

PROLOGUE

THORNY BRAMBLES TORE AT the little girl's face as she ran desperately away.

She wiped blood from her temple and sprinted faster, shredding the skin from her bare feet on the bristly undergrowth of the forest floor. The ground beneath was solid, baked by an overwhelming heat that rose heavily from the earth. She had never experienced anything like it.

Where am I?

Where's Mum? I was with her yesterday.

He was gaining on her, this man. She could hear twigs snapping behind, her name being called. She didn't believe the concern in his voice.

He'd told her he owned her.

She cried out, shrieking for her mother until her voice cracked.

There must be someone who can hear?

She wasn't certain there was.

The smells were different here: exhaust fumes, manure and sweat.

The van had stopped abruptly, and when the back doors had been flung open she'd taken her chance, surprising them; lashing out and breaking free.

Her pursuer was relentless. She had caught a glimpse of him as she'd fled. Heavy-set, balding, with gleaming gold rings on his left hand.

She burst out of the forest, the darkness fading, and was confronted by a sight that evaporated any scrap of hope.

Open fields.

Stretching far into the distance. Green, brown and yellow.

Nowhere to hide.

The realization hit her like the heat had.

It was over. No escape.

She turned aggressively, determined not to be taken. She'd learned how to fight on the toughest estate in Bradford, but he gave her no chance. Before she'd locked eyes with her captor, he kicked her legs from underneath her. She hit the ground hard and a sack was thrown over her, overwhelming her with the smell of potatoes, rough fibres scratching her skin.

Unable to see, she lashed out, screaming wildly, but he grabbed the sack and began dragging her back the way she had come.

Then he stopped and she felt him straddle her, knees digging into her sides, his bulk pinning her to the forest floor. Jagged splinters pierced her skin, drawing blood.

Strong hands seized her neck through the rough fabric.

A sudden sharp scratch in her arm and it all came flooding back: she had felt this before.

A blackness invaded her vision and the world began to spin as the sound of her attacker's heavy breathing grew fainter. His words, in a language she didn't understand, floated away.

The grip around her neck relaxed, the coarse sensation of the sack across her face faded and a sudden warmth enveloped her.

A nightmare.

That was all.

She opened her eyes, her head heavy and spinning.

Girl Zero

The darkness was absolute, the atmosphere thick, the air rancid and damp. She called out, her voice echoing, alien and frightened.

Not a nightmare.

She moved to stand but it made her feel more vulnerable, like she might somehow be seen, so she cowered, huddling her arms around her knees despite the heat.

She tried to scan the room – to make anything out in the dark. There was nothing; escape seemed impossible.

The dark had always terrorized her. At night her mother had left a bedside lamp on so she wouldn't be afraid.

A pernicious, crippling fear was making her breathless.

I'm going to die here.

She clamped her eyes shut and imagined she was at home, in the darkness of the cupboard below the stairs where her mother sometimes sent her when she was bad.

She started to cry – slowly at first, before hysterical sobs took over.

Then, everything changed.

A voice to her left. Young, like hers.

'Don't worry,' it whispered, 'you're not alone.'

ONE

Eleven years later

ANOTHER MURDER IN BRADFORD.

Another.

Detective Inspector Harry Virdee had taken the call an hour ago, a far from unusual event for a Monday morning.

Damn city was killing itself; killing him.

Why today?

Bad karma. No, the worst karma. Like disturbing a minute's silence for the dead.

Shit, he was getting more and more superstitious every day. He'd known this would happen when he married Saima.

What's next, Harry? Avoiding walking under ladders, fearing the number thirteen?

Bradford didn't appear to care for karma, Harry's or its own.

Gotham. That's still what the papers were calling it. It hadn't helped that the article had gone viral.

Pissed Harry right off.

He checked the time on the dashboard.

03:50.

He had left home shortly after receiving the call, but wasn't at the murder scene yet. Instead he was parked outside a house four miles away in Ravenscliffe, one of the most deprived areas of the city. Residents here were a third more likely to receive government benefits and crime was out of control.

Harry's team were regulars around here.

The occupants of number 19 Belle Avenue had never been interested in benefits.

Barry King had been a postman. His wife, Sheila, was a dinner lady. They'd both been signed off work.

Clinical depression, after losing their only son. Michael, nineteen at the time, had attempted to rob Harry's father's corner shop. The robbery had gone badly.

Wild arterial spray.

Harry had gone to his mother's defence and stabbed a pair of scissors into Michael's throat. Worse still, he'd got away with it. The guilt had been suffocating him for the last twenty years. One way or another it needed dealing with, and he knew the process started with the short journey through a rusted gate and up the footpath to a green door.

To tell Mr and Mrs King what? That he was sorry?

For which part?

That their son had joined a bad crowd?

Or that Harry had allowed someone else to take the blame for a murder he had committed?

He switched off the engine of his ageing BMW and removed the keys. His eyes lingered on his keyring, a picture of his one-year-old son, Aaron. He smiled at the image, then glanced at two unopened presents on the passenger seat.

Today was Diwali, the Indian New Year where gifts were exchanged and candles lit as a reminder that light would always overcome dark. Harry was no longer a practising Sikh but he entertained the tradition as his wife was determined to fuse their different backgrounds, which meant celebrating everything – as much for their son as to prove their families wrong about their marriage.

Girl Zero

Harry glanced at the house.

You put the lights out in there for ever.

What if Aaron got involved with a bad crowd? And it cost him his life?

Is that fair? Is that reasonable?

'Fuck,' he whispered and ran his hand over his face, scratching at thick stubble. 'Argh,' he said and clamped his eyes shut. 'Why do you keep doing this? Let it go. Let it fucking go.'

It was no coincidence Harry had ended up working in HMET, the Homicide Major Enquiry Team, in Bradford.

Trying to correct his karma.

His colleagues thought he was just obsessive. They didn't know.

Only one person knew the truth: his brother Ronnie, who had taken the blame and gone to prison for Michael King's murder. It was a decision that had shaped the rest of his life.

Two decades on, Ronnie Virdee was the most powerful criminal in Bradford, the head of a cartel that controlled the supply of drugs on the city streets . . .

Harry focused on the door.

Maybe tomorrow?

Diwali. New beginnings.

New choices.

Harry started the car and pulled away from the house, heading towards the murder scene.

Wapping School had been built in 1877, on the fringes of the city centre. Like much of the city, the school had decayed into ruin.

Harry parked beside two patrol cars. He glanced towards the night sky, black like the soot soiling the once-impressive Victorian building.

A dead body here. It felt symbolic.

He got out of the car, opened the boot and pushed aside a fifty-shot firework. Bonfire night was two days away but he'd planned to surprise his wife and light the firecracker tonight. Saima might

have been thirty-five, three years younger than Harry, but she still reverted to an excitable child at the mention of fireworks. More importantly, it was the perfect way to celebrate their first Diwali with Aaron.

He slipped on a raincoat, grabbed his SOCO suit and a torch. Beside them was a large black holdall that contained Harry's bulletproof vest and an illegal stun-gun – gifts from Harry's brother and permanent reminders that he was walking a glass tightrope, one apt to break at any moment.

You get him to stop, there is no other choice.

Harry closed the boot and leaned against the car. He saw the outline of a uniformed officer coming his way. A patrol bobby – first responder.

'Morning, Detective Inspector.'

Harry acknowledged him with a nod and got the headlines. DS Gemma Eccles was inside. She'd been the one to call him in.

He walked behind the PC, shining his torch up on to a building in woeful condition, the metal fencing around its perimeter breached in many places. The school had been derelict for years. Like so many heritage sites in Bradford, it had fallen into disrepair and simply been left to rot.

Harry focused on a white plaque by the entrance.

Wapping First School.

A vandal had spray-painted a red line through the first word and scrawled *Pakis First School*.

Harry stepped through a gaping hole where the entrance had once been, into a graveyard of broken dreams. The roof was missing, moonlight shining into the room. Dark, unsettling graffiti across the walls showed a veiled Islamic woman crying, her cowering body surrounded by what looked like skinheads. The school might once have been a refuge for vulnerable kids from the local area; now the place was infected by a dank misery.

Harry and the PC picked their way carefully across a floor strewn with old needles, used condoms and pornographic magazines. There were dead rats and the carcass of what might have been a cat.

Girl Zero

Dust swirled, forcing the taste of abandonment down the men's throats.

With deep unease, Harry arrived at the far end of the building: a disused swimming pool. Now simply a pit in the ground, twenty metres by ten, one end filled with rubble from a partially collapsed ceiling.

In the centre, lying awkwardly across the bottom, was a body.
A murder case on the morning of Diwali.

Harry was briefed by his DS, listening as the ghoulish atmosphere of the place crept into his mind. An anonymous tip had led first responders to the body, but the caller hadn't stuck around. Harry moved away and lowered himself gingerly into the pit while Eccles finished her speech.

He approached the body, shining his torch on the floor, taking care where he placed his feet.

Realizing that he had been involuntarily holding his breath, he let it out slowly, watching it form a white mist in the chill as he squatted beside the remains.

He glanced once again around the room before his eyes settled on her and made a familiar silent promise.

I'll find out who did this.

For you.

And for me, to balance my karma.

Harry focused on the victim: Asian female, five-six, petite, maybe size eight; long black hair chaotically strewn across her face. It was hard to place her age.

She was on her back with a large kitchen knife sticking out of her chest.

Harry reached forward and shone his torch directly on the body.

Deep red stains on her white top.

A gold bangle on her left wrist; a Kara; a religious symbol of Sikhism.

Not stolen.

Harry had worn one for many years before he'd opted out of the Sikh faith.

He crouched beside the body, took a pen from his jacket pocket and used it to carefully move the girl's hair aside.

The blood drained from Harry's face and he felt unstable, as if the pool had suddenly begun to fill with water.

He knew that face.

A pain detonated hot and deep in his chest. He looked away, releasing a wounded cry. The victim was Harry's niece; daughter of the city's most dangerous man.

Bradford had been in perilous situations before, but it had seen nothing like the storm that was about to hit.

This murder would unleash the wrath of two brothers.

One who enforced the rules.

And one who made his own.