

BAD BOYS

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Book Summary

The Bad Boys—Cass, Kevin, Winston, Kurt, and Walid are five fatherless, mixed-race teenage boys. Each of them are victims of upbringing from a poor, mostly Moslem inner-city area. They were going their separate ways when Cass was abducted and forced into joining ISIL to fight in Turkey and Syria. After two years, he was sent to Malaysia to join an Islamic terror operation but managed to flee to Thailand.

In trying to bring Cass home and expose the deep and sinister criminality within the community, each of them, for the first time in their lives, met older men to whom they learned to trust and respect.

Written by a nineteen-year-old Kurt, who helped to find Cass in Thailand, this sensitive tale is about five intelligent young men finally finding the hope and inspiration that have been denied by their upbringing.

I didn't know what was going through Cass's mind, but he suddenly slumped to his knees, looked up at me, and for one shocking moment, I wondered if this really was Cass or some other poor guy.

If it wasn't for his eyes, I didn't think I'd have recognised him. For one thing, he'd always been so clean and tidy. Even his school tie would be tied tight to his neck, whereas my top buttons would be open and my tie would hang loose like I was pretending to be some dumb but cool black actor in a gangster movie.

Now he was thin and dirty and staring like some poor guy waiting to be shot by ISIL, which, I supposed, was what he was.

He didn't speak but just looked at me as they clipped handcuffs on him like a criminal. Then his other sandal fell off, and I picked it up. What good could one shoe do, I didn't know, but it seemed the right thing to do. And what then I would say to him?

"Get up, man. Don't be such a mugoo. Jesus, man, you ain't nothing like you used to be. Got some sprawl beard and fancy haircut. And where'd you get them shoes. Sandals ain't cool, man."

Why I spoke like that, I didn't know, but somehow I felt it necessary to revert to the way I used to speak when I was fifteen or sixteen.

Jimmy strolled up then, as Cass crouched on the ground in a heap, and the two police did something inside the van.

"This ugly guy is Jimmy," I said to Cass. "Don't shake his hand. He's dirtier than you are. He rolls a good spliff, but he's piss poor with chiclets and blimps."

About the Author

Terry Morgan lives in Petchabun, Thailand. Having travelled extensively with his own export business, his novels cover international politics, commercial crime, corruption, fraud, science, environmental issues, and occasional satire.

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CHAPTER 1

My name's Kurt.

If I'm to be really pedantic (is that the right word?) I'm actually Courtney Lemar Delmont Learner, but Kurt has got me by since I was a kid. The Lemar and Delmont part has been a source of great humour to some and a genuine threat to my street cred. But Cass, Kevin, Winston, and Walid have known my full name for years. They've already finished laughing, so I'm relaxed in their company.

Rightly or wrongly, though, they think I'm good with words, but it was Roger, Gordon, and Willie who suggested I was the one to write this. We'd gathered in Gordon's old garage tucked down the back alley off Park Road, and for a while, all we did was to sit and listen to these three old codgers debating whether we were up to it.

"It's finished. Nothing to do with us anymore," Gordon said in a loud whisper. "Let these bad boys get on with it."

"I suppose you're right," Roger whispered back. "You sure we can trust them?"

"Do they trust us?" Willie replied.

"That's the big question," Roger said. "They think we're just too old, past our sell-by date, and no longer able to think straight."

Willie had shrugged. "Or are they still too inexperienced to make any judgement at all?"

"Can they even write?" Roger asked.

"Or read?" Gordon added.

"Can they even think straight?" Willie asked behind his hand.

"Well," Gordon said, "there's no harm in giving them a chance, I suppose."

We thanked them for the enormous trust they'd bestowed on us, told them we'd head to the Queen's Head pub for a decision, and left them shaking with laughter over their cups of tea.

Anything that was said about the Queen's Head must take the form of an apology for Queen Victoria. If she knew her shabby portrait now hung, squeaking on a rusting bracket over the door, I'm sure she'd turn in her grave.

Perhaps it was a good thing that the Queen's Head would soon close. Even Gabby, the Polish guy who owned it, had failed to make a profit on this sad, dilapidated shell of Victorian history that still smelled of the thousands of cigarettes smoked there before the ban was imposed. But it was a good-enough meeting place for us, and if what we spent on a few cans of lager helped pay for Gabby's removal van, then we reckoned we'd done our bit towards helping a man when he was down.

The four of us had been at school together so we'd known one another for years. Walid was the exception. He had arrived from Syria about a year ago, had been looking for somewhere cheap to stay, and had made the terrible mistake of taking my advice to check out the area around Park Road. I reckoned he'd have moved on already if it wasn't for Kevin and Gordon and the rest.

So there we were, all five of us, crowded into a corner table on wooden benches with hard backs and even harder seats, trying to look cool. Why we needed to look cool, I didn't know because the Queen's Head was not exactly the place where anyone younger than fifty would go to be checked out on a Friday night.

"You can do it, Kurt," they said.

"Yeh, well, talking comes easy enough," I said. "It's putting stuff down on paper that's the problem." We argued about it for a while.

"But you're the literary genius, Kurt. You're the academic. You're the only one who got an *A* in English at school," Cass said. "You even beat that Chinese guy from the Golden Gate takeaway who reckoned he spoke like Prince Charles."

"You got better style than Fu Manchu, Kurt," Kevin said.

"And wit," Walid added.

"And a nice turn of phrase," Winston said.

"And a cool haircut," Cass added.

I agreed with those last compliments, and in the end, I said, "Yeh, OK, then. I'll admit to my superior intellect. It's my ethnicity. Intelligence flows through my veins. It's in my African genes."

I told them my vocabulary had improved exponentially after I'd moved from the cess pit around Park Road to Edmonton, North London.

“You should visit Edmonton some time,” I said. “It’s light years ahead of Park Road. It’s so much more culturally and ethnically diverse. We even allow Jews, Aussies, white South Africans, and Mormons in. And there’s a whole street for those who still haven’t worked out who they are or where they came from. And as a change from attending the Park Street mosque, you could always try the Ministry of Mountain, Fire, and Miracles run by Pastor Jerry.”

To further illustrate my claim of North London’s diversity, I told them about a guy from Vanuatu whom I met and who’d taught me a whole lot of new phrases. I could tell no one had ever heard of Vanuatu, but Walid was the only one who admitted it. I told him it was the island in the Pacific Ocean, where Robinson Crusoe got washed up. I was not sure if that was true, but it didn’t matter because he then wanted to know who Robinson Crusoe was. I told him to call in at the library and to check the kids’ section.

“It’s closed,” Kevin said. “Council cuts.” So we then spent ten minutes discussing how the hell anyone could read about history when it could only be downloaded from Amazon, which, of course, meant you needed a credit card, and that you’d struggle to get a credit card because of a non-existent credit rating.

“Anyway, they’ve cancelled history,” Cass said. “Nothing good ever happened. It was all bad, so why depress people even more? It’s social engineering.”

“And white supremacists like Gordon.” Kevin laughed.

“Gordon’s never even moved from Park Road, let alone been a slave trader,” Walid said, defending his boss.

“He employs you,” Winston retorted.

“Yeh, but I needed a job,” Walid said.

Of course, we then talked about slavery and exploitation and about rape and pillage and decided that modern slavery still continued except it was now ran by the children of old slaves and that the new colonialists were the Chinese and that rich Arabs in the gulf used Bangladeshis and Pakistanis as slaves and that the Pakistanis in Park Road had enslaved Kevin, who was neither black, white, yellow, or brown but a sort of light beige with long eyelashes.

Going round in circles like that would make you so dizzy you didn’t know where you were heading, so I reverted back to Vanuatu.

“I reckon he was the guy who taught Bear Grylls how to light a fire with sticks,” I said, reverting back also to Robinson Crusoe. “And it’s got a real cool motto.”

“What has?” Winston asked.

“Vanuatu,” I said. “Keep up, man. They’ve got this high-profile black guy in a loin cloth and a spear called Long God Yumistanap.”

“Is that the guy who taught you how to speak?” Kevin asked.

“If he ever existed at all, then Long God Yumi’s long gone, Kev. No, I mean the guy I met in Edmonton. Now that you’ve got your freedom from homegrown slavery by your own relatives, you really need to get out more, Kev.”

“Go on then. Prove you can speak it,” Walid said.

“Speak what?” I asked.

“Vanuatu or whatever,” Walid said.

I had to think about that for a moment. “Proses fud mak causem plenty sik,” I said.

The four dumbasses stared at me, as if I was making it up, so I had to translate it for the uneducated.

“Processed food makes you sick,” I said. “Don’t you understand any Vanuatu lingo?”

Winston was the only one who understood. Winston was from Lagos, you see, and he often talked pidgin. “Speaking pidgin so no one understands is a black guy’s privilege,” I said.

“I thought you didn’t have any privileges, Kurt?” Kevin asked. “That the white supremacists and slave traders had stolen everything.”

“Not true,” I said. “I got plenty of privileges. I’m not like you mixed-race heathens. I’m a true black with genuine African roots that go back to Voodoo days. It was us who invented religion by prancing around fires and waving sticks with ostrich feathers stuck in our curls and wearing more organic make-up than you find in Holland and Barrett’s. Life was simple then and more fun. Now look—everyone’s totally confused. Have you ever seen a more miserable bunch of untidy-looking wretches than those that emerge from the Park Road mosque on Fridays? They’re supposed to look happy and fulfilled, man. They’re supposed to emerge looking content and motivated and set up for the

weekend with plans for shopping at Tesco and evenings watching Simon Cowell.”

They laughed at that, especially Walid and Cass who were the ones closest to the mosque scene I was describing.

Walid tried to explain. “When they come out, they’re deep in thought, Kurt,” he said.

“If they came out dancing, singing, and waving black flags and Kalashnikovs like the guys I met, you’d be right to be worried,” Cass added. Coming from Cass, who had some hands-on experiences of Kalashnikovs and black flags, that line of conversation stopped dead.

Like me, Winston had done a bit of Christianity when he was about seven, His mom used to drag him along to the church on Midland Road. That was before the Archbishop of Canterbury ruined everything by spouting shit about God not being a celestial insurance policy.

So what is he then if he’s not an insurance policy to keep you sane and on track? We all need some structure and direction in our lives. But let’s not go there right now; otherwise, I’ll ruin the rest of the story before I’ve started.

What I will say, though, is that it was Kevin who had the big personal problem when we were all much younger.

We all knew that he’d missed a lot of school when he was a kid, but we didn’t know why and we didn’t care. Kids are selfish. What kid really cares about anyone else but themselves? Is it natural to think your own problems are the worst ever?

When we got to understand Kevin’s background, we told him we were sorry, but by then, it was too late. He’d already gotten over it, and he didn’t care either. Instead, he told us to look at our own lives. Did we had it any better? Were we better equipped to face the future? We shook our heads at that.

We’d known nothing about Kevin’s problems until Roger, a truck driver, came on the scene. Kev was lucky that Roger saw something worth saving in him. Whoever thought an old truck driver could turn out better than the Archbishop of Canterbury? But I supposed that was not difficult.

As we moved onto discussing celestial insurance policies, Winston raised the subject of cremation versus burial, Cass mentioned Buddhism, and I opted for promoting the benefits of Voodoo.

“You might stick with one God for your inspiration,” I said, “but I’ve always gone for pick ‘n match.”

“Like picking up Jessie after school and matching her assets against Aisha’s. That’s what you mean?” Winston asked.

“Don’t be flippant,” I said. “I’m talking about picking and matching from the table of delights we call black magic. Get to choose your ideal witch doctor, ghost, or genuine spirit. Sort the wheat from the chaff, separate the good from the bad, and check out those you’ve never heard of before. Look at me and Winston,” I said. “Black as night and eyes that see. You know why? It’s because of our sun God. It’s not like we prostrate ourselves before him. We stand tall, stand firm, and salute like soldiers. Standing up shows genuine respect, and he reciprocates by giving us a decent sun tan. He takes no notice of all this false sun worship from your average white Anglo-Saxon because he knows they’re not genuine. Anything that fades within a week can never be the genuine article, man.”

That caused more discussion, of course, because while Winston was as black as me, Cass and Walid were brown, and Kevin was, as I mentioned, a sort of off-white beige but with long eyelashes.

Walid said that sun worshipping was pointless. Even if he changed from reluctant Moslem to Voodoo sun worshipper, he’d not seen the sun around Park Road for three months, so what was the point? We agreed about that. Park Road is permanently damp.

We returned to discussing North London and the need to experience new horizons. Walid laughed at that. “New horizons?” He laughed. Then Cass joined in. It was not laughter like you might get for good comedy but more like mocking laughter, and I was the target. I’d experienced Edmonton, but Walid had walked from Syria, and Cass had been in Turkey and got mixed up with ISIL.

They were, of course, quite right to laugh the way they did.

When I’d recently caught up with Cass for the first time in two years, I barely recognised him. He was thin and dirty like a starving refugee, and he smelled terrible.

As for Walid, when I first saw him, he’d just hitched all the way from Damascus. That was a lot further than Edmonton. Of course, Walid then had to remind them it was my fault he’d ended up in Park Road.

“But then you met Gordon, and Gordon offered you a job,” I said.

Of course, we then needed to discuss Gordon, who definitely hadn't been anywhere much. In fact, he hadn't moved far from Park Road. He was about the only white face still living around here, but he took Walid under his wing. Walid had no need of a sun God or, in fact, the mosque. He had Gordon.

Kevin, on the other hand, had Roger. Kevin was a thinker and still sensitive about things, but with Roger behind him, he was already getting over things. Roger opened up Kevin and showed him the sky.

Roger would tell stories about driving his truck across the Libyan desert and about driving through Turkey to Baghdad and Teheran and even to Syria. That surprised Walid, who thought all roads in and out of Damascus had been potholed by bombs for a century.

And who showed Winston the sky? There was no doubt about that. It was Willie Wilkins—our old math teacher from school.

And what about Cass and me? Well, I suppose you'll need to read on to find out.

That night in the Queen's Head, we decided we'd definitely record things for what Willie, Roger, and Gordon called posterity and took a vote on who should write it. Willie, Roger, and Gordon voted by phone. The result was unanimous. I, Courtney Lemar Delmont Learner, more widely known as Kurt, was to become an author.

CHAPTER 2

It was my fault that Walid got involved in what was going on in Park Road. All of us, except Walid, had known one another since school, but after he'd arrived from Syria, he'd fitted into the team so seamlessly it was as if he'd been around the place as long as we had.

To explain Walid's late arrival requires me to explain why I'd moved away from Park Road and found myself living in North London. You must realise I need to handle this sensitively to preserve my reputation, but I'll be as truthful as I can.

I was in London and on one of my secret vigils to find a bit of peace and tranquillity when I met Walid. He'd been sleeping on the grass in Pymmes Park in Edmonton. We got chatting, and Walid seemed keen to talk. He'd just arrived in London after a heroic trip, hitching and walking all the way from Syria.

"So are you legal?" I asked him in a kind of whisper.

"I'm English, bro" he said, though I could tell he was trying to enhance his London accent to impress. It wasn't quite normal, but nonetheless, I was mightily impressed for an Arab-looking guy with a wispy stash and acne spots.

"I started off in Catford, South London," he said. Then he added, "Catford, mate. Know it?" as if to impress me further.

"You walked to Syria from Catford and back again?" I said, astonished. "Did you need the exercise?"

"Nah, nah," he said without appearing to appreciate my wit. "I went out there with my mum. We stayed there a while and then . . . and then she . . ."

And then he stopped. So I guessed something had happened, but I didn't like to pry. I now knew what happened but we all need a few secrets. I certainly had a few that I was not too keen to talk about to a guy I'd just met in a park.

Anyway, he told me he'd been on the move for a year when he met a Polish truck driver called Herman at a truck stop north of Dusseldorf. Herman had told him he could get him all the way from there to England on the ferry from the Hook of Holland to Harwich for a fee.

Neither did I like to pry into the fee he'd paid or where he'd got the money or bring up the thorny matter of people smuggling because Walid seemed an OK sort of guy. He had a certain look in his eye that I put down to determination

and a bit of cunning. And I'd spotted a greasy, curled-up copy of *The Lord of the Rings* in his backpack, which suggested he had a worthwhile brain. I was sort of impressed despite his accent.

Looking back, I was right about the determination. Walid's done OK, but it was my fault he ended up in Park Road.

"I still got some good mates around Park Road," I told him.

And why had I moved from Park Road to Edmonton?

You see, my mother is not exactly the settling down sort. I'd already moved several times while I was at school with Cass, Kevin, and Winston. We never moved far. It was mostly the next street or around the corner so that my mother could pursue her vocation of providing comfort and solace to various male acquaintances for us to pay for the rent arrears that had accumulated from the last place we'd lived at.

With all that's going on, there's not much I remember about school. I went along every day; I diligently did my homework, and then I went out. Messing around by the weed-filled concrete playground with its broken swings and cracked basketball court is what I remember most from around age eleven to sixteen. I remember going to a church once when I was about nine. I can't remember why I was there, but it was a big place on the main road, with big colourful windows, and it was packed out with West Indian men in big suits and big women in fancy hats. I'm Nigerian, I think, but at age nine, it felt cool to say I was from Jamaica until someone asked for details. Then I'd run away. At that church, I still remember wearing my tight school shoes and best jeans. Winston was there too. I remember us playing outside. We poked sticks into cracks around the tombstones to try to wake the dead and wondered what would happen if one of them got annoyed and woke up.

Anyway, one day, when I was about sixteen, my mother decided to move again—this time from the two-up, two-down Victorian terrace in Park Road that we rented from Mr. Khan to a similar one in the backstreets of Tottenham, North London. This was a really big move with a hired van for two beds and the TV. It was also when I got introduced to the man my mother said was my father. She was giggling as she told me, and the guy was laughing. So I just shrugged and carried on. As this was about the fifth father and the sixth uncle I'd met, I decided to move out when I got the chance.

The chance came when I met Coolie outside Burger King.

"A bit of peace and quiet. Know what I mean?" was what I told Coolie I was looking for. Coolie said I could bed down at his place if things got too bad at

home. It was an attractive offer because Coolie was highly respected in the area. Coolie was from Abuja and was already nineteen, so he'd been around and knew a lot more than me.

"I need no altercations and fuss. Know what I mean, Coolie?" I said in explaining my need for a move. "I need some mutual toleration and no friction."

"This is the place, man," Coolie confirmed like he was selling some upmarket real estate. "Guaranteed tranquillity."

Now, unbeknown even to Cass, Kevin, and Winston, I'd always sought out tranquillity. I like reading. I'd go to the library for tranquillity. I think that's how I developed the style, wit, and nice turn of phrase, which they say I've got.

You know why I liked peace and tranquillity and still do? It's because loud noise was the only stimulation that I remembered from being strapped in my stroller at age two. It was the domestic noise, the arguments between my mother and various Caribbean and African lodgers she took in that affected me, and there were signs things would only get worse the day we moved to Edmonton. I can picture this guy even now.

This latest guy was not Rasta like most of the previous ones. Don't get me wrong. I like Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff, and King Tubby in moderation, but this guy looked Arab. He definitely wasn't Rasta, Jamaican, or even Nigerian and definitely not my father. Besides his paler colour, his hair was straight. But he was still very noisy.

If it wasn't his angry, booming voice, then it was the sound of his fist banging on the front door at night or the sonic boom from it being swung in the direction of my head or my mum's.

He never actually connected with my mum's head because he was always off balance, and anyway, she had a long history of giving as good as she got. She could get really angry and point and then wave a kitchen knife at a guy's nose with great effect, so perhaps he'd heard about her reputation and missed her head on purpose.

He never connected with my head because I was too quick, but I can still feel the rush of air past my ear.

And instead of King Tubby, grotesque Arab music would echo through our house—wailing women singers like cats on heat as I tried doing my school homework and watch TV in the kitchen.

Despite everything, I did OK in that new school in Tottenham, even though I didn't like it there. Just like Woodlands School back in the Park Road days, there were too many women teachers.

The exception at Woodlands School, where I was with Cass, Kevin, and Winston, was Mr. Wilkins, the math teacher. Winston especially liked Mr. Wilkins. Willie Wilkins was a bit special.

Willie would divert from the set syllabus into far more interesting areas such as a whole lesson on how long it would take to travel to Manchester and back if we took a train and a bus one way and walked all the way back. I won't explain the fun we had, discussing whether the guy doing the walking was a paraplegic who could only crawl, a ninety-year-old David Beckham with a walking stick or Usain Bolt sprinting backwards dressed like a black Dame Edna Everage. But I can still remember Willie's joke about a one-legged hitchhiker.

"What do you say to a one-legged hitchhiker? Hop in."

And, do you know, I can still remember how to calculate travel time from A to B via C and back to A via D from a list of mixed speeds and distances. Willie had the most amazing tricks to improve memory and do mental arithmetic.

On the other hand, I was thrown out of Ms. Edwards's psychology lesson at Woodlands when I told her fifteen-year-old boys don't fucking care whether psychology helps to understand social phenomena. I told her that just living out there did that. If she got out more, perhaps she'd understand that learning stuff like that from textbooks was a load of crap and would one day turn a whole generation into rioting psychopaths.

I didn't care. Whatever she thought, I wasn't stupid or dim. I knew I could shine if I had to. Someone once wrote, "Never dull your shine for somebody else." That was me. All I needed was some peace and quiet and an opportunity to show what I could do.

So, at the age of sixteen and a half and living in Edmonton, a hundred miles from Park Road, I'd had enough. By then, I'd done some of my own shouting just to make my opinions known, but it was useless. So, some nights, I'd walk over to Coolie's place for somewhere to go. Coolie, whose own folks had gone their separate ways leaving the place empty, would open the upstairs window and look down.

"Been a bad boy again then, Kurtie?" he'd shout down. "Ma smacked your little bad boy ass? The old man landed one on your ear? Been crying?"

But even at Coolie's place, the noise didn't stop. It was definitely not tranquil. Coolie played Afro beat—Fela Kuti, Lucky Dube, and Ska non-stop on volume 9 until someone gave him an old collection of Def Leopard and Alice Cooper. The noise didn't abate. It just changed.

I had grown so used to noise that a few moments of silence hurt my ears. I'd look up, thinking something was wrong—that the world had stopped or I'd suddenly gone deaf. But it also showed me that silence was a chance to sit and think without distractions. Silence was nicer than noise. Silence was golden. Noise obliterated thought, but silence encouraged it. I discovered that despite my full-on act, I was a bit of a thinker.

But I still couldn't avoid noise.

Another mate, Basher, had a cool way to get tickets to watch Spurs, so I used to go with him to watch the soccer and come away with my ears ringing and a list of new adjectives to describe ineptitude. Afterwards we'd meet up with Stacker at the Crown Inn and then go to Deci Belles, where we'd meet Coolie, and I found out why Coolie never came home on Saturday nights.

As I've said, Coolie was highly respected around Edmonton. He was already nineteen and from Abuja, so he'd been around and knew a lot more than me.

He wore brown Nike Manoa boots, tight black jeans, and a belt with a brass buckle like a skull the size of a dinner plate, and whether it was raining or snowing, he'd top it off with a grey Superdry vest with Chinese writing and a medallion nearly the same size as his buckle hanging around the neck. Coolie looked the part. Most days, he worked in a pub in Tottenham, but he always seemed to have more money to spend than the pub was likely to pay. I never asked how or why, and he never said anything to me, but I think he always knew I was a bit of an oddball so not entirely to be trusted with bad news. I once mislaid an old Portishead CD, and Coolie found it in the kitchen stuck in the toaster like a slice of bread. No wonder I'd not spotted it. I think one of his mates, probably Snaz, must have put it there for a joke. "What the fuck is this crap?" he said before lobbing it in my direction.

"Yeh, weird stuff," I said though I often played it through ear plugs with my head under the pillow.

But I was grateful to Coolie for the shelter over my head despite the endless stream of noisy North London traffic outside. And then I got a job as a binman for Haringey Council, where the banter, shouting, and bin rattling began at 4:00 a.m. It all explained why I was often in bed at 10:00 p.m. with a pillow over my head listening to soft Irish Celtic music on my phone. Not that I could admit this was my kind of music, of course.

My point is this. My search for a bit of peace and tranquillity in Pymmes Park not only turned out lucky for Walid but it then helped Cass with his problems.

CHAPTER 3

According to Cass, his problem started on one of those dull wet and windy days that seem to characterise everything about the area around Park Road.

Number 43, Shipley Street with its weed-strewn cobbles and council-owned trash bins had been Cass's home for as long as he could remember. However, on that dull, wet, and windy Saturday afternoon two years ago—when he'd crept downstairs, opened the front door, and wandered away—it had changed his life forever.

When he turned the corner onto Brick Street, the only movement had been the dirty brown gutter water sweeping urban debris downstream. Plastic bags, cigarette ends, dead leaves, and other detritus from the maze of inner-city streets of Victorian brick terraces floated slowly past to gather in soggy piles at the first blocked drain. On Park Road, an empty bus splashed by. Strip lights shone inside the Cash for Clothes shop and behind the steamy front window of Osman's Launderette. The dismal streets around Park Road were always like that.

If he'd found me, Winston, Walid, Mo, or Shaifiq sheltering like wet pigeons in the doorway of Raja's Store or Hussein's Money Exchange, it was unlikely things would have turned out differently. Such was his mood that if we'd said, *"Where're you going, Cass?"* he'd probably have called back that he was heading down to Mootalah's. That wouldn't have been true because Cass hadn't known where he was going. He'd just wanted to get away from everything and everybody. He'd had enough of the stifling square mile of familiarity locally known as Park Road with its mosque, backstreets of broken pavements, boarded up properties and shabby corner shops like Mootalah's that smelled of wet cardboard, overripe fruit, and wilting vegetables.

Even if he'd passed Bushra and Javeria hiding beneath an umbrella in their tight jeans and make-up who always smiled, giggled, and held onto each other when they saw him, he might have said something different.

"Hi, Cass. Going somewhere nice?"

"Pushing weights down at the centre."

That would have been a joke because Cass had only ever looked through the plate glass window at the city's sports centre and watched those with enough money to afford the membership fee running, sweating, and going nowhere in their Lycra.

In his heart, Cass knew it would have been better to admit he didn't know what he was doing or where he was going, but honesty demanded self-confidence and, at age seventeen, Cass's confidence was in short supply. Unless, of course, he'd seen Kevin. Cass and Kevin had been best mates since they were kids.

If he'd passed Bashir's Asian Store and Kevin had happened to be outside stacking boxes of oranges or cucumbers for pocket money, things might have turned out differently. *"Hey! What's happening, Cass? Why not call me?"*

If he'd met Kevin, it's likely Cass would never have stopped outside the shabby front window of Faisal World Travel on Park Road. But they hadn't met, and so Cass had walked on and stopped, distracted by coloured stickers advertising cheap flights to Dublin, Paris, and Amsterdam. Not only that but he'd gone inside and met the owner Mr. Khan. It was Mr. Khan who'd then sold him a cheap air ticket to Turkey, which he bought in cash with his savings from his part-time jobs.

At the last minute, Mr. Khan had given him a parcel to give to his brother in Istanbul. The only other person who knew about the parcel was Kevin because he was the one who'd waved Cass off on the bus to the airport.

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