

# BAD BOYS

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## Summary

Cass, Kevin, Winston, Kurt and Walid are five fatherless, mixed-race teenage boys, each of them 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 is sent to Malaysia to join an Islamic terror operation but manages 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, meets older men who they learn to trust and respect.

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

*... "I don'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 don'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 suppose, is 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 one shoe was I don't know, but it seemed the right thing to do. And what did I then 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 don'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 aid 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 title 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 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's 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's a good thing that the Queen's Head will soon close. Even Gabby, the Polish guy who owns it, had failed to make a profit on this sad, dilapidated shell of Victorian history that still smells 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's down.

Four of us had been at school together so we'd known each other for years. Walid was the exception. Walid had arrived from Syria about a year ago, had been looking for somewhere cheap to stay and made the terrible mistake of taking my advice to check out the area around Park Road. I reckon 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 and trying to look cool. Why we needed to look cool I don't know because the Queen's Head is not exactly the place where anyone younger than fifty goes to be checked out on a Friday night. But:

"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 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 that 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 I'd met 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'm not sure if that's true but it didn't matter because he

then wanted to know who Robinson Crusoe. I told him to call in at the library and 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, about rape and pillage and decided that modern slavery still continued except it was now run 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 makes you so dizzy you don't know where you're heading so I reverted back to Vanuatu.

"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 flag."

"What has?" Winston asked.

"Vanuatu," I said. "Keep up, man. Their flag has got this black guy in a loin cloth and a spear called Long God Yumistanap."

"Is that the guy who taught you how to speak?" Kevin said.

"Long God's long gone, Kev. No, I mean the guy I met in Edmonton. Now you've got your freedom from home grown 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 said.

"Vanuatu or whatever," Walid said.

I had to think about that for a moment. Then: "Proses fud mak causem plenty sik," I said.

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’s from Lagos, you see, and he often talks 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 who’d got 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’d 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 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? It's natural to think your own problems are the worst ever?

When we got to understand Kevin's background, we told Kevin we were sorry but by then it was too late. He'd already got over it and he didn't care either. Instead, he told us to look at our own lives. Had 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 suppose that's 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 what you mean?" Winston said.

"Don't be flippant," I said. "I'm talking picking and matching from the table of delights we call black magic. Get to choose your ideal witchdoctor, 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's 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. Gordon definitely hasn't been anywhere much. In fact, he hasn't moved far from Park Road. He's about the only white face still living around here but he took Walid under his wing. Walid has no need of a sun God or, in fact, the mosque. Walid's got Gordon.

Kevin, on the other hand, has got Roger. Kevin's a quiet thinker and still sensitive about things but with Roger behind him, he's already getting over things. Roger opened up Kevin and showed him the sky.

Roger tells 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 potted by bombs for a century.

And who showed Winston the sky? There's 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 Queens 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 each other 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 on one of my secret vigils to find a bit of peace and tranquillity when I found Walid sleeping on the grass in Pymmes Park in Edmonton. We got chatting and it was me who then suggested he go and live in Park Road. "I've still got some good mates there," I told him.

It was all well intentioned, you understand. Walid had just arrived from Syria and Park Road is one hell of a lot cheaper than anything around north London where I was living.

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 and to pay for the rent arrears that had accumulated from the last place we'd lived at.

With all that 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 - big, colourful windows and 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?” is 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 already nineteen and from Abuja 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 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 because I was quick and he was always off balance 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 maths 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 Miss Edwards' psychology lesson at Woodlands when I told her fifteen-year-old boys don't fucking care whether psychology helps to understand social phenomena. Just living out there did that I told her. If she got out more, perhaps she'd understand that learning stuff like that from text books 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 and 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 and 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. And always there was the endless stream of noisy north London traffic.

And then I got a job as a bin man for Haringey Council where the banter, shouting and bin rattling began at 4am. It all explained why I was often in bed at 10pm 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 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, but 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's 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, its 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 them 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 for cash with 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 Kevin was the one who'd waved him off on the bus to the airport.

## **CHAPTER 4**

Kevin, now aged eighteen, also collected and delivered packages and parcels for Mr Khan of Faisal World Travel on Park Road.

It was not his main job which was helping Bashir in the Bangladeshi food store on Park Road, but part of an arrangement with Mr Khan who provided Kevin with attic space above the travel agents. Kevin's attic was basic: a mattress, a metal pole on which to hang what few clothes he had, a single light bulb hanging from the frayed loft insulation and a plug for charging his phone and the single bar electric heater. Kevin's main possession was an old car which he sometimes used for his errands.

The jobs for Khan had worried him for weeks, but the latest collection was three hundred miles away. “Shall I go by train, Mr Khan?” he’d asked.

Khan had shaken his head. “Don’t you have a car?”

Kevin never argued with Mr Khan because arguing with Mr Khan caused other problems. He didn’t even have the courage to ask for money for fuel but hoped his expenses might be included in whatever Mr Khan was proposing to pay when he returned. So, Kevin took his old red Volkswagen Golf for its longest drive ever.

57 Montrose Crescent, turned out to be a housing estate on the outskirts of Edinburgh. For Kevin, Scotland was like a foreign country. It was as far from home as he’d ever been but, once he’d found it, it was like many other places he knew – an area of low-cost houses, cracked concrete gardens, old cars and white vans blocking the roads. Then there was the man who came to the door when Kevin rattled the loose letter box.

He was a man of around fifty with sharp brown eyes set in a nutty brown face covered in a grey, bushy beard, his head topped with a white taqiyah. A grey shirt covered half a globe of stomach that hid the top of baggy grey trousers, but he looked like countless others Kevin saw every day walking the streets at home, going in and out of the local shops, standing, chatting in groups or on their way to or from the mosque - Pakistanis, Bangladeshi’s, Afghans, Somali’s, Iraqis, Syrians, Indians, West Africans - and Mr Khan.

“Good morning,” Kevin said, politely. “Wazir?”

“From Khan, is it?” Wazir said. “Wait.”

Wazir had then plodded back inside in dirty white trainers with the laces undone leaving Kevin standing on the doorstep, stamping his feet, shivering and rubbing his hands. It was ten degrees colder than back home and Kevin had hoped that after a seven-hour drive, he might at least be invited inside for five minutes for a friendly chat and a cup of tea or coffee. Instead, he waited outside and allowed his mind to wander.

It was so cold he wished he’d brought his sweater but it was, he thought, in the attic. Or had he left it at Bashir’s.

Kevin pictures his attic and tried to visualise his sweater hanging there.

All thoughts about the attic depressed Kevin. This space beneath the roof tiles, the crumbling styrene insulation and the cooing pigeons was accessed via a folding ladder that hung onto the top landing but could be pulled up or down whenever Mr Khan decided. If Mr Khan wanted it up when Kevin was already up there then Kevin was marooned for a while like a prisoner. If Mr Khan had a meeting with friends, downstairs, then the ladder was dropped and Kevin was told to go out for an hour. And if he returned too soon then it was to such a

volume of Arabic, Urdu or Punjabi abuse that Kevin would leave again and wait in the Silver Bullet gaming shop opposite until he'd watched them all come out and disappear into the night. Kevin's choice of work and accommodation, just like his other choices in life, had always been limited, even more so since his mum had been granted a single person council flat after being forced out of the old, rented house on Shipley Street that Mr Khan also owned.

Cass had also lived on Shipley Street and, as he stood shivering on Wazir's doorstep, he thought about Cass.

It was Mr Khan who, two years before, had sold Cass his air-ticket to go to Istanbul and then, at the last minute, given him a parcel to take with him. Kevin had not seen Cass since but he often thought about him.

He kicked a loose lump of asphalt, watched it slide across the concrete garden and hit the overfull trash bin and decided to phone his mum later to tell her about his trip to Scotland, to check if she was OK and take her a few packs of the frozen peas Bashir couldn't find space for in the freezer Had she eaten today? Was she feeling OK he wondered?

Kevin's mum had had problems for longer than Kevin could remember.

Kevin's mum had self-harmed, overdosed and, when he was twelve, ran away only to come back next day, throw her arms around him, smother him in hugs and kisses and promise never to leave him again. For a time, Kevin had become well known to social services but, whenever they visited, his mother would be calm, collected, rational and protective and she and Kevin would sit together on the broken sofa holding hands. The hugs and smiles were genuine. Kevin loved his mum.

But he'd grown used to days off school when she had a bad day and he was all too familiar with the professional words of wisdom from experts who came to check. It's an anxiety attack, depression, not eating properly, stress. None of them had ever asked her why she was like that. For a long time, Kevin hadn't either until he was old enough to realise that for every problem there was a cause.

*"You were too young, Kevin my love. We've just got to get on with it. We'll manage. It's just between you and me, OK?"*

When they'd moved out of Shipley Street, the only thing Kevin got beside the room in Khan's attic was his mum's old, red Golf that had sat in someone's garage for seven years after she'd lost her licence. Kevin had asked Walid who was working at Gordon's Motors to check it over and fix the sat nav. It had twin exhausts, a special steering wheel and the ancient satnav device stuck to the windscreen had been loaded with a Joanna Lumley voice-over

Using the car for Khan's work was unusual. Normally, it was an envelope to the Minhaj-ul-Quran mosque in Birmingham, train ticket paid for, a box to a house in Swindon, bus fare paid or an envelope for someone who'd meet him outside Starbucks at Paddington Station.

Wazir was such a long time that Kevin wondered if he should wait in the car but Cass was still playing on his mind. Cass would have stuck it out. Cass would have shrugged and put up with it.

Cass and Kevin had played together, been to school together, shared thoughts together and only Kevin had been there when Cass caught the bus to the airport carrying his small bag of clothes and the parcel from Khan. Cass would have been nineteen now, almost a year older than Kevin.

"Don't tell anyone where I'm going, Kevs. Promise?" Cass had said.

"You're such a bad boy, Cass," Kevin had said.

They had always called each other bad boy. Bad boys told bad, un-Islamic jokes. about terrorists, beards and women in hijab and niqab. Bad boys bought ham sandwiches from the Shell garage and greasy pork sausages and chips at the Park Street Chippie, shared naughty pictures on phones and dodged prayers on Fridays. Being a bad boy was what had kept them close.

"Where are you going, Cass?"

"Turkey, Kevs. I'm going to Istanbul. It's on the Bosphorus. The bridge between Europe and Asia."

"Waah! That's so cool. Genuine bad boy stuff."

Wazir eventually returned carrying a small box wrapped in brown paper and Kevin finally left Montrose Crescent with Wazir's words still ringing in his ears. "Lose this and you're in big trouble, fella. Got it?"

Kevin's day was to get worse.

Half an hour outside Edinburgh, the car's engine misfired and Walid's words of caution started ringing in Kevin's ear. "*I wouldn't take this old wreck too far, Kevs. And don't rely on that sat nav.*"

The sat nav had suggested a short cut through the hills and Kevin took the advice because the scenery looked more interesting than around Shipley Street and Park Road. The road wound upwards, higher and higher and the scenery was interesting but the weather was deteriorating. It went from rain to sleet and then to heavy snow and that's when Kevin's old Golf gave up completely and died. Neither was there a phone signal.

So, with dire warnings from both Khan and Wazir about urgent parcels ringing in his ears, the snow piling up, night drawing on and the temperature near freezing, Kevin started to panic.



## CHAPTER 5

### **While Kevin was shivering in Scotland, Cass had moved on from Turkey.**

Things had happened. A ten day trip had turned into two long years but in two years, events had turned him from a boy into a man, but a man can still feel lonely and in need of someone to listen to him describe what had happened and why and to help him understand.

Cass had decided long ago that when the chance came, he'd need to start his explanation with how he'd felt as a seventeen-year-old living around Park Road, a poor, predominantly Moslem inner-city area, on a depressingly grey and wet Saturday afternoon.

He'd become so bored listening to a Tamer Hosny CD in his cramped bedroom that, despite the weather, he'd crept downstairs, checked that his mother and grandmother were distracted by the TV, opened the front door and wandered away from the narrow, vehicle-blocked, Victorian brick cul de sac that was Shipley Street.

His short-cut black hair and his teenage stubble that he might, but probably wouldn't, have allowed to grow into something bigger like Shafiq's, was getting wetter by the minute. His trainers were wet through, his black jeans saturated at the ankles and his black nylon jacket was zipped to his neck to keep out the wind that swirled at the junction with Brick Street.

Two years ago, Cass had felt he was being swept along by an uncontrollable tide with no sense of purpose or direction. He'd passed no-one he knew. No Kamal, Mo, Shafiq, Winston or Kevin. Two years on and Cass could still remember how he'd felt that Saturday afternoon. It was as if he was the only person left alive.

But then he'd stopped outside Faisal World Travel and looked in. Stuck to the window were coloured cards in fluorescent pink, yellow and green. '*Cheap Flights - Barcelona, Paris, Amsterdam*'. Cass checked them all because he'd just become the proud holder of a British passport.

He'd always wanted a passport but living in Shipley Street, meeting up with Kevs to stack shelves with tins of processed peas and sardines in Bashir's shop after school or playing pool down at the Youth Centre with Kevs, Mo, Kaff, Wills or Hass why would he need one? Cass's mum didn't know but getting a passport had become a private obsession since Mo had shown him his. A passport was needed to explore the world beyond Shipley Street and experience new things, new people, new places, new ideas and new beliefs. It was the route to learning and understanding the truth about what was really going on, the

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