 the CF genre outsold all other fiction.

From these statistics it is clear that CF makes an extensive contribution to the creative industry economy and has the potential to be a real cultural influencer if it adopts expansive narratives. Further to this, in recent years CF has been recognised in the world of academia. City University, London, was the first to introduce an MA in Crime Thriller Writing in 2012, followed by the University of East Anglia in 2015, who claim that they want to 'lead the world in both the creative practice and critical study of crime fiction.' (2017) In 2021, the University of Cambridge started an MSt in Crime and Thriller Writing. At present, there are no other MAs, or equivalent, specific to CF writing in the UK; a situation that, with an increase in critical reflection and rigour around the writing and production of the CF novel, is sure to be rectified. Increasingly though, CF courses are being offered as post-graduate literature studies, notably at the University of Dundee, (2018) which offers a Crime Writing and Forensic Investigation MLitt and at Bath Spa University (2018) which offers a post-graduate course in Crime and Gothic Fiction. There are also undergraduate courses with dedicated CF modules.<sup>14</sup> In 2018, CF author Val McDermid, was awarded an honorary doctorate from Bath Spa University with a view to increasing the profile of CF in academia.

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<sup>14</sup> **On MA or equivalent in CF:** [Cambridge University](#), [University of East Anglia](#) **On Undergraduate courses with CF modules:** [Manchester University's American Crime Fiction \(2018\)](#), [third year CF module at Bath Spa University \(2018\)](#)],

In spite of this, there is reluctance in some circles to accord the CF genre the merit it deserves. In a New York Times interview, Philippa Gregory said:

Why does anyone write lazy, sloppy, genre novels? ... Writing should be both individual and universal. Choosing to write a genre novel is like fencing the universe because you are afraid of space. (Timaki 2017)

The use of pejorative adjectives ‘lazy’ and ‘sloppy’ insults both CF authors and readers of the genre and demonstrates a lack of awareness of the extensive reach of the genre in both subject matter and appeal, and the inference that a CF novel is neither individual nor universal is ludicrous in view of the earlier discussion and the position of CF as the genre ablest to cross boundaries. (see Chapter 3) This is demonstrated by the CF community, which is vibrantly interactive with many public and closed international Facebook groups specifically for CF readers.<sup>15</sup> These groups, which have memberships of between 500-20,000+, generate discussion, and are active in bringing authors and readers together, particularly during the Covid Pandemic, with interactive author panels and workshops. Many bloggers commit themselves to the genre exclusively by reviewing books, offering authors opportunities to ‘Guest Post’, making recommendations and opening discussion on trends within the genre,<sup>16</sup> whilst there are also many CF Podcasts.<sup>17</sup>

Howard Jacobson, on a similar theme, condemned genre, particularly crime fiction, in a 2018 BBC Radio 3 broadcast. Jacobson posited that a reader of literature needed to be educated and stated that the modern reader’s short attention span denies them the skills to be intellectually challenged. There are two distinct flaws in this argument; the first is Jacobson’s

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<sup>15</sup> **On CF Facebook Groups:** [Crime Fiction Addict](#), [UK Crime Book Club](#), [Thrillers, Crime Fiction & Mystery Readers](#), [Mystery & Thriller Marketing Book Club](#), [Crime Book Club](#), [The Thriller Book Club](#), [Bloody Scotland Book Club](#), [Scottish Crime Fiction Book Group](#), [Crime Readers’ Book Chat](#)

<sup>16</sup> **On Blogs dedicated to CF:** [Crime Fiction lover](#), [Crime By The Book](#), [Crime Book Junkie](#), [The Girl With All The Crime Books](#)

<sup>17</sup> **On CF Podcasts:** [Writer Types](#), [Partners in Crime](#), [Two Crime Writers and a Microphone](#), [The Crime Hub](#), [The Red Hot Chilli Writers](#)

belief that CF does not educate or challenge the reader. The CF novel engages the reader (and author) in the intellectual activity of a puzzle and provides a platform to learn, explore and contemplate others' lived experiences. The second is that he considers readers' reading choices 'a problem'. This attitude is indicative of deeper, deeply ingrained issues within the publishing industry; those of entitlement, exclusion and lack of diversity and representation of disenfranchised groups.

Despite this, it is clear that the CF genre in many instances outstrips literary fiction, as evidenced by Marlon James' novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (James 2015) winning the 2015 Man Booker prize. This was followed in 2016 by two CF novels being shortlisted; Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project* (2015) and Ottessa Moshfegh's *Eileen* (2016). However, despite attending Bloody Scotland Crime Writers' festival in 2015 as a 'spotlighted' debut author, Macrae Burnet distanced his novel from the genre, claiming, '[*His Bloody Project* was] a novel about crime rather than a crime novel.'

Literature encompassing 'crime' is centuries old, because at its heart most dramatic narratives, from the Greek tragedies, to Shakespearean plays, to contemporary fiction and beyond, begin with the premise of an injustice, a crime or a misdeed all of which are an exploration of the human condition. Macrae Burnet's statement questions the nature of the CF genre in relation to literature which features a crime and appears to make a distinction between 'genre fiction' and 'literary fiction'. It appears that the line between genre and literary fiction is blurred and moveable. It begs two questions; who defines where a novel sits in the vastness of literary outputs – the publishing industry, the reader or the author? Why would genre fiction be considered 'lesser' than literary fiction? The answers to these questions lie in the publishing industry's ingrained attitudes and a desire by some creatives to 'value' their work more highly than others. However, the 2018 Man Booker prize recognised

the importance and relevance of CF by, not only availing itself of CF's top female writer Val McDermid as a judge, but also once more selecting a CF novel, *Snap* (Bauer 2018), for its longlist.

If CF authors like Macrae Burnet who attain acclaim in the wider literary spectrum are reluctant to claim the genre as theirs then, in effect, they discredit a genre that has much to offer in the field of world literature. In *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, Louise Nilsson and others explicitly state their agenda:

By exploring the genre of crime fiction, we want to show the value of not dividing literature into watertight categories of high and low art and culture. ... Even the most popular crime fiction shares important features with elite works of world literature, especially the characterisation of combining universal themes with local settings. (2017, p.4)

This is a much more inclusive and celebratory attitude. CF can be as compelling as, for example, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (430 BC), a story about incest and murder, Doestovsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), a story of murder, moral dilemmas and social conscience and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), 'Domestic Noir' of its time.

CF is widely accepted as the genre that shines a spotlight on societal injustice and takes up the mantle for the disenfranchised and voiceless. As Catherine Nickerson (1997) asserts, CF can release 'explosive cultural material.' This implies that the genre is forward thinking and unafraid to challenge the status quo. Today, the explosive cultural material that should be released by the CF community is expansive narratives; narratives that broaden, include and represent society more equitably. Nickerson notes that CF 'represent[s] in a generally realistic style the most anxiety-producing issues and narratives of a culture.' (744-745) Renowned CF author Denise Mina states that 'crime fiction illuminates, informs and explores societal rupture' (2018), and Sophie Hannah says, 'I feel I am writing about ordinary people in the real world – but with the proviso that nobody is really that ordinary.' (2019) Whilst in agreement that the genre does indeed address societal issues, my research indicates



that it is unrepresentative of the diverse ‘narratives of a culture.’ The genre does not reflect broader society, nor is it inclusive and, on occasion, it is stuck in the rut of tokenism, with marginalised characters being presented in stereotypical or two-dimensional ways in subsidiary roles. The number of authors from marginalised groups being published, although rising, remains unrepresentative, and the narratives published are often not expansive in nature. I would posit that employing expansive narratives would produce a more realistic and authentic picture of the diversity of contemporary culture.

Part of my PhD research involved conducting interviews with twenty CF authors. Of the twenty:<sup>18</sup>

- eight were men and twelve were women.
- eight were under forty-five years old, eight were between 45 and 60 years old and four were over 60 years old.
- one identified as BAME (5%), nineteen as white (95%)
- three specified they had a disability (15%)
- all identified as heterosexual (100%).

During these interviews, I asked three questions which drew answers pertaining to inclusivity in CF. The first was: ‘What draws you to write CF?’ The overwhelming majority of responses echoed Mina and Hannah’s comments about exploring societal rupture and characterisation. There was a definite emphasis on exploring the psychology of characters (protagonists and antagonists), the search for resolution and justice, exploring darkness, personal experience, compulsion to write, conflict, escapism, and the challenge of creating a puzzle. The responses which particularly illuminated the authors’ awareness of, or desire to incorporate, expansive narratives included the following:

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<sup>18</sup> **Appendix 2:** Author Information email, Author questions

- ‘I like to give voice [...] to the voiceless.’
- ‘It’s the last stronghold of the everyday hero, the hero the reader could actually become.’
- ‘I am interested in the authority of the CF genre to reflect society and to explore issues of political, economic and moral weight.’

Nine authors expressed a desire to ‘reflect real life’, to ‘give voice’, to include ‘credible characters’ and to ‘explore issues and dilemmas’. However, whether these authors would produce expansive narratives depends on their personal perceptions of ‘real life,’ which is why it is important that there is wider representation within the CF author community.

Alongside this, there needs to be commitment from publishers to ensure that narratives offer wider representation of society, thus sharing the responsibility of producing representative narratives and not relying on those from under-represented groups to do this.

One author wanted the reader to identify with the ‘hero’ and believe that they could become that hero. (I use the term hero as a unisex term) If the reader is from an under-represented group, does that hero share any of their identified characteristics? Another author credited the CF genre with having ‘authority’ to reflect society, as if there is an expectation that the genre will do just that, but again this is reliant on the author’s concept of ‘society’. Only by employing expansive narratives can we effectively deliver the things CF authors feel the genre represents; to create heroes that mirror the reader’s expectation that they could one day be that hero, whilst representing wider society and giving voice to the voiceless.

My experience as a reader of CF is that, as a genre, it does to an extent fulfil these expectations. CF explores societal rupture, spotlights social injustice and gives voice to the voiceless. Mark Billingham’s *Love Like Blood* (2018) is about ‘honour killings’. It spotlights social injustice and gives voice to the disenfranchised characters killed for ‘dishonouring’

their families. *Dead Memories* (2019) by Angela Marsons explores issues around society's responsibilities to abused and vulnerable children. Both Jane Casey's *Cruel Acts* (2019) and Brian Freeman's *The Voice Inside* (2019) scrutinise flaws in the US and UK justice systems respectively, and explore how corruption, politics and the media exacerbate existing flaws. However, whilst generally highlighting very important issues, CF narratives are still, to an extent, exclusive. Protagonists are rarely from a marginalised group and, although overall narratives have a number of BAME characters, few of these characters are 'the heroes'. Often the marginalised characters are the victims. In two of the above examples, the protagonists are women, but in one instance, the woman's opinion is considered less valid than that of her male counterpart. There are no characters from the LGBTQ+ communities, all protagonists bar one are between the ages of twenty and forty, and none is physically disabled, although two suffer from PTSD.

If we consider the prestigious Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year (2021) awards shortlist, we can again see this trend perpetuated. Of the six shortlisted novels – Elly Griffiths' *The Lantern Men* (2020), Rosamund Lupton's *Three Hours* (2020), Brian McGilloway's *The Last Crossing*, (2020), Abir Mukherjee's *Death in the East*, (2020), Chris Whitaker's *We Begin At The End* (2020), and Trevor Wood's *The Man on the Street* (2020) – only Mukherjee identifies as BAME and his is the only novel featuring a non-white protagonist. Whilst the large majority of published CF novels are penned by women, only two of the shortlisted novels were by women. Each novel featured male main protagonists whilst 4 included female main characters. Three main characters were over 45 years of age with the others being under 45, with two novels featuring teen characters in significant roles. This lack of representation of wider society is not an isolated occurrence, with the make-up of shortlisted novels in this and in other important CF festivals demonstrating a similar makeup

in their shortlisted novels year on year.<sup>19</sup> Whilst in no way denigrating the talent of these writers, this raises question about who identifies talent within the genre. Whether it is publishers, festival committees or bookshops who contribute to long and short list selection, there is a need to identify biases, seek talent from a wider, more representative pool and consider the content of the narratives they exalt. In order to break the glass ceilings that authors from under-represented groups face, all gatekeepers to publishing should seek out more expansive narratives and pro-actively seek talent from these groups.

This was further emphasised when The Theakston Old Peculier Crime Festival was called out for the absence of women of colour among their panellists. (Bayley, 2021) Harrogate Festivals responded quickly, publicly and positively to the criticism on Twitter (2021), stating, ‘It has been brought to our attention that our 2021 Crime Writing Festival Programme contains no female writers of colour. It should not have been necessary for this to be pointed out to us’, with a further pledge to address inclusivity in future.

The second of my author questions relevant to expansive narratives was: ‘Do CF authors have a responsibility to society?’ Interestingly, one author responded that their only responsibility was to themselves. Three responded that they had no responsibility to society,

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<sup>19</sup> **Theakston Old Peculier Crime Festival Shortlist 2020:** *My Sister the Serial Killer* (Braithwaite,2019), *Worst Case Scenario* (Fitzgerald, 2019), *The Lost Man* (Harper, 2018), *Joe Country* (Herron, 2020), *The Chain* (McKinty,2019), *Smoke and Ashes* (Mukherjee, 2018).**Theakston Old Peculier Crime Festival Shortlist 2019:** *Snap* (Bauer,2018), *Thirteen* (Cavanagh, 2018), *London Rules* (Herron, 2018), *Broken Ground* (McDermid, 2018) *The Quaker* (McIlvanney, 2018), *East of Hounslow* (Rahman, 2018).**Bloody Scotland’s McIlvanny Prize Shortlist 2021:** *The Silent Daughter* (Christie, 2020), *The Coffinmaker’s Garden* (MacBride, 2021), *Edge of the Grave* (Morrison, 2021), *The April Dead* (Parks, 2021) *Hyde* (Russell, 2021).**Bloody Scotland’s McIlvanny prize Shortlist 2020:** *Whirligig* (Greig, 2020), *A Dark Matter* (Johnstone, 2019), *The Art of Dying* (Parry, 2019), *Pine* (Toon, 2020).**Bloody Scotland’s McIlvanny prize Shortlist 2019:** *Breakers* (Johnstone,2019), *A Treachery of Spies* (Scott, 2019), *Conviction* (Mina,2019), *The Way of All Flesh* (Parry, 2018).**CrimeFest edunnit Award 2021:** *The Hunted* (Bergmoser,2020), *The Split* (Bolton,2020), *Little Boy Lost* (Carter,2020), *Fifty-Fifty* (Cavanagh, 2020) *Fair Warning* (Connelly, 2020) *A Private Cathedral* (Burke, 2020) *A Song for the Dark Times* (Rankin, 2020) *The Dead Line* (Watt, 2021) **CrimeFest edunnit Award 2020:** *Worst Case Scenario* (FitzGerald, 2019), *Never Be Broken* (Hilary, 2019) *The King’s Evil* (Taylor, 2019), *The Maltese Herring* (Tyler, 2019), *To The Lions* (Watt, 2019), *The Border* (Winslow, 2019). **CrimeFest edunnit Award 2019:** *When Trouble Sleeps* (Adenle, 2018) *Thirteen* (Cavanagh, 2018) *Gallows Court* (Edwards, 2018), *Sunburn* (Lippman, 2018), *Homegrown Hero* (Rahman, 2018), *The Fire Court* (Taylor, 2018), *The Shrouded Path* (Ward, 2018).

but stated that they would not write gratuitous violence or use certain language in deference to their readership. One specified that their aim was ‘to entertain not to influence’ whilst acknowledging that other authors ‘inject social justice into their work’. One author responded ‘Absolutely not. We have a responsibility to pull it [society] down’. The other authors verbalised their responsibility to society thus:

- ‘I would never paint a particular group in a negative way ... although I may paint them that way through the eyes of somebody whose values needed to be questioned.’
- ‘to portray people in a fair way, challenge prejudice.’
- ‘CF authors have an obligation not to perpetuate damaging stereotypes.’
- ‘Writers have a responsibility to avoid cliché ... but be true to reality. Not every Muslim is a terrorist, blond is a dumb victim, politician is corrupt.’

Clearly the desire to ‘do no harm’, to expose ‘societal wrongs and social injustice’ and to not ‘perpetuate stereotypes’ is high on the agenda of the majority of CF authors interviewed, yet although they intuitively challenged and spotlighted issues leading to inequitable representation, only two referenced wider narratives by mentioning avoiding stereotypes. In order to avoid tokenism, it is important to portray a breadth of characters from marginalised groups. This relates to Idris Elba’s concern about being labelled a ‘black actor’ when he is so much more than that. It’s about being able to represent, for example, a gay man as a villain, because he is not *only* a gay man – he is more than that – and could be a villain, a nurse, a father ... and gay. However, the worry of portraying under-represented characters in a stereotypical way is ever-present, and this can be difficult to navigate as a writer.

In order to gain clarification around this, I posed the question: ‘Do current discussions/debates around, for example, the portrayal of marginalised groups, violence

towards women, etc., in CF influence how or what you write?’ Six respondents said that they would not be influenced by current debate. One of those cited the fact that not conforming to current ‘thought’ around certain issues could be a barrier to being published. Two cited their method of writing as ‘pantsers’ (those who do not plot), for ignoring current debate. Three mentioned being true to their writing and not being forced into writing stories which didn’t interest them and spoke about writing to expose inequality, whether it was fashionable or not. The fourteen who acknowledged being influenced by current debates commented thus:

- ‘To keep current and authentic, then you must be broadly aware of all possibilities.’
- ‘Yes, I discuss this a lot with fellow writers.’
- ‘I’m keen to see people from the BAME community represented accurately and not placed in stories where the fact that they are BAME is the purpose of them being in the story.’
- ‘Representation is important, good representation is imperative.’
- ‘I often cover controversial topics that a lot of authors would shy away from, [...] I can use my voice to bring attention to these things.’
- ‘I’m in a position to expose corruptions, abuses, conspiracies and social injustices that happen in real life.’
- ‘I tend to focus on domestic violence and misogyny as themes ...’
- ‘As a feminist I make a conscious effort to ensure my work subverts the stereotypical victim trope.’
- ‘I try to explore social issues – especially the disempowerment of women.’
- ‘I don’t know if it’s entirely true that CF is now a radical genre but it does provide a vehicle for exploring the experiences of oppressed and disenfranchised groups.’

- ‘Many of my books try to give expression to the experiences of disenfranchised groups or individuals.’
- ‘It is inevitable that the debate around different groups has an impact on writing. I think the exploration of this can be a good thing.’

These responses indicate that with particular reference to BAME communities and women, CF authors consider D&I when writing. Interestingly, only the author who identified as BAME referred to D&I of BAME characters. One of the authors mentioning the disempowerment of women was male. This is indicative that being from an under-represented group makes it more likely that an author will consider representation of that group. Although oppressed, disenfranchised and different groups are mentioned in loose terms, there is very little indication of the precise groups the authors refer to. Overall, the interviewed authors are socially aware, try to represent broader society and are committed to giving voice to marginalised groups. However, if D&I is focused mainly on women and the BAME communities, what are the implications for other marginalised groups? If we are not fully inclusive, then we still leave people behind: their narratives are not told, their experiences invalidated. This brings into question the way in which under-represented voices are created. Do narratives including marginalised groups portray them as victims, peripheral or secondary characters, or do they represented them as equals – the ‘heroes’? If the former, then there is work to do. The need to encapsulate, as a matter of course, inclusive narratives, with members of marginalised groups playing leading roles, is pressing. This is especially true if CF is to continue to be the genre that represents contemporary society in a realistic way.

To illustrate this, I considered the 78 adult CF books I have read since January 2021 and studied the representation of the authors and the main characters they created in

comparison to national statistics on age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability.<sup>20</sup> The 78 novels comprised of 53 police procedurals, seven psychological thrillers, two legal thrillers, four Gang thrillers, ten Private Investigator thrillers, one Futuristic CF novel, one Cosy crime.<sup>21</sup>

This is what I found:

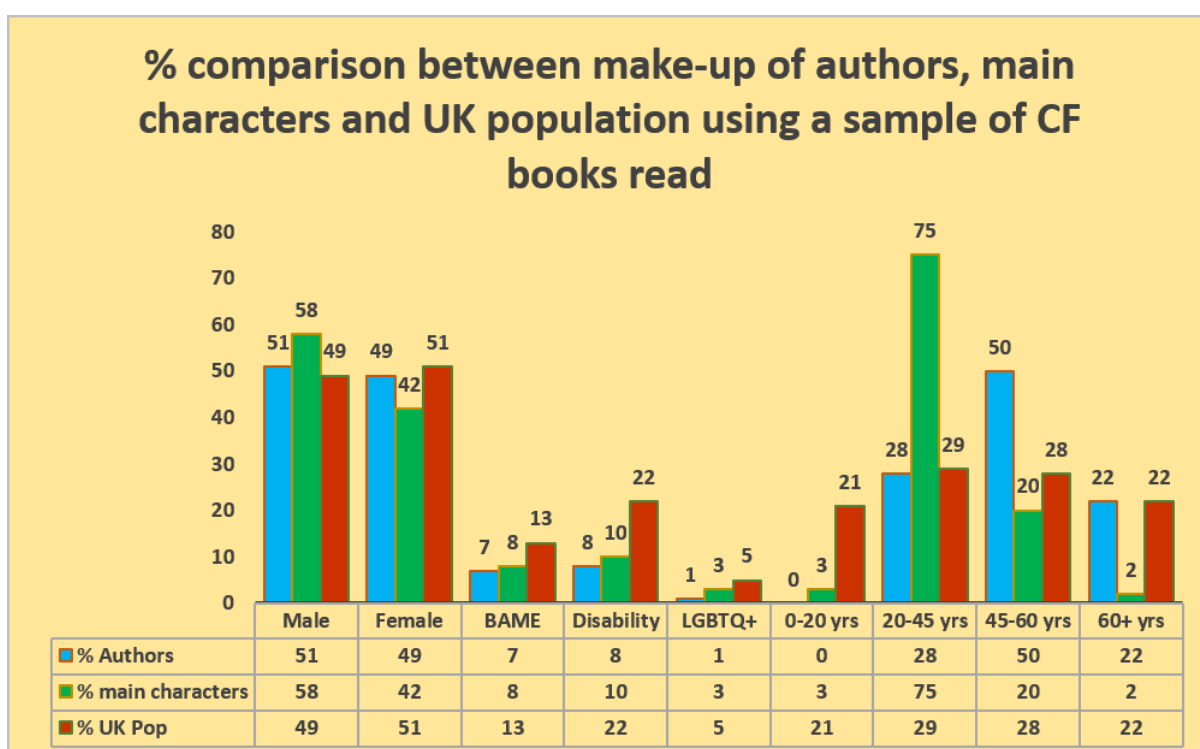


Figure 9: % comparison between representation of authors, characters within novels and national UK statistics

Despite males accounting for only 49% of the UK population, narratives about males are 16% higher than those about women and noticeably higher than the UK statistics. Those from BAME communities are underrepresented both by author and in main characters. Narratives involving characters from LGBTQ+ communities and those who are disabled are grossly under-represented, as are those narratives involving teens and those over the age of 45 with

<sup>20</sup> **Data collated from the following sources:** Office for National Statistics (2011, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021) Department of Work and Pensions (2016/2017), Gov.Uk (2018), Scottish Census, (2021).

<sup>21</sup> **Goodreads List of Books Read 2021** [https://www.goodreads.com/user\\_challenges/27159694](https://www.goodreads.com/user_challenges/27159694).



the concentration of narratives involving those in the 20 – 45 age category. This is particularly striking when the majority of authors are over the age of 45.

Further analysis of the narratives shows that;

- Of the 5 significant characters from BAME communities, just one was written by an author *not* identifying as BAME, whereas 2 of the 3 authors from these communities included a mix of ethnicities in their narratives.
- The only author to include a significant character from the LGBTQ+ community identified as gay.
- All of the significant characters with a disability or narratives including disability were written by authors who themselves have a disability.

Using the first victim from each novel, I considered victimology in the narratives studied:

- 28 victims were male and 45 were women with five narratives involving family annihilation (I excluded these from the age criteria). To unpick this a little more, it is important to be aware that themes such as male privilege, domestic abuse, gaslighting, rape, child trafficking, mental health gangs, racism, poverty, drugs and entitlement were explored in these novels.
- 47 victims were within the 20-45-year age group with 19 under the age of 20 and 7 over 45 years old.
- 67 victims were white (as were the families) with only 7 victims from BAME communities

These statistics demonstrate that if you are young, white female reader you are more likely to see characters resembling you as victims rather than heroes. A reader over the age of 45 is unlikely to see themselves represented as either a victim or a hero and this appears to be true of the LGBTQ+ and disabled communities, although the chances of a reader seeing characters

similar to themselves portrayed as a victim if they are from the BAME community is fractionally higher. If you are a man between the ages of 20 to 45, you're more likely to be a hero. Notably, even among the wider cast of characters there was scant representation of marginalised groups. Disenfranchised groups when reading CF will be unlikely to see people with their identified characteristics portrayed. Expansive narratives would balance this, ensuring that diverse readers, whilst being able to experience cultures, worlds and lifestyles different to their own, would also sometimes be able to see their identified characteristics reflected back at them in a variety of ways.

Not every CF novel needs to represent all aspects of society. However, if the default is to perpetuate the clichéd, hetero, young, white, male protagonist, then we, as writers, miss opportunities to incorporate the richness that expansive narratives bring, to vitalise wider society by exploring narratives that can take author and reader out of our comfort zones and stretch perceptions of what people should or can do. Relating this back to the answers elicited from the author interviews, this questions how effectively CF authors are addressing their previously stated aims of:

- 'challenging stereotypes'
- 'giving 'good representation''
- 'using our voices to 'bring attention to these [controversial topics] things''
- 'exposing 'social injustice''
- 'subvert[ing] the stereotypical victim trope'
- exploring 'the disempowerment of women'
- exploring 'the experiences of oppressed and disenfranchised groups'
- 'challenging prejudice'
- 'not to perpetuate damaging stereotypes'

- ‘making sure tough subjects aren’t brushed under the carpet’
- giving ‘expression to the experiences of disenfranchised groups or individuals’
- ‘avoid[ing] cliché’

This brings us back to the function of literature to sometimes mirror *all* of us and introduce us to others’ experiences.

## **2.4 Appropriation of Voice and Authorial Responsibility**

Whilst initiatives like the PRH policy will ultimately lead to a more diverse workforce in the publishing industry, that alone will not expand the narratives. Fortunately, increased initiatives for marginalised groups combined with action plans to redress imbalance in representation is positive. However, alongside these initiatives, influential crime writing festivals and authors must also take positive and inclusive steps. Recently, more CF from BAME authors has been published; AA Dhand (Transworld Publishers), Abir Mukherjee (PRH), Alex Khan (Hera Books), Khurram Rahman (Harper Collins), and Vaseem Khan (Hodder & Stoughton). The range of publishers publishing BAME authors indicates a change in direction towards more expansive narratives. However, the representation of BAME women CF authors is poorer with Zia Abdullah (Harper Collins HQ), Dreda Say Mitchell (Bloodhound Books) and Dorothy Koomson (Headline books) among the few to break into CF publishing. PRH’s (2018) pledge that ‘new hires and the books we acquire will reflect UK society by 2025’ shows a commitment not only to a greater representation of society in terms of who they employ, but a greater representation of wider society in the narratives they publish. By extending the remit to include more expansive narratives, and by having manuscripts scrutinised by employees with wider experiences, the expectation of more representative narratives will increase. This will ensure that under-represented groups do not alone carry the burden of creating inclusive narratives to represent themselves but are free to

explore their creativity with the knowledge that wider more representative narratives are not only valued and sought after, but published, too. Expansive narratives are the only way forward to ensure better representation without pigeonholing authors from specific groups and restricting their creative practice.

Alongside this, the subject of appropriation of voice must be considered. In no way should expansive narratives replace the creative industries' commitment to equitable representation of marginalised groups. On the contrary, expansive narratives should complement equitable representation. However, discussions surrounding identity politics, representation of people outwith your own lived experiences and appropriation of voice in fiction are tremendously important. This was brought to a head by Lionel Shriver at the Brisbane Writers Festival (2016) where she dismissed ongoing concerns over appropriation of voice and representation of marginalised groups in an inflammatory address stating 'the ultimate endpoint of keeping our mitts off experience *that doesn't belong to us* is that there is no fiction.' (Guardian 2016) This is a wilful misrepresentation of the importance of sensitivity and research when representing marginalised groups in an inequitable publishing industry and an insensitive view of authorial responsibility when writing outwith the author's lived experiences. Whilst Shriver acknowledged that 'the spirit of good fiction is one of exploration, generosity, curiosity, audacity and compassion,' she fails to cement these adjectives in the context of a society where writers from marginalised groups are grossly under-represented in an industry that reeks of white, middle-class, heterosexual, non-disabled privilege. She fails to acknowledge the need for authors of privilege to write responsibly.

Shriver's speech elicited the following response from Yassmin Abdel-Magied who described it as 'a monologue about the right to exploit the stories of 'others', simply because

it is useful for one's story' and 'a poisoned package wrapped up in arrogance and delivered with condescension.' (Guardian, 2016). Abdel-Magied's outrage was directed at the insensitivity of Shriver's speech and the narrowness of its remit because, had Shriver framed it as an open discussion around appropriation of voice and writing fiction, then it would have been inclusive rather than another justification of unfettered support for the privileged to appropriate at will with no consequence or accountability. As Abdel-Magied points out, 'How is it that said straight white woman will profit from an experience that is not hers, and those *with* the actual experience never be provided the opportunity?'

These two viewpoints demonstrate the delicate debate surrounding representation of marginalised groups in fiction, inclusion of authors from marginalised groups and what authors from those groups are expected to write as well as how all authors can write responsible and inclusive expansive narratives.

Anthony Horowitz's claims (Kean, 2017) that he was asked not to write black characters sparked anger among writers who openly challenged his assertion citing many white authors with diverse characters. Author Patrice Lawrence in the same article states that 'white writers' fears of accusations of cultural appropriation if they create black or Asian characters was 'a diversion'. Meanwhile, author Courttia Newland suggests that

The issue isn't whether or not [white writers] are given the right to create characters of colour. Rather, it is whether they do it well and the privilege that comes with being enabled to tell stories that writers of colour are routinely marginalised for.'

In his Guardian (2019) article author John Boyne responded to criticism about his novel, *My Brother's Name is Jessica*, which is from the POV of a boy struggling to cope with his transgender sister's transition, thus:

There is this awful thing, in my opinion an awful thing, #OwnVoices [which says] that people can only write about their own experience and stories, and my experience as a reader and as a writer is the opposite to that.

Whilst understanding his frustration as a YA author whose characters are always outwith his own experience, I found his response both worrying and indicative of the defensive attitude of the privileged publishing world which fails to understand appropriation of voice and authorial responsibility. Boyne's response should have included a discussion around how he approached the subject matter, the sensitivity he employed as an author and any research he may have done. He could have used his privilege as a published author to frame authorial responsibility when including diverse narratives at the heart of the debate, instead, he closed down discussion, closed ranks and side-lined the issue to an 'authors can write what they want' narrative.

Whilst Boyne dealt with the subject of having a loved one transition empathetically and his novel illuminated a subject rarely broached in fiction, some authors are not so empathetic in their approach to writing diverse characters. In July 2021 a Twitter storm illuminated some very serious issues in the publishing world. It began with *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* author Kate Clanchy using Twitter to dispute a reader's review which stated, 'the narrative is centred on this white, middle-class, woman's harmful, judgemental and bigoted view on race, class and body image' and went on to cite numerous instances to corroborate this assertion. Calamity with a K included photographic evidence to refute Clanchy's denial of the content. Clanchy's tweet resulted in over 500 responses, some in support of her 'creative choices' and others condemning them. However, the most significant revelations from the episode are twofold: Firstly, Clanchy's book was published in 2019, subjected to numerous pre-publication edits by a major publishing house, none of which flagged up the inappropriate language or descriptors. Secondly, this book won the Orwell Prize for Political Writing in 2020, judged by a panel of literary figures and

journalists, and again no issues were flagged. This is particularly worrisome when the Orwell Foundation's mission statement concludes that:

we use George Orwell's work to celebrate honest writing and reporting, uncover hidden lives, and confront uncomfortable truths – and, in doing so, to promote Orwell's values of integrity, decency and fidelity to truth.

Whilst abhorring the Twitter frenzy around this, it serves to illuminate a problem in some published narratives exalted in the world of literature and publishing and reinforces the statistics that prove that the industry is unrepresentative. It also brings into question how literature involving diverse narratives can be monitored to ensure Clanchy's mistakes are not repeated. Alison Flood's article (2018) shows that whilst authors (Jodi Picoult and Anna Hecker) advocate the use of sensitivity readers - readers employed to read books that feature identities or experiences that are outside the author's lived experience - others including Lionel Shriver and Francine Prose disagree, viewing their use as censorship. However, whilst the role of sensitivity readers may have a place, it should not be seen as an alternative to signing authors from marginalised groups, or employing a more diverse editorial team.

Indeed, writing effective, sympathetic and responsible expansive narratives is a nuanced and delicate subject, which necessitates a degree of authorial responsibility and a deep knowledge that, as authors, the privilege we have to write a vast array of characters must be tempered by the duty to be responsible in the manner in which we do this. Kit De Waal describes it thus:

We have to ask ourselves who we are and what we are trying to say in speaking as "the other". What are we trying to accomplish in our writing that needs that perspective? Are we the best person to say it? Have we examined our privilege and our attitudes sufficiently to give us the necessary perspective to be authentic, sympathetic and true? Are we sure that we are not dabbling in exotica, in that fascination with the other that prevents us portraying a rounded, rich culture with all its nuances, diversity and reality? (2018)

With this in mind, I addressed the issue of appropriation of voice during the author interviews with the question: ‘What are your feelings about appropriation of voice in creative writing in general?’ One author declined to answer the question, two were unaware of any political dimension to the question, one understood the question to be about the use of first or third person narration, and one gave the example of a CF author who, in their opinion, had appropriated an African woman’s voice badly. The words *inevitable*, *necessary*, *unavoidable* and *appropriate* were used a total of seventeen times, indicating that overwhelmingly the need to write in other voices was seen as an integral part of the craft. However, most authors provided further detail to their answers:

- ‘I certainly wouldn’t presume to write something that sits within another culture unless I was sure I was well enough informed to do it and that it was fair representation.’
- ‘One of the most satisfying aspects of the creative process is adopting or representing the other.’
- ‘... in depicting a different culture or identity any writer should take the responsibility seriously.’
- ‘I try to represent my characters fairly and convincingly.’
- ‘Writers need to do their homework to avoid harmful stereotypes.’
- ‘Research is key. Understanding different cultures is key.’
- ‘I would like to see some of those voices tell their own story.’
- ‘The vast majority of writers are white and middle class. I seek to represent the world as I see it, so I write about people of different colours, religions and backgrounds. That’s what authors do.’
- ‘Appropriation of voice is inevitable in fiction.’



- ‘If you couldn’t write about anyone else, there would only be one story left – your own. You need to write what you want.’
- ‘We must move into areas beyond our knowledge, understanding and expertise.’
- ‘My feeling is that ‘appropriation of voice’ is a modern-day concern which should actually concern none of us.’
- ‘Perfectly fine as long as necessary research has been done.’
- ‘[Authors] sometimes get accused of not including minority groups in their writing but when they do, they are in danger of being accused of misrepresenting such groups. It’s important to be inclusive but like any subject matter, it has to be handled sensitively.’
- ‘As long as the voice is done in a professional manner that has been adequately researched and stays true to the voice then authors can do it very well.’
- ‘I’m uncomfortable when authors appropriate material from other cultures for exploitative or meretricious reasons.’
- ‘If writers were only allowed to write from within their own experience, the scope of fiction would be very limited.’
- ‘If a writer chooses to write from another perspective... then they have an obligation to take the process seriously.’

The overall emphasis was that appropriation was necessary in order to provide diverse narratives, but that alongside this the author has an obligation to research, to be sensitive, not to misrepresent, and to be accurate. Some authors used terms like ‘fair representation,’ ‘responsibility,’ ‘sensitivity,’ ‘obligation to take the process seriously,’ and ‘professionalism,’ as well as stressing the need for research. These responses led me to consider who would be the adjudicator for all these concerns. Who would decide if the representation was fair or

sensitively handled, or adequately researched, or exploitative? We have Ahmed and Elba pointing out the benefits of inclusive narratives and alongside that we have a publishing industry that is addressing the issue of under-representation of marginalized groups in the workplace and amongst authors, whilst pledging to publish more expansive narratives representative of wider society. Meanwhile we have notable authors like Lionel Shriver dismissing concerns over both appropriation of voice and the initiatives to redress the imbalance, whilst other authors, like Kit de Waal embrace these initiatives. It's hardly surprising, then, that CF authors are wary when it comes to creating characters from marginalised groups. As a result of this, the representation of marginalised groups in CF is still poor, which brings into question the CF community's assertion that this genre is the one that most represents society.

Despite the overall lack of representation of marginalised groups in CF, there has in recent years been an encouraging move by some authors to embrace more expansive narratives. With the ongoing presence of more aged characters like Ian Rankin's Rebus and Mark Billingham's Thorne, we see middle-aged heroes. The introduction of Robert Galbraith's disabled character Cormoran Strike, Tony Forder's DI Bliss who suffers from Meniere's disease, and Alison Morgan's character in *Fat Chance* (2019) who has bipolar disorder, demonstrates that more disabled characters are appearing in CF. In terms of the LGBTQ+ communities, one of my own characters in *Last Request* (2019) is gay, and A. M. Peacock's main character is not only gay but also an older man, whilst Keri Beevis' main character in *The Darkness Beneath* (2017) is lesbian, and Patricia Dixon's character in *They Don't Know* (2018) is asexual. There's a host of capable female protagonists, from Angela Marson's Kim Stone to my own Alice Cooper, and many representing BAME main

characters from my own DS Nikki Parekh, DC Sajid Malik and DI Gus McGuire, to Vicky Newham's Maya Rahman.

Having read the novels mentioned above, I would consider the diverse characters to be well-researched and sensitively portrayed. I myself research carefully before portraying any character I have no lived experience of and, according to my interviews, this appears to be the case for most authors. The point is that authors are used to researching in order to portray characters vastly different from themselves; for example, how many CF authors are serial killers or murderers? Authentic character development is an integral part of the craft that good authors have developed over time. Like all genres of fiction, CF is held up to scrutiny by its readership, literary critics, the publishing world and other authors. This makes authors accountable for their writing and it is their responsibility to ensure they have carried out the groundwork when they represent characters with different experiences to their own lived ones. The concept of accountability is further discussed by Chris Cleave:

Readers are mostly ignored in this debate (appropriation), but the worldly and widely read reader has a hinterland, is quick to spot an agenda and is willing to call out fakes. Readers are more heterogeneous than writers will ever be and in their multiplicity a book finds its measure of truth. (2016)

It is not only about detailing and spotlighting issues faced by these groups, it is about empowering these groups by sometimes reflecting them as the heroes, the solvers, the ones who make a difference, the aspirational leaders that readers can look up to, but only if they themselves are adequately represented. Writing expansive narratives is something I pursue in my novels and by actively trying to avoid stereotypes and by considering the implications of my writing, by taking responsibility for my narratives and characterisation, I aim to be more representative of wider society. After all, I no more want to always write about a fifty-something, working-class, Scottish, white woman than the readership wants to read only one narrative and there is evidence to support this assertion.

Author, blogger, reviewer and reader, C. S. O’Cinneide said the following of my character DS Nikita Parekh:

We also need more characters of colour, or ethnicity or whatever you want to call it, not writing books about a whole bunch of white people of privilege. Nikki Parekh is neither white nor privileged. She’s of dual heritage and lives on a housing estate where sleazy punks try to get her nephew to deal molly. Throughout the book she comes into contact with people of varying cultural backgrounds, sexual preference, and social standing. That makes for a rich human landscape in a novel. But here’s the best part — there’s not one cliché across that panorama. This is what makes this gritty noir particularly scenic, it’s realist painting of a life mosaic that includes more than one view.’ (2019)

In the same vein, actor, and narrator of the audiobook of *Last Request (2019)*, Shaheen Khan tweeted, ‘It was my absolute pleasure to narrate #LastRequest. Fantastic to have had the opportunity to play a range of fabulous characters and wonderful to have a strong, complex Asian female lead at the heart of the thriller.’ (2019).

Kit De Waal states that:

As writers we have to be the other – without it we would have no literature, no great stories, no murder mysteries, no great romances, no historical novels, no science fiction, no fantasy – but when we become the other we need always to act with respect and recognise the value of what we discover, show by our attitudes and our acknowledgements that we aren’t just appropriating but are seeking to understand. (2018)

This is what expansive narratives can do, and if the CF genre does this then Nilsson’s assertion that ‘Crime fiction [is treated] as a significant participant in the international sphere of world literature,’ because it ‘offers a particularly rich area of inquiry,’ with ‘bestselling genre fiction fully illustrat[ing] what Marx and Engels enticingly describe as world literature’s ‘intercourse in every direction’ (2017: 2) remains true, with CF evolving with changing culture and producing ‘intercourse’ in the form of expansive narratives that extend beyond the readers’ experiences and represent wider society.

### **Chapter 3: ‘Once you know, you can’t claim ignorance’: The Digital Teen in Adult Crime Fiction**

*Writing novels as a form of activism! Part of a long tradition of lit/art engaging with difficult problems, raising awareness. Once you know, you can’t claim ignorance.*  
(Young, 2020)

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Baroness Lola Young’s assertion refers to the long tradition of literature, and in particular CF, highlighting difficult, sometimes traumatic, societal problems and interrogating them through narrative, in order to understand or expose them by exploring their root causes and potential consequences. Many CF authors hold this view, including Stav Sherez (2013) who posits that, ‘In the crime novel we find the perfect metaphor for the way we read the signs that surround us and make sense of our existence.’ This relates to the genre’s power to illuminate darker areas of society and the CF writer’s place and role within it in relation to their readership. It offers the reader access to a range of unfamiliar societal experiences, as well as an opportunity to process shared lived experiences, whilst controlling how far they will engage with them. In interview with journalist Yvette Huddleston (2020), Val McDermid suggests that, ‘the crime novel has become the novel of social history – you can write about any aspect of how we live life now.’ This concept is supported by author Denise Mina (2018) who maintains that ‘crime fiction really informs how we look at the world ... how we understand social rupture is so important.’

In Chapter 2 we considered the importance of D&I within the CF genre. Chapter 3 will demonstrate that digital age teens are a multi-marginalised group. Not only are issues affecting teens under-explored within the genre, but the complex make-up of this significant group in terms of race, sexuality, socio-economic position and more, is largely ignored. This chapter establishes the importance of giving voice to the teen lived experience through the medium of adult CF. It will exemplify teen experiences of ‘social rupture’ in a digital age

society and demonstrate how imperative sharing these diverse experiences with an adult audience is.

Before focussing on the specifics of the digital age teen voice in adult CF, it is crucial to consider the role of CF. Within the context of realist fiction, the crime novel not only echoes and endorses the values of the social order, but challenges deviant or aberrant views and actions held or perpetrated by individuals or groups who flout acceptable social norms. With a view to engendering understanding of violent crime, CF scrutinises the myriad reasons and circumstances that give rise to and facilitate this violence. It offers insight into wider humanity by introducing reader and author to lives and experiences they may otherwise not encounter, nor ever wish to encounter. By offering narratives involving varied perspectives upon topical issues and events, such as migration, Brexit, homelessness, sexuality and more, the CF novel engages the reader in critical social thinking and debate.

Individuals experience, adhere to, and interpret values in different ways and whilst the genre generally denounces criminal activity, there are exceptions which explore questionable criminal morality through, for example, vigilantism.<sup>22</sup> Overall, CF furnishes the reader with a nuanced interpretation of human experiences, by exploring not only the crime, but the actions and reactions of all characters involved in perpetrating, witnessing or investigating. When reading CF, the reader expects the novel to expose cracks, inequalities and circumstances that allow marginalised groups and/or individuals to be mistreated, and to explore the consequences thereof. In addition, there is an expectation that justice will prevail. In engaging with a CF novel, the reader explores the circumstances pertinent to that story and is prompted to emotionally connect with the narrative. They are taken on a journey that necessarily

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<sup>22</sup> **Examples of CF novels with vigilantism:** *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (Lindsay, 2005), *Huntress Moon* (Sokoloff, 2015), *The Witness* (Ryder, 2021).

encourages scrutiny, which allows them to interrogate their own responses in this context.

The CF novel implores the reader to ask probing questions such as; which circumstances might influence a change in character's behaviour or what triggers could change a person's moral perspective? What would make a good person do a bad thing or a bad person do a good thing?

Within the novel the CF author holds their characters (criminals, victims, investigators, observers, and inadvertent participants) up to inspection against the values held by society. They unpack conceivable causal events leading to crime and, in exploring the characters' subsequent reactions, they consider the consequences of these actions. This expectation is substantiated through my research with CF readers. The following anonymised examples demonstrate that readers hold similar views on the social value of the genre to those of Sherez and Mina:<sup>23</sup>

- 'People and communities have always used stories as a way of making sense of the world. [CF] [...] requires you to engage with the shades of grey that exist in our world as opposed to a rigid dichotomy.'
- '[CF] highlights social injustice and inequality. It's a great platform to give voice to those that don't ordinarily have one.'
- '[CF] gives us space to explore the things that frighten us and to make sense of them by making them seem logical and explainable.'
- 'CF] explores and highlights societal issues in an entertaining way. [...] it can make you think.'

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<sup>23</sup> **Appendix 3:** Facebook Group Readers' ethically approved questions, introductory statement, list of approved questions.

- ‘[CF] novels represent a moral point of view – there is transgression and there is [...] punishment.’
- ‘Most are self-contained morality plays with good and bad characters with strengths and flaws [...] CF explores universal themes.’
- ‘We all seek truth in life. This is not more true for any other genre than CF.’
- ‘CF can call attention to situations that actually exist – people trafficking, forced labour, etc.’
- ‘I read [...] for the insights into a world unknown to me.’
- ‘[CF novels] allow you to enter a world not many people see.’
- ‘I like to understand what people might do if pushed into something or if they feel they are in extreme circumstances.’
- ‘I enjoy books ranging from ‘cosy murder’ to thrillers that place ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances ... (prompting the question) What would you do?’
- ‘I like to see how people respond to the crime.’
- ‘What draws me to [CF] ... are the possibilities for social commentary (race, class, environmental concerns, political corruption, homeless etc).’
- ‘Explore the psyche of criminals. What drives them? Their childhood.’
- ‘Why people kill ...?’
- ‘To get into the minds of the murderers What makes them tick and why do they do what they do?’
- ‘[CF] offers the justice that society craves.’

The range of CF sub-genres is vast, ranging from less gritty, ‘cosy’ crime, through supernatural, romantic, forensic, detective, psychological, futuristic, domestic noir, to gritty Nordic/Scandi/Tartan crime, Noir, and beyond. This presents both reader and author with the



ability to choose how to examine ‘the evil in the world and the evil inside ourselves from whatever distance we feel comfortable with and in whatever circumstances we find most compelling.’ (Ryan and Hall, 2015, Loc. 50)

Exploring society at its worst is both a major consideration for CF authors and an expectation of CF readers. Sub-genres ease the navigation through the range of CF available, thus ensuring that the reader is comfortable with the content and context of their chosen read. Cosy crime offers a light-hearted, gentle exploration of crime, usually set in small villages and where the grittier elements are skimmed over and the action is supported by a cast of quirky characters. The cosy sleuth is usually an amateur whose understanding of human nature impacts their ability to solve the crime. Noir is gritty and offers a visceral exposure to the crimes which are realist in nature and are often set in cities. Domestic Noir deals with criminal acts within the home and covers themes such as coercive control and domestic violence. Psychological CF explores psychological abuse by a perpetrator and might involve stalking, gaslighting, coercive control, or manipulation.

Again, the genre’s versatility appeals to a wide audience as demonstrated by my reader responses below:

- ‘You can put your own pictures to everything in the safety of your own home.’
- ‘I love crime books which have very graphic descriptions.’
- ‘CF has a myriad of forms and sub-genres so you can always find something you enjoy.’
- ‘Depending on my mood, I enjoy books ranging from cosy murders to thrillers.’
- ‘[CF] enables us to experience awful things in a safe and comfortable environment.’
- ‘CF allows the masses to access [the criminal world] from the safety of their homes.’

- ‘We get the thrill of free fall, yet we happily go along with this knowing that CF offers resolutions and the restoration of moral order.’
- ‘CF brings us to crime in a safe way, a controlled pack of pages where we can start, stop and skip if we need to.’
- ‘CF allows us to confront and address our fears in a safe way.’
- ‘CF gives us space to explore the things that frighten us and make sense of them.’

These responses indicate that a major strength of CF is its ability to engage with widely differing reader expectations, by exploring ‘social rupture’ in a variety of nuanced ways. This is further demonstrated in practice when considering the societal issues illuminated by contemporary CF books. Many narratives examine the effects of criminal activity, usually murder, and explore, from various POVs and degrees of realism, the impact of these crimes on individuals, families and wider society. It is the restorative nature of the genre – good triumphs over evil – that allows the reader to engage with dark themes and explore their own responses to them, knowing that ultimately order will be restored.

There is scope within the genre for thwarting a complete resolution. In *The Silence of the Lambs* (Harris, 1988) whilst one serial killer is caught, Hannibal, the scarier and more intelligent one, escapes. In Zia Abdullah’s *Truth Be Told* (2020), although the criminal is brought to justice, there is a nuanced exploration of ‘guilt’ and failure in the justice system causes another victim to lose their life. Whilst order remains unrestored, these novels and others like them demand that the reader ask probing questions around the morality of the specific circumstances illuminated, which necessitates considering how resolution is achieved.

In CF, the expectation is that resolution and restored order occurs when the villain is held to account and punished. This is normally achieved by the criminal being caught and

incarcerated. However, there are exceptions to this form of resolution, which prompt the reader to question authors' decisions in relation to their own creative choices. In David Mark's *Taking Pity* (2017) resolution is achieved, not through legal channels or procedure, but through a knowing inaction on the detective's part resulting in the criminal's death. A classic example of an author subverting the genre's norms is *Murder on the Orient Express* (Christie, 2010), in which, when the victim's family seeks revenge, a different sort of resolution occurs. In this case, the villain's death restores order; however, societies' judicial norms are flouted, which poses a fascinating moral and human dilemma for the reader.

The genre does not shy away from exposing readers to the reality of irrevocable violence. It is by exploring the circumstances surrounding the crime as well as the societal context of it that the reader gains a greater understanding of human nature. Of course, each reader will respond to the narratives within the context of their own lived experiences, values and influences. CF offers a nuanced exploration of human emotion, responses and motivations in the darkest of times. For some readers, engaging with CF allows them to explore motivations and 'get inside the head of the villain,' whilst for others it allows them to empathise and understand how violent acts can occur because of a series of events rather than from pure evil. They are privy to the workings of the human mind and this allows them to question their responses in relation to those of the different characters. The genre tests our ability to forgive, our desire for vengeance, our ability to empathise, and often puts our own gut responses into perspective from a safe place. As Sherez says, both readers and authors can make sense of the world through engaging with it in a vicarious way through CF. The genre offers the opportunity to connect with victims, detectives and perpetrators as three-dimensional characters and allows insights into their motivations, influences, backstories, and experiences. In doing so, an emotional connection is forged between reader, author and

characters, thus allowing author and reader to explore the complexities of the problem while connecting to the players in the novel. Each theme is explored in a variety of ways and through the viewpoints of different characters with unique experiences, motivations, and options.

It is the author's responsibility to weave a complex narrative which connects the readers with protagonists. Each protagonist presents as a three-dimensional being with baggage, flaws, strengths and frailties which combine to bring them to life. Protagonists vary as much as we do and through the choices they make, we learn more about ourselves by questioning their conduct. In John Ryder's series his protagonist, Grant Fletcher, reveals near the end of Book 1 that he killed his wife. Designed to evoke various emotions in the reader who has already connected with the character, Ryder subsequently frames his character's actions in an 'acceptable' way, drawing on the ongoing consequences he faces and eliciting sympathy in the process. These nuanced and probing questions are at the heart of a CF novel and each reader experiences a unique personal response to fictional events. The CF novel prompts introspection and critical self-analysis, with readers bringing experiences, opinions, strengths, fears and prejudices that will colour their instinctive response to each narrative.

Whilst attempting to make sense of dark themes and illuminating issues that they feel drawn to write about, the good CF novelist offers insight, humanity and hope whilst exploring disturbing, yet realist themes. It is up to the reader to make what they will of it. The thematic examples of CF novels published since 2010 and itemised below offer insight into contemporary societal issues and are indicative of the genre's scope:

- Drug Mules /County line trafficking: Cross County line trafficking, grooming, vulnerable children, poverty, drug gangs.<sup>24</sup>
- Hate Crime: far right groups, responses to racism, organised crime, homophobia ...<sup>25</sup>
- Mental Health: PTSD, Bipolar, Alzheimer's, self-harm, anxiety, depression, schizophrenia ...<sup>26</sup>
- Modern Day Slavery/ Human trafficking/ Sex Crimes: organised trafficking, prostitution, paedophilia, human auctions, trafficking human organs, Sado-masochism.<sup>27</sup>
- Sexual/Domestic Abuse /Coercive Control: abuse/control by men or women, abuse/control within same sex relationships<sup>28</sup>
- LGBTQ+ issues: cultural, religious, sexuality, trans issues, sexual/ gender identity.<sup>29</sup>
- Poverty/Social Inequality/ Homelessness: vulnerabilities, societal perceptions, social disadvantage, exploitation.<sup>30</sup>
- Child Abuse/Kidnapping: trafficking, paedophilia, dark web usage, organised crime.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> **On Drug Mules/County Line Trafficking:** *Endless Silent Scream* (Forder, 2020), *Girl Zero* (Dhand, 2017), *The Girl Who Walked in the Shadows* (Riches, 2016), *No Escape* (Kelleher, 2020), *Broken Silence* (Mistry 2020).

<sup>25</sup> **On Hate Crime:** *The Taken* (Kelleher, 2016) *Untainted Blood* (Mistry, 2019), *Streets of Darkness* (Dhand, 2016), *Turn a Blind Eye* (Newham, 2018), *The Khan* (Mir 2021).

<sup>26</sup> **On Mental Health:** *Suspended Retribution* (Ashman, 2018) *Where Ravens Roost* (Nordin, 2020), *Firewatching* (Thomas, 2020), *Coffin Road* (May, 2016), *The Shadow Man* (North, 2020), *The Man on The Street* (Wood, 2019), *The Silent Daughter* (Ferguson, 2020), *Suspicious Minds* (Mark, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> **On Modern Day Slavery/ Human trafficking/ Sex Crimes:** *Broken Silence* (Mistry, 2020) *Pop goes the Weasel* (Arlidge, 2014), *Harvest* (Gerritsen, 2010), *Dark Game* (Lynch, 2019), *Long Way Home* (Dolan, 2014), *Broken Bones* (Marsons, 2017), *Deadly Fare* (Liscio, 2016), *Prodigal Son* (Hurwitz, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> **On Sexual/Domestic Abuse /Coercive Control:** *No Fear* (Kelleher, 2020), *Under Your Skin* (McClelland, 2020), *A Cold Retreat* (Ody, 2019), *The Man Behind Closed Doors* (Frankland, 2020), *#Me Too* (Dixon, 2020), *A Suitable Lie* (Malone, 2016), *Bright Lies* (Abbott, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> **On LGBTQ+ issues:** *Geraldine* (Mead, 2019), *The Girl in the Green Dress* (Staincliffe, 2018), *Broken Silence* (Mistry, 2020), *Silent Night* (Pattison, 2020), *Truth Be Told* (Abdullah, 2020).

<sup>30</sup> **On Poverty/Social Inequality/ Homelessness:** *The Other Hand* (Cleave, 2009), *Out of Bounds* (McDermid, 2016), *Lifeless* (Billingham, 2008), *Unseen Evil* (Mistry 2019), *The Man on the Street* (Wood, 2019), *I Know What I Saw* (Mahmood 2021).

<sup>31</sup> **On Child Abuse/Kidnapping:** *A Prayer for the Broken* (Tilbury, 2020) *Dirty Old Town* (Krier, 2020) *The Kingdom* (Nesbo), *The Dare* (Wyer, 2019) *Unquiet Souls* (Mistry 2016).

- Immigration/Refugees: prejudice, poverty, vulnerability to exploitation.<sup>32</sup>
- Honour Killing/Forced Marriage: culture, manipulation, peer/family pressure, trauma.<sup>33</sup>
- Cults: manipulation, Stockholm syndrome, trauma.<sup>34</sup>
- Digital Technology misuse: exhortation to commit suicide, sexting, online bullying, online stalking, web cam misuse, remote access technology.<sup>35</sup>

Many of these novels explore multiple themes and some frequently under-explored issues.

Michael Malone's *A Suitable Lie* (2016) discusses domestic abuse by the female partner, whilst Rob Ashman's *Suspended Retribution* (2018) explores PTSD through the experiences of a veteran soldier and, Felicia Yap's *Future Perfect* (2021) is a futuristic exploration of DT misuse. These novels do not offer an exhaustive list of themes raised in contemporary CF, yet they illustrate the genre's potential to interrogate a range of issues. Val McDermid suggests that:

the crime novel has become the novel of social history – you can write about any aspect of how we live life now. A good writer never makes it preachy – it is the genre's propulsive narrative that drives them – but it allows authors to explore issues that concern them. (Huddleston, 2020)

However, in order to reflect social history, CF must embrace diversity and make efforts to be inclusive. Chapter 2 demonstrated how increased representation of diverse society is essential to portray an accurate 'social history' representative of all. In order to provide a valuable resource for engaging with and recording social history, CF authors must explore a range of

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<sup>32</sup> **On Immigration/Refugees:** *The Girl Who Walked in the Shadows* (Riches 2016) *Broken Silence* (Mistry 2020).

<sup>33</sup> **On Honour Killing/Forced Marriage:** *Love Like Blood* (Billingham, 2017), *Untitled* (Mistry 2022), *The Khan* (Mir 2021), *Razia* (Khan, 2019) *No Honour* (Khan, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> **On Cults:** *The Poison Garden* (Marwood, 2019), *A Killing Mind* (Marsons, 2020), *The Goodbye Man* (Deaver, 2020), *The Girls* (Cline, 2016), *The Cult* (Davies, 2021).

<sup>35</sup> **On Digital Technology misuse:** *Splinter the Silence* (McDermid, 2017), *Future Perfect* (Yap, 2021), *The Hashtag Killer* (French, 2021), *The Intrusions* (Sherez, 2017), *Cut to the Bone* (Caan, 2016), *The Dare* (Wyer, 2019), *Anatomy of a Crime* (Hodge, 2020), *The Last Cuckoo* (Frankland, 2020), *Watch Me* (Clarke, 2017).

issues from a variety of perspectives, some of which they may have no direct knowledge of, but by purposeful research they can extend both their own and readers' understanding.

The potential for literature, and CF in particular, to shape culture and thus wider society has been widely recognised. Andrew Milner states, 'cultural studies would be interested in the interplay between cultural texts, cultural identity and such conventionally "sociological" indicators of social inequality as class, gender, race and ethnicity' (2004, p15), whilst Tony Bennett in *Making Culture, Changing Society* (2013), explores the need for policy makers to consider all sociological influences including literature. Research demonstrates the impact of CF as an influencer; Andrew Pepper (2019), for example, explores the symbiotic nature of CF and the BLM movement and discusses the genre's contribution to illuminating race issues. He believes that both the BLM movement's campaigns and the way the genre discusses themes relating to BLM, gives the issues more prominence. This echoes both Sherez's and Mina's comments regarding CF illuminating and interrogating contemporary social concerns and our understanding of them in the context of our lives and wider society.

There are parallels between the academic pursuit of philosophy and the CF novel. Both seek to better understand the complexities of the world, our perceptions of it and our place within it. Whilst CF explores these issues through realist narrative, philosophers explore the ideals and belief systems that influence human behaviour. Thus, it is not surprising that there is a notable crossover between those who write and enjoy CF and the development of philosophical values. Josef Hoffman in *Philosophies of Crime Fiction* observes that, 'The mutual influence of philosophy and crime fiction is manifold ... Further it [CF] may include ways of thinking or argumentation, themes, narrative styles or aesthetic reflections regarding the literary form' (2013, p9). He points out that crime writers have a

history of making philosophical connections to their writing. Dorothy L. Sayers, in her talk *Aristotle on Detective Fiction* (1935), compares passages from Aristotle's *Poetics* to CF texts. She discusses parallels between twentieth-century detective fiction and Aristotle's tragedies through their mutual focus on death and murder, betrayal and lies, emotions and plausibility.

Both Edgar Allan Poe, in his prose poem *Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe*, (1848) and Nicolas Freeling, in his essay 'Crime and Metaphysics', in *Criminal Convictions* (1994) utilise a philosophical approach to analyse the aesthetics of the genre and their place as authors within it. Meanwhile, notable philosophers have compared philosophical thinking to various aspects of the CF novel. In *The Words*, existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1981) credits his fascination with the genre to the development of his personal philosophical views. David Frisby's *Between the spheres: Siegfried Kracauer and the detective novel* (1992) discusses the genre's relatable realism which, realist theorist Kracauer believes, makes the CF novel influential literature. The symbiotic relationship between CF and philosophy is also explored by Heather Worthington in *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, in which she cites the use of the CF genre on a number of notable philosophers to 'illustrate, support and explicate their theories.' (2011, p. ix)<sup>36</sup> This view of the wide influence of the genre was supported by my interviewed authors who in reference to how the genre could influence said:

- A vast influx of wealth and western cultural influences, sit side by side with ancient problems of caste prejudice, religious intolerance and inequality...
- Crime writing also gives recognition, acknowledgement, bearing witness to the lived experience of true life crimes.

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<sup>36</sup> **Ideologists, Philosophers, and Literary critics cited in *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (Worthington, 2011):** Marxist ideologist Slavoj Zizek, deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida, literary critic Catherine Belsey.



- There is a power of literature, and crime writing in particular, to address the trauma and hurts of the past.
- ... anyone reading my books may re-examine what they thought about the world around them and either, thank fuck they don't live the way the characters do... or [...] have some understanding and compassion for them.

While CF begins to represent some previously ignored communities of writers and readers, one significant group which remains consistently overlooked is the digital age teen. Statistics from ONS (2019) show that there are over 5 million teens between the ages of 13-19, accounting for 7.5% of the UK population. It is notable that, despite our rapidly changing cultural landscape and particularly in relation to the use and misuse of DT, adult CF rarely casts its spotlight on the experience of this group. Whilst the adult CF genre addresses varied and complex societal issues, these are predominantly discussed in the context of adult lives and experiences and through an adult viewpoint. Teens remain an underrepresented, disenfranchised, group in adult CF and, because they exist in each of the marginalised groups previously mentioned, this makes them doubly disenfranchised. Current teen experience, while as diverse as those of adults, is unique in that they are the first generation to have grown up entirely in the digital age where the use of the screen is 'intensive and pervasive.' (Orben, 2020, p. 1)

Economically and politically, this group is disenfranchised and rely on adults with parental, educational, voting and legislative powers to represent their needs. However, if examples of teen lived experiences are not represented in widely accessible forms such as literature, then their diverse plights remain ignored and the potential to raise awareness of their concerns, implement support systems or effect change is diminished. As the most-read genre of adult fiction, CF has the potential to document a range of teen digital age

experiences and thus help to increase awareness, expose issues, and promote understanding. In turn, by developing awareness of the range of teen lived experiences, there is opportunity to stimulate debate and influence change.

### **3.2 The Teen Voice in Adult CF**

This section explores three considerations in representing the teen voice in adult CF. Firstly, with today's teens growing up entirely in the digital age, it is imperative to consider their experiences in relation to the use and misuse of DT and the effects and influences of this technology on teen behaviour, MH and lived experiences both on and offline. Secondly, as a genre, CF deals with crime and, therefore, it is essential to consider the possible societal influences and life experiences encountered by teen witnesses, teen victims and the criminal teen and the choices deriving from these. In writing authentic teen voices, CF authors should consider the variety of teen lived experiences and incorporate in their narratives the range of those diverse experiences, with reference to ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic background, regional influences and other sociological factors. This brings us to the third point, which is a consideration of the ways in which the teen voice is managed or created. To this end, I shall compare contemporary young adult (YA) CF texts and adult CF texts involving narratives pertaining to diverse YA lived experiences, by examining the adult crime author's role.

#### **3.2.1 Use and Misuse of Digital Technology and its effects on teen lived experiences**

After considering the plethora of academic research into the content, usage and influence of digital technology on teens, it became apparent that research criteria could be sub-divided into the following two categories for the purpose of my study:

- The effects of digital technology usage on teen MH.
- The criminal misuse of digital technology involving teens as both criminals and victims.

### 3.2.2 The Effects of Digital Technology Usage on Teen Mental Wellbeing

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental wellbeing as:

a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. (WHO 2001, p.1).

*Adolescent Mental Health* (WHO, 2020) illuminated significant international statistics on teen mental health:

- Almost 17% of the population are aged 10-19 years.
- MH conditions account for 16% of the global burden of disease and injury in people aged 10-19 years.
- 50% of MH conditions start by 14 years of age but most cases are undetected and untreated.
- Globally, depression is one of the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents.
- Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death in 15-19-year-olds.
- The consequences of not addressing adolescent MH conditions extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and MH and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults. (p.1)

This puts into perspective the importance of addressing MH issues of the teen population. In recent years increased research has resulted in the development and analysis of the effectiveness of various school-based programmes to support teen mental health,<sup>37</sup> which

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<sup>37</sup> **On programmes to support teen MH:** *School-based early intervention for anxiety and depression in older adolescents* (Brown and others, 2019), *School-based depression and anxiety prevention programs for young people: A systematic review and meta-analysis* (Werner-Seidler and others, 2017), *Young, adult and ignored. Getting a fair deal for 16-24 year olds from mental health services* (Youth Access, 2017), *The Invisible Problem? Improving Students' Mental Health* (Brown, 2016), *Young Adult Mental Health* (Grant, and Potenza, 2010), *Depression in children and young people* (Kelvin, 2016), *Promoting mental health* (WHO, 2005).

emphasises the worldwide concern over teen mental wellbeing and supports the value of highlighting these issues through a mainstream medium like CF.

For the purpose of this research into expanding the creative narrative to include the teen voice in adult CF, it is important to focus on the effects of SM usage on the MH of teens. It is clear that the rise in usage of digital age technology influences teen MH and wellbeing. The 2016 UK Young Minds report, *Resilience for the Digital World*, cites that:

- 33% of all internet users are under 18.
- 50% of them found online interactions more straightforward than face-to-face ones.
- 20% had shared personal information and photos with someone they ONLY knew online.
- Over 50% of interactions on social media affected 1 in 10 young people, socially and emotionally, for a month or longer.

These statistics demonstrate the power, scope and importance of DT to the teen user and indicate the potential for misuse of DT to occur. The Young Minds study also discovered that online risk taking is associated with drugs & alcohol misuse, depression, post-traumatic stress, and self-harming behaviours. The UK study, *Social Media Use and Adolescent Sleep Patterns* (Scott and others, 2019), reveals that nearly 65% of 13-15year olds spend 1-5 hours online daily, whilst US study, *Teens, Social Media & Technology* (Anderson and Jiang, 2018), states that 45% of US teens are on SM ‘almost constantly.’ This indicates that a sizeable proportion of teens is immersed for long periods in SM activity. From this we may infer that SM usage significantly impacts the MH and wellbeing of teens. Further research specific to the effects of SM usage on teens reveals similar findings.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> **On effects of SM use on teens:** *When social media traumatizes teens: The roles of online risk exposure, coping, and post-traumatic stress* (McHugh and others, 2018), *The Tenuous Relationship Between Instagram and Teen Self-Identity* (Wiederhold, 2018), *Reach of social media used by UK teens and young adults*

SM usage has some positive impacts. It can help the user develop networking skills, and through interactions with others can increase their social support network, resulting in greater connectedness and increased emotional reward. In addition, it can lead to broader knowledge gained through seeing a variety of opinions and research. However, the breadth of research cited also emphasises various concerning downsides of SM usage among teens, including:<sup>39</sup>

- Feelings of envy and inadequacy caused by passive usage.
- Unrealistic expectations being placed consciously or subconsciously on the user.
- Feelings of anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues such as self harming, panic attacks, anxiety, depression, low self esteem, and more.
- Inability to function at a high level in face-to face situations including interpreting non verbal signals.

For the CF novelist attempting to create authentic teen voices which exemplify teen lived experiences, then, it is essential to consider the potential impacts and consequences of DT use and misuse on their teen characters' MH.

### **3.2.3 The Criminal Misuse of Digital Technology Involving Teens as Both Criminals and victims**

Research also highlighted increased sexualisation in the use of SM among teens.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, research indicates that not only are teens at risk of misusing SM in this way, but

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(Tankovska, 2020), *Social Media Use and Adolescent Sleep Patterns: Cross-sectional Findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study* (Scott and others, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> **On Effects of DT Use On Teens :** *Teens, Social Media & Technology* (Anderson and Jiang, 2018), *Effects of screentime on the health and well-being of children and adolescents* (Stiglic and Viner, 2019) *Some Thoughts Regarding Generation Z's Social Abilities* (Kárpáti, 2021), *Beyond Mediatized Transmissions of Youth Culture: A Study in Digital Citizenship* (Petersen-Jensen, 2008), *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8–18 year olds* (Rideout and Roberts, 2005) *A Study on Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media on Society* (Akram, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> **On Sexualisation of Teens in SM:** *Abuse Through Sexual Image Sharing in Schools: Response and Responsibility* (Lloyd, 2020), *'Snapchat', Youth Subjectivities and Sexuality: Disappearing Media and the Discourse of Youth Innocence, Gender and Education* (Charteris and others, 2018).

they are at risk of becoming victimised by adults misusing these platforms for criminal gain, for grooming and recruitment purposes, cross-county drug running, and more.<sup>41</sup> Alongside this, research suggests that teen peer solicitation is also of concern, in the form of catphishing, distribution of sexualised images, and sexting.<sup>42</sup> Other concerns and research pertaining to misuse of SM includes accessibility to the DW or unsuitable sites including online pornography, which results in unrealistic sexual expectation, objectification of women, unrealistic portrayal of sexual roles, and more.<sup>43</sup> The US study *Social Media as a Vector for Youth Violence* (2014) found that, ‘youth violence, including bullying, gang violence, and self-directed violence, increasingly occurs in the online space’ (p. 548). This study further posits that online space provides a forum to develop bullying behaviour, dating aggression and gang-related activity, and also for inciting self-harm and encouraging cyber suicide. In light of this research on the impact of DT on this current generation of teens, it is clear that contemporary adult CF is neglecting a very significant area. However, to date research data pertaining to the effects, benefits, dangers, use and misuse of DT among teens is limited in significant ways. Kárpáti’s paper, cited earlier highlights the need for more current research into the effect of SM usage amongst teens because the participant research pool and information gained from the most recent research studies, is derived from teens pre-2010.

Orben (2020) observes that current research does not monitor the specific effects on teens over SM platforms and fails to incorporate data on amount of time spent online and differing types of usage (active or passive); neither does it scrutinise SM activity in relation

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<sup>41</sup> **On Criminalisation of Teens through SM:** *Beyond Criminalisation and Responsibilisation: Sexting, Gender and Young People* (Salter and others, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> **On Solicitation of Teens through SM:** *Young People, Peer-to-Peer Grooming and Sexual Offending: Understanding and Responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviour Within a Social Media Society* (Ashurst, and McAlinden, 2015), *When social media traumatizes teens: The roles of online risk exposure, coping, and post-traumatic stress*.

<sup>43</sup> **On SM Influence on Teen Attitudes yo Sex:** *When social media traumatizes teens* (McHugh and others, 2018) *Some Thoughts Regarding Generation Z's Social Abilities* (Kárpáti, 2021).

to sex, gender identity, race, social status, or other demographic and social categories.

However, Anderson & Jaing's 2018 study considered US teens by gender, three racial groups, family income, and parents' education level, in relation to smartphone usage, and found little difference in usage time over all groupings. This research did not extend over SM platforms, nor did it consider other characteristics such as sexuality, gender identity, and disability, which may also impact the effects of DT usage and experience.

In representing diverse teen lived experiences and voices, it is therefore important to consider culture, ethnicity, socio-economic, class, social advantage/disadvantage, sexuality, gender identity, disability, teen mental wellbeing and their use/misuse of digital technology. DT. Subsequent to research concerning teen misuse of DT, and its potential misuse in the victimisation of their peers, it is important to consider the criminal teen.

### **3.3 The Criminal Teen**

In England and Wales, the age of criminality for children is between 10 and 17. These figures from the YJB (2021) record criminal activity of children between 2019 and 2020, during which period the number of children arrested was 57,600 (p.8) The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) represents the age, ethnicity and gender of the offenders in terms of the severity of the crime committed.

		Gravity score band	
		Less serious: 1 to 4	Most serious: 5 to 8
<b>Age</b>	10-14	90%	10%
	15-17	85%	15%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Asian	82%	18%
	Black	77%	23%
	Mixed	83%	17%
	Other	83%	17%
	White	88%	12%
<b>Sex</b>	Girls	95%	5%
	Boys	85%	15%

*Figure 10: Proportion of proven offences by gravity score band & demographic characteristics, England & Wales, year ending March 2020 (MOJ Youth Statistics, 2021, p.25)*

In addition, the report states that over the previous ten years, the arrests of white children fell by 80% whilst the arrests of black children fell by only 58%, and the proportion of youth arrests of black children has doubled to 12%, whilst youth arrests of children from a mixed ethnic background more than doubled from 4% to 9%. In the context of inequity of representation of BAME authors and non-white narratives, these statistics on teen criminal ethnicity raise various questions for the concerned CF author to explore: Why are black and mixed heritage children more likely to be arrested than white children? What influence do societal issues regarding race and society, equality, conscious/unconscious bias, attitudes to children of colour, social disadvantage, socio-economic status, vulnerability, and disenfranchisement have on these statistics?

Statistics on the gender of those arrested show that whilst boys make up 51% of the general 10-17 population, they account for 85% of arrested children. Whilst these statistics are indisputable, they are limited in value as they do not take into account other demographic considerations, such as class, region, advantage/disadvantage, economic status, familial



stability/instability, education and family/home life. The following MOJ chart shows the types of crimes committed by children in England and Wales:

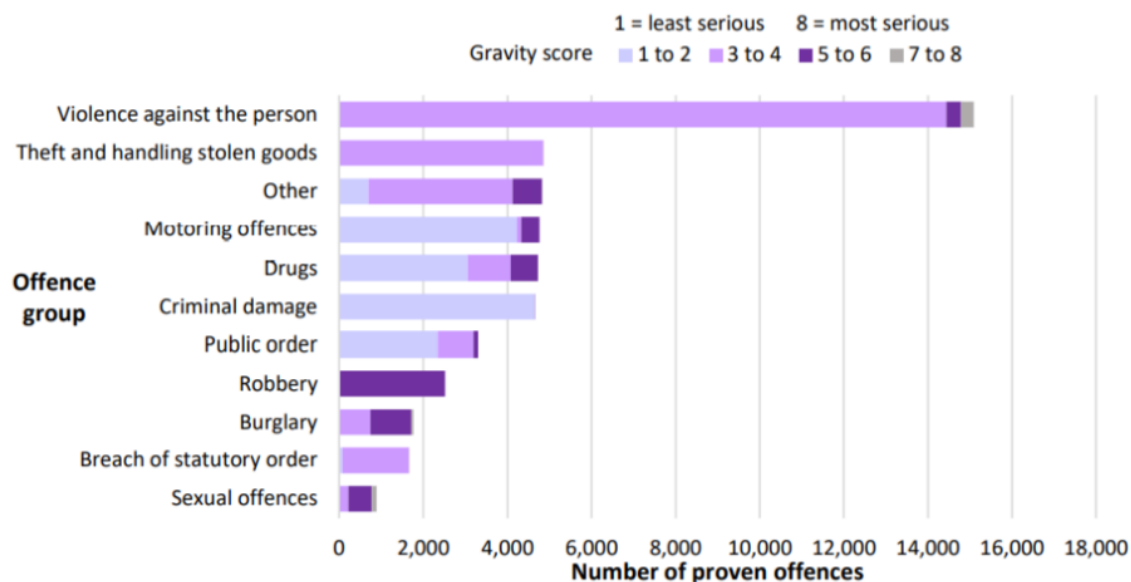


Figure 11: Proven offences by children, by offence group & gravity score band, England & Wales, year ending March 2020 (MOJ Youth Statistics, 2021, p.24)

This demonstrates that the majority of teen crime is the perpetration of violence against the person, with only a small proportion of these crimes being in the most serious categories. However, bearing in mind the discussion around teen violence in Chapter 1, this is of concern. Despite the marked influence of DT on the teen, there are no statistics in this report detailing the involvement of cybercrime, cyber bullying, catphishing, sexting and accessing illegal online content in the perpetration of these acts. Given the statistics cited earlier regarding the use of DT in criminal activity, it is likely that this technology is involved in the perpetration of some of these crimes.

Although murders perpetrated by teens or children are rare, when they occur they gain proportionately more traction in the media as the vessels of ‘moral panic’ than similar adult crimes and elicit dramatic responses from society. (Cricher, 2003, Cohen, 1999). As Dr Susan Bailey points out in reference to media portrayal of children’s violent crime, ‘most individual case reporting only serves to escalate society’s ever pervasive fear of crime at the hands of the young.’ (p.26). This is demonstrated by some of the newspaper headlines from James Bulger’s murder by two 10-year-olds:



Figure 12: Google newspaper archived images of James Bulger's Killers accessed June 2020

The horror of such a rare and serious act resulted in outpourings of moral outrage which ‘initiated a reconsideration of the social construction of 10 year olds as “demons” rather than “innocents”’ (Muncie, 1999, p 3). Yvonne Jewkes notes that ‘the political and media hysteria surrounding the killing of James Bulger ... demonstrate(d) ... the paradoxical sentiments with which we view children.’ (2004, p 93) In this context, Tim Newburn argues that, ‘the

attachment of children to a story gives it a prominence it might not otherwise have' (2007, p 86), while Nicola Madge observes that:

The well-behaved, well-adjusted, 'ordinary' child may not be newsworthy, but this does not explain the undue attention paid to negative messages about youth. The challenge is to rectify the balance if these messages are not to infiltrate the public consciousness and thereby endure. (2006, p.144)

Whilst James Bulger's murderers were barely the UK age of criminal intent, issues surrounding the criminalisation of children are pertinent and, as discussed in Chapter 1, there are a number of examples of teens committing violent acts and being convicted of murder. Whilst often these acts are sensationalised in the press, the motivations for the acts of violence are worth exploring; What series of events led to such violence? Was there a point at which the final act could have been prevented? Through CF narratives, these questions may be explored and contextualised. Despite the number of violent acts perpetrated by teens in real life, some of which result in the victim's death, there is scant representation of the criminal teen in adult CF. CF is the perfect vehicle to explore teen issues which might result in violence and possible contributory factors. Whilst the MOJ statistics report facts, the purpose of exploring the criminal teen is to consider the range of potential circumstances, choices and consequences that may lead to teens criminalisation. This is in line with author and reader comments discussed earlier which liken the CF genre to a social history commentary and emphasise the thirst to understand and explore lives dissimilar to one's own. As an author, I am concerned less with the actuality of the crime and more with the reasons and circumstances leading to it.

### **3.4 Comparison Between Young Adult Crime Fiction and Adult CF Including the Author's Role in Creating Teen Voices**

With specific reference to the CF genre this section considers how the teen voice is utilised in YA novels and the way in which adult CF gives voice to teen experiences. The focus will be

on three main areas; D&I, the digital teen experience, and teens as victims, killers and witnesses. Further to this, the role and responsibility of the adult author when writing inclusive YA narratives, or narratives involving the lived experiences of teens from diverse backgrounds and communities, will also be discussed.

### **3.4.1 Young Adult Fiction**

YA fiction is a category which encompasses all genres aimed at the Young and New Adult reader. There is a huge disparity between the way the YA fiction presents teen lived experiences and the way in which adult CF does. YA narratives focus on a range of issues affecting teens and explores these themes from the teen viewpoint. Many of the issues written from the teen perspective in YA CF are also explored in adult CF, but from an adult viewpoint. YA also explores teen-specific issues which are uncommon in adult CF and does not shy away from discussing and offering narratives which touch upon traumatic issues and experiences. In addressing these issues, the YA author is able to affirm their readers' lived experiences, enlighten and educate them about wider lived experiences, and offer information to assist the YA reader to navigate a path through these issues. However, the YA reader's ability to effect change is hindered by their lack of agency. Teens have little political or financial influence to effect change in policy around issues pertaining to them and many of the decisions regarding their lives are made by adults or are as a result of adult action. One instance of this is the response to research around teen MH issues being spearheaded by adult-led charities and health institutions with decisions regarding appropriate support for vulnerable teens being made by adults.

The examples of contemporary (published since 2000) YA fiction discussed in the following sections demonstrate the unique way in which the YA category explores varied YA-related societal concerns across the range of CF sub-genres. Although not an exhaustive

list, many of these novels explore multiple themes, some of which may be secondary to the main theme: bullying/peer pressure, gangs, hate crime, MH, sex crimes, LGBTQ+ issues, poverty/social inequality/ homelessness, immigration/refugees, child abuse/kidnapping, DT use/misuse, cyber bullying, disability.<sup>44</sup>

### 3.4.2 Diverse and Inclusive narratives in YA CF

In the YA novel the reader becomes immersed in the teen voice from the start. Teen characters normally either fight for agency or their lack of agency is illuminated. The issues faced by teen protagonists are real-life ones, explored through the teen characters' experiences. YA CF novels embrace a wider, more diverse range of characters and teen experiences than adult CF novels, in terms of social advantage/disadvantage, ethnicity, disability (physical and mental), sexuality, foster care and non-nuclear families and they illuminate changes that could improve teen lived experiences.

When considering two different types of hate crime addressed in YA novels, it becomes clear that the YA novel can act as a vehicle with which to explore a variety of contemporary issues. Although the main focus of Angie Thomas' novel *The Hate U Give* is racism, race relations, white privilege and conscious/unconscious bias, the novel also incorporates other teen-related issues including self-identity, peer pressure, social advantage/disadvantage, the effects of poverty, drug use/dealing, gangs, and gun laws. Whilst

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<sup>44</sup> **On Bullying/Peer Pressure:** *I Know You Did It* (Wallman, 2021), *13 Reasons Why* (Asher, 2009), *13 Minutes* (Pinborough, 2016), *Gang Girl* (Miller 2018), On Hate Crime see: *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), *Eden Summer* (Flanagan, 2017), *Ace of Spades*, (Faridah Abike-Iyimide, 2021). **On Mental Health:** *We Were Liars*, (Lockhart, 2014), *Eden Summer* (Flanagan, 2017), *A Danger To Herself and Others* (Sheinmel 2019), on Sex Crime see: *13 Reasons Why* (Asher, 2009), *Watched* (Lyons, 2014), *A Good Girl's Guide To Murder* (Jackson, 2019). **On LGBTQ+:** *Eight Pieces of Silva* (Lawrence, 2020), *They Both Die At the End* (Silvera, 2017), *Catnet* (Kritzer, 2019). **On Poverty/Social Inequality/Homelessness/ Immigration/Refugees:** *Gang Girl* (Miller, 2018) *Find Layla* (Elison, 2020). **On Child Abuse/ Kidnapping:** *I Have No Secrets* (Joelson, 2017), *Two Can Keep A Secret* (McManus, 2019), **On Digital Age Technology Use/Misuse:** *Watched* (Lyons, 2014), *Good Girl, Bad Blood* (Jackson, 2020), *Sadie* (Summers, 2018,) *Scream Site* (Ireland, 2018). **On Disability:** *I Have No Secrets* (Joelson, 2017) *Shadow Jumper* (Forster, 2014).

Liz Flanagan's *Eden Summer* focuses on the effects of a hate crime against the Goth main character, it also considers peer pressure, mental ill health, PTSD, self-esteem, prejudice, survivor's guilt, bullying, and grief. Both novels present three-dimensional, nuanced representations of their teen characters which offer insight not only into the novels' main themes, and into the surrounding characters' attitudes, experiences and actions. The focus is on the teen rather than the supporting adult characters and this promotes greater understanding of these teen lived experiences whilst illuminating real life issues faced by their target audience.

In terms of disability, J. M. Forster's main character in the mystery novel *Shadow Jumper* (2014) copes with an extreme allergy which confines him to living his life in near darkness. As well as a sensitive and inclusive portrayal of a boy with a disability, *Shadow Jumper* explores other themes such as bereavement, family dynamics and building friendships. Similarly, in Penny Joelson's *I Have No Secrets* (2017) the main character has an extreme form of cystic fibrosis and is non-verbal, and thus struggles to make her knowledge of a crime known. Sub-themes in this novel include coercive control, loneliness, family dynamics, and the foster care system. Autism is explored in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2014) alongside themes of prejudice, family dynamics and abuse. These types of narratives involving aspects of YA life are affirmative and informative and representative of the diverse teen reader, yet are largely absent from adult CF.

Sexual identity is a theme covered in many YA novels, including Adam Silva's *They Both Die at The End* (2017). This futuristic thriller combines DT usage with a love story between two boys and includes themes of bereavement and coping with dying. *Catfishing on CatNet* (2019) by Naomi Kritzer, whilst focussing on the main theme of catfishing and

artificial intelligence, features an impressively diverse range of characters representing various ethnicities and sexualities, including non-binary and asexual.

Whilst the above-mentioned books include characters from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, from the affluent to those living in poverty, and from those in ‘traditional’ families to those in the foster system, there are within the YA category many novels that include similar themes, but are set in a closed environment, generally boarding schools, and whose narrative voice is either that of a privileged but disengaged teen or a disadvantaged teen (the outsider) who is in this alien environment due to having gained a bursary.<sup>45</sup>

### **3.4.3 The Use and Misuse of Digital Technology in YA CF**

Unsurprisingly, YA fiction does not shy away from including the use and misuse of DT and its effects on the teen characters. With YA readers being fully integrated into the world of DT, SM usage and online activity, references to and themes involving DT are present in most YA novels to a greater or lesser degree. From cyber bullying to exploitative digital media abuse by adults, to sites encouraging suicide pacts, to hacking and catfishing, the YA category covers it through a range of narratives including diverse characters and thought-provoking sub themes. Meg Alison’s *Find Layla* (2020) explores the effect on socially disadvantaged Layla, when her video portraying her impoverished life goes viral. In exposing the way in which the social care system treats teens, Alison digs into themes of poverty, neglect, familial dysfunction and bullying, and also highlights the way in which SM can be used to bully and isolate users who are deemed ‘less than.’ Meanwhile, David Owen’s futuristic *All The Lonely People* (2019) offers a warning on the dangers of creating online

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<sup>45</sup> **YA Novels Featuring Affluent Disengaged Teen Characters:** *A Danger To Herself and Others* (Sheinmel, 2019), *We Were Liars*, Lockhart (2014), *13 Minutes* (Pinborough, 2016). Examples of teen outsider character: *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), *13 Reasons Why* (Asher, 2009), *Find Layla* (Elison, 2020). Examples of teen character in foster care: *13 Reasons Why* (Asher, 2009), *This Is My Truth* (Rahman, 2021), *I Have No Secrets* (Joelson, 2017).

identities and the toxic nature of some SM platforms. Tom Hoyle's *The Challenge* (2017), Chris Van Etten's *Wickedpedia* (2014), C. J. Lyons' *Watched* (2014) and Yasmin Rahman's *All the Things We Never Said* (2019) offer insight into the world of the DW, where suicide sites, webcamming abuses and sinister online games exist with teen users as prey for adults to abuse them.

The exploration of these issues may serve as a warning for YA readers and offer them insight into a variety of situations they or their friends may encounter, and may guide them towards support networks. However, lack of agency means that their ability to elicit actual change in online safety measures, increased monitoring of social networks and holding SM sites accountable is limited. In contrast, if adult readers, through CF narratives, are able to engage empathetically with the possible threats to teens through misuse of SM and the destructive potential of these abuses, there is the potential for them to take measures to protect the teens they are responsible for. The adult reader may influence protective policy changes by putting these concerns on various agendas, such as education, health care provision for teens and exert pressure on companies and government.

#### 3.4.4 Teen Killers/Victims

Likewise, the YA category does not shy away from characterising teen sociopaths and killers, with a range of novels involving teen killers ranging from the teen sociopathic serial killer to the teen shooter, and from the situational (locked room) killer to the premeditated killer.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, YA CF also considers the teen victim in a variety of different scenarios, for

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<sup>46</sup> **On Teen Sociopathic Killer:** *Genuine Fraud* (Lockhart, 2017), *Blood of my Blood* (Lyga, 2015). **On Teen Shooter:** *This is where it ends* (Nijkamp, 2019), *Hate List* (Brown, 2017). **On Situational (locked room) killer:** *The Island* (Tayler, 2021) *This Lie Will Kill You* (Pitcher, 2018), *Five Little Liars* (Morgan, 2021). **On Pre-Meditated Killer:** *13 Minutes* (Pinborough, 2016).



example as the child of killers, the victim acting as an omniscient narrator, or as the innocent person considered guilty of a heinous crime.<sup>47</sup>

E. Lockhart's *Genuine Fraud* (2017) is an adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (2014), in which the titular Ripley is replaced by a female teen sociopath and the novel is told from her POV. From the beginning, Lockhart takes us into the psyche of the teen sociopathic killer and gives voice to her every thought, her logic and motivations, every perceived threat and her reactions to them. Holly Jackson's *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* (2019) incorporates DT in the form of a true crime podcast in which the teen protagonist investigates the allegedly solved murder of a schoolgirl years earlier, unravelling secrets which put her at risk from the real killer who remains at large.

Sarah Pinborough's *13 Minutes* (2016) effectively explores issues relating to peer pressure, group compliance, bullying and manipulation, by focusing upon a group of teens after an attempted murder. The reader is taken into each girl's head in turn and experiences their emotions, thereby gaining access to the motivations and power dynamics within the group.

With a unique twist to the teen killer narrative, Barry Lyga's *Blood of My Blood* (2015) explores the concept of Nature versus Nurture through the point of view of a teen serial killer hunter. The teen narrator is the product of not one but two serial killer parents. *Blood of My Blood* explores the boy's inner struggle with the knowledge that he shares DNA with serial killers and his interrogation of his own responses in relation to this knowledge. In so doing, it includes themes of MH, neglect, and the nature of family. In Tiffany D. Jackson's *Allegedly* (2017), one of the narrative viewpoints is that of the killer/abductor and the other is of the victim/abductee, which allows the reader to access dual POVs. This device creates

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<sup>47</sup> **Variety of Teen Victims:** *Blood of my Blood* (Lyga, 2015), *The Challenge* (Hoyle, 2017), *Two Can Keep a Secret* (McManus, 2019), *Allegedly* (Jackson, 2017), *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold, 2014).

uncertainty and suspense as the reader must decide which POV is most accurate. Meanwhile, Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2014) is told from the POV of the deceased teen victim of a paedophile murderer.

Although these narratives centre upon teen protagonists as either perpetrators or victims of murder, they also provide insight into recurring themes of, for example, family dysfunction, the effects of keeping secrets, MH, perceived injustice, grief, teen angst, peer pressure, bullying and survivor's guilt.

### **3.5 How Adult CF gives Voice to Teen Experiences**

There is a gap in the adult CF world in representing the teen voice. If we consider that some of the prime functions of the genre are to explore societal issues, discuss societal rupture, and illuminate problems, then the adult CF genre is neglecting a huge area of concern relating to teen experience in the digital age and its impact on both the teens themselves and on wider society.

On the rare occasions when the adult CF author creates a teen character and awards their experience some page time, the teen world is often viewed through the eyes of adult characters. As their experience is filtered through an adult perspective, it distances the reader from the actual lived experiences of the teen character and places a barrier between reader and character. This in turn diminishes the complexity of teen characterisation found in the YA novel, where every action, thought and response comes directly from the teen characters' POV. Further to this, adult CF tends to explore issues pertaining to the teen experience by addressing the ways in which the subject matter impacts on adult lives rather than the child/teen's and focusses on the adult's responses to these 'crises'. With this in mind, the next section discusses how adult CF authors portray the child killer, the lack of narratives from the

viewpoint of the teen killer, the ways in which teen points of view are utilised in adult CF, and the portrayal of the digital-age teen in adult CF.

### **3.5.1 The Child/Teen Killer in Adult CF**

In adult CF children and teens are often portrayed as secondary characters (victims, perps, witnesses, useful ‘helpers’) whose stories are generally limited to a few words and narrated through the adult POV. This means that the reader effectively experiences the adult perspective but loses sight of the YA/child’s perspective and how the issues explored affect the YA. Furthermore, adult CF which includes killer children tends to focus on the pre-teen/child killer rather than the teen killer.

Often the adult CF author employs a variety of plot devices and narrative choices which have the effect of distancing the reader from the ‘teen experience’. The teen story is not given voice and, therefore, adult readers’ understanding of how the novels’ themes impact YA lives is limited. In *Line of Blood* (2015), for example, the author, Ben McPherson, tells the story from the POV of the parents who reveal how their actions resulted in their child becoming a killer. The novel draws on real life events such as the James Bulger murder and a subsequent, yet similar, case that occurred in Norway. However, the mindset of the child killer and the thought processes leading to his act of violence remain unexplored, leaving the reader with an adult understanding of the events leading to his actions, but not the actual process the child went through before and after the act. The effects of his crime on the boy are cushioned through the adult perception of how his actions may impact on them and the boy’s future.

Likewise, Simon Lelic’s *The Child Who* (2012), which is about a brutal murder perpetrated by a child (again influenced by the James Bulger case), is narrated through the observations of the duty solicitor forced to defend the child killer amid feral public opinion. It

explores the impact of this terrible murder on the wider community and on the duty solicitor and his family, but whilst the reader is party to the solicitor's thoughts on the child's motives, again no insight is given from the child criminal's POV, thus distancing the reader from accessing his thoughts and motivations. Whilst both these narrative choices are effective and deliver thought-provoking stories exploring varied adult responses to the rare phenomenon of the child killer, readers are not privy to a narrative explaining the inner machinations of the child's thought processes, their motivations, triggers or stimuli.

Authors often use plot devices to filter the teen/child narrative, which of course is a valid and effective way of creating an exciting and engaging novel. However, for the purpose of hearing the child or teen perspective, these methods create distance between the reader and the child killer.

In *The Fourth Monkey* (2017), for example, J. D. Barker employs the use of a diary to allow the reader retrospective access to the mind and thought processes of the now adult killer when he was killing as a child. The adult killer sends his childhood diaries to the detective hunting him and, whilst this allows us some insight into the child killer's viewpoint, reading it retrospectively is distancing and throws up narrative questions of accuracy, authenticity and ownership, such as: When was it written? Was it written by the adult killer as a child? Is it truthful? Was it written retrospectively? Is it the child's viewpoint or the adult killer's machinations to play with the detective?

In Alex Marwood's *Wicked Girls* (2012), the story of two girls who kill a younger child unfolds through a series of flashbacks when the two perpetrators reconnect as adults. Because both have experienced very different lives since their childhood incarceration, the flashbacks to the fateful day make the reader wonder about the authenticity of their memories. How accurately have they recalled what happened and how much have they

embellished over time? In the end we still come away feeling uncertain of what those girls actually experienced or their motivations on the day they killed a child.

Although these are thought-provoking narratives which fulfil the ‘function’ of CF to illuminate or try to make sense of troubling or unfathomable or shocking occurrences, what they don’t do is address the ‘teen’ or ‘child’ motivation. As readers we are no closer to understanding, empathising with, or experiencing as near to first hand as we can what motivated these child behaviours. There is no attempt to delve into the minds of the child perpetrators in order to affect understanding or to take the reader into those uncomfortable viewpoints. Instead, the exploration of societal consequences remains focused upon the ways in which the adults in the narratives are affected.

The horror of the crime is magnified when a teen or child is responsible and, as discussed in Chapter 1, if we are to understand and learn from these tragic events, adult CF writers and wider society should be concerned with the possible causes, events and circumstances leading to them. However, there is a lack of representation of the teen killer in adult CF and, as demonstrated above, on the occasions when a teen killer is featured in adult CF, the voice is generally filtered through adult perceptions and often with scant representation of teen lived experiences. This limits the potential to explore the societal influences and circumstances leading to the crime with a view to affect change.

### **3.5.2 The Teen Voice in adult CF**

There are few examples of teen characters in adult CF. However, where there are, the teen presence in the overall narrative is generally fleeting, with little page space given to exploring their situations. The narrative voice is normally that of the adult main character and understanding of the teen experience is filtered through their adult perceptions, thereby maintaining a distance between the teen lived experiences and the readers. Whilst these narratives illuminate complex societal issues as per the expected function of the genre, and

offer compelling narratives which on occasion offer a nod to teen experience, they maintain an adult perspective and analysis of the situations explored, thus never quite offering the reader insight into the deeper teen world.

In Tony J. Forder's *Endless Silent Scream* (2020) we are introduced to a teen girl who is a drug mule involved in cross county lines drug transportation and who attempts to commit suicide thus highlighting these issues. However, although the girl plays an important role in the narrative, the impact of her suicide attempt, her desperation and the circumstances leading to this action, are filtered through the main detective's responses to her and an analysis of his ongoing personal issues as a result of rescuing her. Whilst the reader gains a snippet of insight into the darkness of her teen life and the ways in which society has let her down, the emphasis is on foiling the drug dealers and bringing them to justice, Her story is only partially told and although the reader learns something of her route to becoming a drug mule, her plight is explored through the emotions and responses of the detective, thus denying the reader insight into the girl's inner thoughts, emotions and reactions The reader never fully understands the depths of her despair or the toll her journey has taken on her both physically and mentally.

In A. A. Dhand's *Girl Zero* (2017), the murder of the hero's niece is the starting point for the narrative. Her murder is a result of gang feuds, drug wars, child trafficking, and revenge and, even in her death, she is a key character in the narrative, yet her story is filtered through the adult characters' thirst for vengeance, their family dynamics and their grief. Once again, however, the true impact on the teen characters and events leading to the niece's murder are side-lined in an action-packed rush to vengeance.

Kirsty Ferguson's psychological thriller, *The Silent Daughter* (2020), explores a series of catastrophic events leading to a house fire in which only a mother survives. Grief stricken,

she imagines that her teen daughter also survived. Through flashbacks and present-day observations, we become privy not only to events experienced by the teen daughter but also to those experienced by the mother as a teen. However, once more, the daughter's narrative is filtered through the mother's eyes and her insights tainted by her bias and flawed perceptions. As an unreliable, traumatised narrator, her personal accounts of her own teen years are unreliable and, under scrutiny by other characters, are shown to bear little resemblance to reality. Luke Delaney's *The Killing Boys* (2021) focuses on a detective's conviction that two child killers will repeat their crime. This narrative focusses on the detective's story rather than the child killer's story about their crime or how their incarceration has affected them.

These given examples indicate that while teen narratives are sometimes included in adult CF, their lived experiences remain secondary to the adult characters' viewpoints, thus relegating the teen experience to hearsay that is filtered through the adult character's limited understanding of their experiences and how those experiences impact on them as they move forward with their lives. Often the teen is 'saved' by the adult character and is used as a plot device to further the reader's understanding of the adult character's personal journey.

### **3.5.3 The Portrayal of the Digital Teen in Adult CF**

In recent years the adult CF genre has embraced narratives exploring the use of DT to perpetrate or solve crime. However, few of these novels are written from the POV of the teen digital expert, victim or perpetrator.

In both Chris Carter's *The Caller* (2017) and Stav Sherez's *The Intrusions* (2018) – in which the killers prey on their victims through stalking SM networks, hacking into their devices to control their vehicle's GPS, remotely accessing their webcams to record and sell them unwittingly as 'slaves' on the DW - the reader is transported deep into the world of DT misuse. However, although a teen expert is called in in both these narratives to offer detailed and imperative DT advice which leads to the solving of the case, these characters are

relegated to only a few paragraphs on the page. In both M. W. Craven's *The Curator* (2020) and Carol Wyer's *The Dare* (2019), teens are being enticed to their death through a murderous online dare. Once again, though, although the victims of this murderous prank are teens, the investigation is narrated through the viewpoint of the adult characters in the book, which leaves the reader lacking insight into the possible motivations and issues leading up to the teen victims' involvement in this deadly behaviour. In James Patterson's *1<sup>st</sup> Case* (2020), there is a young (but not teen) genius with expertise in all things digital, and a complex series of crimes involving hacking, apps and remote access technology. The perpetrator is revealed to be a teen genius from an affluent family, yet the motivations for his destructive actions are restricted to only a few paragraphs in the final chapter.

It is clear that adult CF authors see the potential for the misuse of DT and its subsequent contribution to social rupture and are keen to explore narratives around this. However, by limiting these narratives to the adult voice and viewpoint, the genre neglects a substantial part of society – the digital-age teen – who is most familiar with DT. If adult CF is to retain its reputation as the genre which explores 'social rupture' and makes sense of the world, then it is duty bound to incorporate narratives involving the presently marginalised teen voice.

### **3.6 Appropriation of the Teen Voice**

Writing in the voice of a character whose lived experiences are notably different from the author's own brings its own unique challenges, and the decision to do so must not be taken lightly. However, as a creative, the author's job is to transport their reader to places and experiences which may be alien to them; a process which also involves the author in a journey which may or may not be familiar to them and may or may not involve their personal lived experiences. In Chapter 2, the importance of expanding our individual narratives to be



inclusive of wider society and disenfranchised groups within society was discussed. As was argued there, the expectation that authors write only from their own lived experiences would limit creativity and place boundaries on our imagination. However, more importantly, it ultimately would lead to a very narrow exploration of life, restricted to the author's personal limited experiences. It is for this reason that expanding the creative narrative to include, as a matter of course, a diverse representation of characters and experiences is essential. However, authors who choose to do so must be prepared to accept their own limitations, to challenge their own conscious and unconscious biases, and embrace the need to research and question their own representations of experiences outwith their personal knowledge.

YA novels are largely written by adults, and many of those adults are very much distant from their teen years. This does not preclude them being able to accurately portray and explore issues pertaining to the teen lived experience. It does, however, necessitate research into their subject areas and questioning their portrayal of whatever characters they create. Not only might the YA novelist create characters that are much younger than themselves, they may often portray characters that possess lived experiences vastly different from their own in terms of ethnicity, sexuality/gender, class, social advantage/disadvantage, and so on. With diligent research and care, these narratives often incorporate and explore a wider and more nuanced representation of society in order to discuss themes YA readers will benefit from experiencing through the pages of their book.

Thus, if adult CF includes more illuminating narratives representing wider society and disenfranchised groups, including teens who are a diverse group in themselves, then it will continue to fulfil its function as the genre which chronicles social history (McDermid, 2020). It will help us to better 'understand social rupture' (Mina, 2018), 'engag[e] with difficult

problems, rais[e] awareness' (Young, 2020), 'read the signs' and 'make sense of our existence' (Sherez, 2013).

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Ethical Approval confirmation, Teen participant consent form, Teen information sheet



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**PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL**  
Liz Mistry

**Dr Suzanne Owen**  
Chair of SAC Ethics Committee  
Tel: 0113 283 7100 ext.678  
E-mail: S.Owen@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Date: 11 May 2018

Dear Liz

**Re: SAC/2017/061 - Exploring the creation of the teen dynamic world in a crime fiction novel for an adult audience.**

Thank you for your recent amendment to your application for ethical approval for the above named project.

After reviewing the application, it has been resolved that the research project is granted ethical approval.

I wish you well in your study.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Suzanne Owen'.

Dr Suzanne Owen  
Chair of School of Arts and Communications Ethics Committee

### Teen consent form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Exploring the creation of the teen dynamic world in a post digital age crime fiction novel for an adult audience.** I am researching under the supervision of Professor Paul Hardwick , Department of English and Creative Writing, email: [p.hardwick@leedstrinity.ac.uk](mailto:p.hardwick@leedstrinity.ac.uk)

The research has been explained to me and I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions which I may have. I understand that my involvement in this study is voluntary.

The only people who will have access to individual data will be the student researcher and their project supervisor.

The data may form part of a publication written by the researcher and/or their supervisor.

I freely consent to participate in this study. Even after giving my consent, I understand that I have the right to withdraw at any time without explanation up to two weeks after my participation.

You are under no obligation to complete the questionnaire and indeed, if within two weeks of returning your answers to me, you wish to withdraw from the study please contact either myself or my supervisor and your interview will be deleted from my records.

Thank you very much for taking your time to take part in my research. By signing below, you are consenting to take part in this study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Teen information sheet

Participant No \_\_\_\_\_

### **Exploring the creation of the teen dynamic world in a post digital age crime fiction novel for an adult audience.**

I am conducting research at Leeds Trinity University into the teen voice in the adult post digital age crime fiction novel as part of my PHD in Creative Writing. I am researching under the supervision of Professor Paul Hardwick , Department of English and Creative Writing, email: [p.hardwick@leedstrinity.ac.uk](mailto:p.hardwick@leedstrinity.ac.uk)

There are three parts to this interview

#### **Part 1**

In the first you will be asked to answer some questions about young adult social media usage, language and group behaviours of young Adults. You will be given a participant number and your responses will be recorded.

You are under no obligation to participate and if within two weeks you wish to withdraw from the study please contact either myself or my supervisor with your participant number and your interview will be deleted from my records.

My details are

Name: Liz Mistry      Address: PGR Office, AF 8  
Leeds Trinity University,  
Brownberrie Lane,  
Horsforth  
LS18 5HD

Email: [e.mistry@leedstrinity.ac.uk](mailto:e.mistry@leedstrinity.ac.uk)

#### **Part 2**

You will be asked to look at a series of envelopes each with a single word written on it. You will be asked to write the word/s you are most likely to use instead of the one on the envelope on a piece of paper. You will fold your paper up and insert it in the appropriate envelope.

This will be completely anonymised and you will be unable to withdraw your answers for this part at a later date as they will be unidentifiable as belonging to you.

This will be to help me to make authentic teen/young adult dialogue in my writing.

#### **Part 3**

You will be asked to write the three main conversation topics you share with your friends on three separate pieces of paper. You will fold each paper up and insert into the drawstring bag supplied.

This will be completely anonymised and you will be unable to withdraw your answers for this part at a later date as they will be unidentifiable as belonging to you.

This will be to help me develop my young adult characters more effectively.

## **Appendix 2: CF author email information sheet, Consent form, Questionnaire**

### **CF author email information sheet**

#### **Exploring the creation of the teen dynamic world in a post digital age crime fiction novel for an adult audience.**

I am conducting research at Leeds Trinity University into the teen voice in the adult post digital age crime fiction novel as part of my PHD in Creative Writing. I am researching under the supervision of Professor Paul Hardwick , Department of English and Creative Writing, email: [p.hardwick@leedstrinity.ac.uk](mailto:p.hardwick@leedstrinity.ac.uk)

You are being asked to complete the attached author interview which will used as part of my PHD research.

The interview is all about why you write crime fiction and your views around the genre, it's place in the wider literary and academia worlds, your thoughts on appropriation of voice, the portrayal of disenfranchised groups within the genre as well as questions about your writing process.

You are under no obligation to complete the questionnaire and indeed, if within two weeks of returning your answers to me, you wish to withdraw from the study please contact either myself or my supervisor and your interview will be deleted from my records.

By completing and returning the questionnaire to me you are agreeing to participate in the research.

My details are

Name: Liz Mistry      Address: PGR Office, AF8  
Leeds Trinity University,  
Brownberrie Lane,  
Horsforth  
LS18 5HD

Email: [e.mistry@leedstrinity.ac.uk](mailto:e.mistry@leedstrinity.ac.uk)

### Author Consent form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Exploring the creation of the teen dynamic world in a post digital age crime fiction novel for an adult audience.** I am researching under the supervision of Professor Paul Hardwick , Department of English and Creative Writing, email: [p.hardwick@leedstrinity.ac.uk](mailto:p.hardwick@leedstrinity.ac.uk)

The research has been explained to me and I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions which I may have. I understand that my involvement in this study is voluntary.

The only people who will have access to individual data will be the student researcher and their project supervisor.

The data may form part of a publication written by the researcher and/or their supervisor.

I freely consent to participate in this study. Even after giving my consent, I understand that I have the right to withdraw at any time without explanation up to two weeks after my participation.

You are under no obligation to complete the questionnaire and indeed, if within two weeks of returning your answers to me, you wish to withdraw from the study please contact either myself or my supervisor and your interview will be deleted from my records.

Thank you very much for taking your time to take part in my research. By signing below, you are consenting to take part in this study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## Author Questionnaire

**Exploring the creation of the teen dynamic world in a post digital age crime fiction novel for an adult audience.**

**You are free to answer as many or as few of the following questions as you feel comfortable doing. Please give as much detail as possible.**

**Author Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **Most Recent Novel published**

\_\_\_\_\_

What is crime Fiction (CF)?

What draws you to write CF?

Why is CF is such a popular genre?

What are your feelings about 'appropriation of voice' in creative writing in general?

Do current discussions/debate around for example the portrayal of disenfranchised groups, violence towards women etc in Crime Fiction influence how or what you write?

Do crime fiction authors have a responsibility to society and if so, what is it?

What are your views on the relationship between genre (CF specifically) and literary fiction?

What processes do you go through when devising and developing plot ideas?

Can you describe your creative process?

How much do your personal experiences feed into your writing?

What function, if any, do you feel your writing contributes to society?

Is CF as a genre worthy of being studied in academia? Why/Why not?

**Thank you for participating in this research.**

**Liz Mistry**

### **Appendix 3: Facebook Group Readers Information supplied before posting each question, list of questions<sup>48</sup>**

#### **Information supplied before introducing each question**

I am conducting research at Leeds Trinity University into the teen voice in the adult post digital age crime fiction novel as part of my PHD in Creative Writing. I am researching under the supervision of Professor Paul Hardwick, Department of English and Creative Writing, email: p.hardwick@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Should you respond to the following thread, your responses will be anonymized but may be used as part of my research. You are at liberty to delete your response at any time and it will be discounted from my research.

Be aware that I won't respond other than to like your comments but, rest assured, I will read them all with interest.

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<sup>48</sup> **Facebook Groups used and membership numbers: UK Crime Book Club:** membership: 20,700+ internationally), **Crime Fiction Addict:** membership: 11,000+ Internationally, **The Book Club:** membership 13,200+ internationally.

**The questions to be asked (at intervals) are as followed – Only one question will be asked per thread:**

What draws you to read Crime Fiction?

Is the teen voice well represented in Crime Fiction? Can you give examples from your reading?

Is digital society well represented in Crime Fiction? Can you give examples from your reading?

What sub-genre of Crime Fiction do you most read?

Why do you think Crime Fiction is such a popular genre?

What are your views about ‘appropriation of voice’ in fiction? (using voices/point of views not belonging to the author)

What are your thoughts on the relationship between genre (Crime fiction specifically) and literary fiction?

What function, if any, do you believe CF contributes to society?

Is Crime Fiction a genre worthy of being studied in academia? Why/Why not?

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