

FERAL YOUTH

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GLOSSARY OF 'STREET' SLANG TERMS

A bag	A thousand pounds
Bait	Blatant, conspicuous
Bare	Lots, lots of
Bennies	Speed, crystal meth
Big man tings	Man's business, serious stuff
A bill	A hundred pounds
Blud	Very close friend
Bone	Spliff, joint
Boxed	Beaten up
Bredrin	Very close friend
Bumbaclot	Highly insulting term, derived from Jamaican slang for 'bum cloth' or tampon
Busted	Arrested
Buzz	Crap, rubbish, disgusting
Clapped	Ugly
Clink	Prison, jail, Young Offender Institution
Creps	Trainers
Crow	Weed, marijuana
Cuz	Very close friend
Deela	Drug dealer (near the top of the food chain)
Draw	Weed, marijuana
Dubz	Graffiti
Endz	Territory, postcode, neighbourhood
Fam	Very close friend
Food	Drugs
(One) G	A thousand pounds
Gwop	Wad of notes (money)
Hyped	Agitated, psyched, 'on it'
Ice	Diamond jewellery, 'bling'
Jezzie	Prostitute
Key	Kilogram (of drugs)
Kiss my teeth	Disrespecting someone
Mandem	Group of men, typically gang members
Merked	Knifed, stabbed, seriously injured
Nabbed	Arrested
Notes	Money
Lick	Beat up

Niner	Gun (9mm)
p's	Money
Paigon	Disloyal person
Pen	Prison, jail, Young Offender Institution
Peng	Pretty
Piece	Gun
Q	Quarter-ounce of marijuana
Real talk	Serious conversation
Rep, repping	Represent, representing, exerting power over
Rims	Car
Screws	Prison guards
Shanked	Knifed, stabbed
Shotter	Drug dealer on the streets (low in the food chain)
Shubz	Party
Sket	Prostitute
Slump	Beat up
Smarties	Pills, e.g. Ecstasy
Snake	Disloyal person
Split	Run off
Strap	Gun
Ting	Thing, often code for gun, weapon
Tonked	'Built', muscular
Undies	Undercover policemen
Wasteman	Waster, loser
Wheels	Car
Whip	Car
Whipped on	Crazy for
Yardie	Jamaican
Yat	Girl
Z	An ounce of marijuana

TEXT SPEAK

BRB	Be right back
WBU?	What 'bout you?
WUU2?	What you up to?

1

Reggie Bell is dead. He was seventeen. JJ says we saw him get shanked last night, but really and truly, I didn't see nothing. It was all just a blur of hoods – a mad whoosh in the darkness.

I heard it, though. Reckon half of South heard Reggie Bell die. It was the kind of noise a cat would make if it got stretched and stretched 'til it snapped. Then nothing. JJ says that's when Reggie died. He says the blood was leaking out of his body from the slit in his neck and when there was two pints all over the road, that's when he died. JJ knows about things like that. He learnt more stuff in the Young Offenders' than I learnt in the whole of year 10.

'Alesha?'

I keep on ripping strips off my exercise book, watching the tiny curls float their way to the floor.

'*Alesha?*'

I let out this big sigh and drag my eyes up to Mrs Page's face. When it comes to jarring teachers, Mrs Page ain't the worst at Pembury High, but she's up there.

'Why do you think George shot Lennie at the end?'

My shoulders lift up and I let out a long, loud sigh. The rest of the class is watching, waiting for me to say something rude.

'Coz he was a paedo, miss?'

Laughter travels round the classroom. I smirk, getting back to ripping strips off my book. I'm nearly at the margin now, which is filled with jaggedy biro scribbles.

'Alesha, that's not funny.' Mrs Page stares at me, her head sticking out like she's one of them long-necked birds. 'Do you know who George and Lennie are? Have you actually read this book?'

'Yeah,' I lie.

I ain't read the book. I got about three sentences in and then I gived up coz the page was filled with complex words. Honestly, I thought this Lennie man was wrong in the head coz Mrs Page kept banging on about him stroking rabbits and such. That's why I said he was a paedo – it weren't even a proper joke.

‘Then I’ll ask you one last time,’ says Mrs Page, staring me out. ‘Why do you think George shot Lennie?’

I ping my ruler against the desk, trying to come up with a good reply. Jokes is the best way. I ain’t gonna be one of them losers who just stares back at the teacher like a goldfish, saying I don’t know. You do that, you lose all your respect.

‘Coz he was pissed off with Lennie’s jarring questions,’ I say, making a point.

‘Right, that’s *enough*.’ Mrs Page does her crossed-arms, pouty mouth thing at me while another laugh ripples round the room. ‘And what is that mess on the floor?’

She’s losing it, I can tell. I just sit there and watch as she flings her arms about, eyes rolling in their sockets as she jabbars on.

Truth is, I don’t see how this book is gonna help me live my life. Is it gonna get me a flat? Is it gonna bring in the p’s so JJ don’t have to go thieving wallets for our food at night? What’s the point in talking about made-up killings in a made-up book when there’s real ones going on down the road? Mrs Page don’t know nothing about blood and shootings. Reggie Bell’s lying dead on a slab right now, bled dry through a slit in his neck. Knowing why George shot Lennie ain’t top of my priority list.

‘Pick up your stuff and swap places with Hailey,’ she says, finally. ‘I want you where I can *see* you.’

I slam my book shut, grabbing my bag and pushing past Hailey, who’s creeping through the room like a spider. I’m thinking about busting straight through the door and out the school gates, but then I remember just in time that I’m seeing Miss Merfield at lunch so I drop into Hailey’s old seat and flip open my shredded book.

‘George shot Lennie out of *kindness*,’ says Mrs Page, looking over my head.

I zone out, turning towards the window. Crystal Palace tower looks faint today on account of the drizzly rain. You can’t even see the flashing light on top.

I watched the news this morning, thinking *rah, maybe Reggie’s gonna be on TV*. No sign. I looked at the front of the newspapers on the way

to school. No sign. That's how much they care. A black seventeen-year-old getting shanked in south London – that ain't news. That's just the way it is. Me and JJ, we joke that no one round here knows what it's like to see their twentieth birthday. Maybe it ain't jokes after all.

I feel eyes on the side of my face and I turn to see Shalina Amlani looking down her giant nose at me. I hate Shalina Amlani. It ain't just the way she looks at me – it's who she is. Her affiliations. Shalina's brothers roll tight with SE5, the crew that killed Reggie last night. Reggie was one of us; one of the Peckham Crew. The beef between the Peckham Crew and SE5 runs deep.

Shalina squints her lashes in my direction and then spins back to Mrs Page, flicking her oily black hair like she's won something over me. Like I'm dirt. *Bitch*. She don't even know what went down last night. She probably heard some hyped up version from the mandem but she don't know the truth. She ain't seen what I seen.

Thinking about that noise again, I remember Jamila, Reggie's sister. She was in the year below me at Langdale Girls', the last school I was at. We never rolled tight, but we'd check for each other. I hope she don't get told how it happened. I hope she don't hear about the blood spurting in the air like a burst water pipe or the way they run off and left him. I hope she don't find out it was one of ours who set things off by stepping on SE5 turf – that if it weren't for Kingsley Wright getting over-hyped and leading the mandem through the bit of Kestrel Estate where the exit's blocked off for road works then her brother would still be alive. Some things, you don't need to know.

I feel Shalina's eyes on my face again and I turn, proper slow, feeling the pressure build up in my veins. She's looking at Mrs Page but her head's tilted sideways and I know she can see me. She *knows* I know she can see me. Feels like it's only a matter of time before things kick off.

'This dream of getting their own place, living off the land...'

I tune in, then out again. I got dreams. I wanna get my own place. Ain't gonna happen, though. Social Services don't even know I exist.

The bitch is playing me. She's waiting for me to break. I ain't

gonna break. I'm just gonna sit here staring at the side of her ugly face 'til she turns and then I'm gonna make sure she knows who's dirt.

‘...true friendship throughout the book...’

Shalina ain't got no clue. She don't know what's coming to her and her bredrin. SE5, they made a big mistake shanking Reggie Bell last night. Big mistake. Maybe they thought he was just one of the youngsters, someone they could shank to get back at Kingsley for breezing through. Maybe they couldn't see properly in the dark. Or maybe they knew exactly who he was. Maybe they *knew* his cuz was Tremaine Bell.

Tremaine Bell runs the Peckham Crew. He got put away for dealing, years back, but he still runs the Crew from inside. He's still the most feared and respected gangsta in the endz.

Tremaine getting done for dealing was jokes, given what he done up 'til then. He put a man in a coma for linking with his girl. He cut the ear off some shotter who couldn't pay up. He's known for rearranging people's faces with scalpels and wire-clippers and rusty blades and he chops fingers off people who ain't to his liking – at least, he did before he got chucked in the pen. Now he gets the mandem to do it for him. Tremaine Bell is nasty work. SE5 killed his cuz. This means there's gonna be trouble. Shalina Amlani and her crew need to watch their step.

I'm still staring at the side of her face, waiting for her to turn round. I've got this itchy feeling under my skin. It's like my blood's too hot, expanding inside me, moving too fast in my veins. I feel like I'm gonna burst with rage. I hate Shalina Amlani. I *bate* her. I hate her brothers and cousins and everyone else that comes from the wrong side of Peckham Road.

Mrs Page starts handing out bits of lined paper, walking between us and causing me to break my stare. I blink, reach into my pencil case and pull out the metal straw JJ gived me last year, when he was still in school. He thieved it from a bar. Nabbed two: one for him to protect me, he said, and one for me to keep. He even scratched my initials on it with a compass. They ain't supposed to be pea-shooters, but that's what we use them for. I feel around for a BB pellet and slip

it inside, like JJ showed me. It's a perfect fit. I wait for Mrs Page to get a few rows back, then I aim and fire.

Chook. Straight into the side of Shalina's neck. Her whole body twitches like she's having a spasm, but only quickly. I see her hand shoot up, like she's gonna rub where it hurts, but then it drops back onto her desk and she sits up, tall and still. I tuck the pea-shooter away, pleased with my skills, and watch as this purple mark appears on her skin. Not much longer, I reckon, before she turns round and gives me the eye.

'Imagine you're setting off on a journey, like George and Lennie.' Mrs Page taps her way to the front. My eyes stay trained on Shalina.

The itching's getting worse. Feels like my skin's on fire. Shalina ain't turning round. It hurts, I know it, but she ain't gonna show me how much. The purple's spreading up her greasy-brown skin and I think about Reggie, lying there under the shower of his own blood, feeling himself drain away in the dark. Any minute now, I think, she's gonna side-eye me or rub the mark... but she just sits there, looking up at Mrs Page as the woman spouts her stuff.

'Remember what we said about narrative. Alesha?'

I ain't looking at Mrs Page. I'm keeping an eye on the bitch next to me. My body's shaking with too much anger – too much hatred for this yat.

'Alesha?'

I let out this long, hot breath through my nose, catch the eye of Mrs Page and pick up my pencil. Then I get back to staring at Shalina.

She's hunched over now, writing her words like a good girl. That riles me. She's just pretending like everything's cool, even though there's this giant purple stain creeping up her neck. I'm shooting daggers at the side of her face but she's fronting it.

Seconds later, she straightens up, her eyes scanning left to right like she's checking her work, even though there can't be more than one line on that page. I feel the hate building up inside me as I lean on my own blank sheet, a ball of fire burning inside my belly. As I watch, Shalina folds the sheet in half, then in half again, then again so it fits in her hand. Then she turns sideways and flicks it onto my desk,

giving me this look that I can't hardly describe. I swear, it's like she ain't got no cares in the world. Like she's so happy right now, she don't even notice the hurt in her neck.

I flip open the note, clocking the shakiness of my hands. I'm like a petrol bomb being held over a flame.

How does it feel to be on the losing side? Loser.

The bomb explodes. I don't know what happens but I hear this yelp and the screech of chairs on the floor and then Mrs Page's voice above my head. I can taste dirt on my tongue and my head's pinned to the ground and some yats sitting on my back and all around me is shoes – scuffed black shoes, kicking dust and grit in my face. I can hear dripping, right next to my ear. I twist my head and see a dark, red puddle a few centimetres away. Shalina's blood. That's when I notice the pencil in my hand. That's when I work out what I done.

2

‘Barry?’ The voice screeches through the flat, hurting my ears. ‘Barry, are we goin’ out?’

I look at JJ, who closes his eyes for a second, taking an extra-long toke on the draw before passing me the spliff.

‘Barry?’

I quickly push the joint back into JJ’s hands and get up off the settee. ‘I’ll go.’

‘Barry, is that you?’ The mad old bag’s already on her feet by the time I get to the bedroom.

‘You ain’t going nowhere,’ I say, taking her hand and getting her back in the chair. ‘Too hot outside.’

‘Who are you?’

I do my nicest smile. She asks me that every time, even though I been cotching on the floor here nearly a year. Deep down, I know she don’t like me. She’s suspicious of me, on account of the colour of my skin. She can’t help it, she’s just old. JJ’s mixed race – white mum, black dad, same as me – but she makes allowances for him coz he’s blood fam. Me, I’m just some dark kid she don’t wanna know.

‘I’m Alesha. Jayden’s mate.’

‘Get offa me! Lemme go! We’re goin’ out. Where’s Barry?’

There’s a trick to dealing with batty types. They’re like kids. You gotta distract them so they forget about whatever it is they’re whining about, then you get some peace and quiet. Barry’s dead. He’s been dead for long. But I ain’t gonna tell her that.

‘You hungry, nan?’ She ain’t my real nan. She ain’t even JJ’s nan – she’s his mum’s nan – but she’s been nan to me ever since I knew JJ, which is nearly all my life. ‘Want a biscuit?’

She looks like she’s thinking about it, then she squints at me, all confused.

‘Who are you?’

I tell her again, then offer her the biscuit again and this time she holds it all in her rattly old brain long enough to answer the question.

I grab a custard cream from the pack we keep hidden in her cupboard, where she never goes coz she thinks it's full of Barry's stuff. (It ain't. It's full of stolen garmz and food and draw and sometimes money, if we got any spare. We sold Barry's stuff to Sanjay at the market, years ago.)

'You ain't taken your pill.' I point to the little pink tablet on the arm of the chair. Who knows if it's today's or yesterday's, or maybe some other day's. I swear she's spitting them out and putting them back in the box. They ain't running out like they should be. Maybe that's why she's losing it in the head so quick.

I stay with her 'til she's nodding off in her chair, biscuit crumbs all down her front. JJ catches my eye as I come back in the room. He ain't one for words, but I know what he means. He means *Thanks*.

There ain't no need for JJ to thank me. I can spend the rest of my life looking after his nan and I still ain't done owing him – not after what he done for me. Me and JJ roll tight. JJ's the only fam I got.

Bare people I know, they call each other 'fam' and 'blud' like they're so close they don't know each other from real blood. Like they'd do anything for each other. That's what Twitch and Lol and Smalls is like at the Shack – *yeab blud, no blud, for real blud*. It ain't like they're lying, they just can't see that if it comes to it, they'd rather protect themselves than take one for their bredrin. They say they got your back, when really they're only watching their own. But for me and JJ it's different. I know, coz he proved it by doing six months in the Young Offenders' for me.

I come over all shaky with rage, thinking about that time. I hate the fedz and their stupid rules. I hate the way they can pin you against the railings like they did to me and JJ and tell you: *empty your pockets*. I hate how they look down on you, how they get all smart-ass and talk to you like you're dirt. I hate how they don't listen when you try and tell them you're carrying a knife for *protection*, not coz you wanna cause trouble. No one *wants* to get locked up in the pen. No one *wants* to carry a blade. We do it coz we can't defend ourselves if we don't.

They don't even pretend to listen. They enjoy watching us get sent to that place – the place where you ain't allowed phones or gum or

posters or magazines or even a picture in your room. The place where they feel you up as you walk through every doorway; where they watch you through mirrors and cameras; where the shitters ain't got no seats on and the food comes on paper plates with plastic forks that fall apart in your mouth.

That's what JJ went through for me when he jumped at me in the Stop and Search. He pushed the blade out my hand and told the fedz both knives was his. No point in two of us doing time, he figured. *That's* what he did for me. That's why I know I can trust him more than anyone else on this earth and that's why I ain't never gonna complain about looking after his nan when he ain't feeling it. I owe him a lifetime of favours.

JJ hands me the ends of the draw – nothing more than a few flakes of red-hot ash falling through my fingers. I take the last puff and stub it out, looking down as Geebie appears at our feet, tail wagging madly.

'What's up with you?' I push him over and rub his hot little belly, how he likes it. 'You wanna go out? You wanna bad up some more little dogs?'

Two days ago, Geebie – short for GBH on account of his first owner – went for this other Staffie owned by some kid on the estate. JJ had him on the lead, but the lead wasn't enough to stop the killer instinct. JJ says they was dragged together so quick he practically headbutted the other kid. He pulled back just in time, but not in time to stop Geebie tearing a hole in the other dog's ear. Lucky for both of them they're quick on their feet. One of these days, that dog's gonna get us in trouble.

JJ joins us on the floor and gets the dog in this proper state. Soon Geebie's panting and rolling and making a play for whatever comes near and it's only when JJ pushes me backwards I realise the dog was going for my new Burberry belt. JJ only got it for me last week.

He laughs as I pick myself up, his big, wide lips peeling apart in a way that don't happen so much after his time inside.

'Comes, let's take him out.'

JJ grabs the lead while I look around for the keys.

'Y'alright, nan?' he yells as we head. 'Later.'

He always does that – always talks to his nan like she’s all there, even though he knows she ain’t. If the other kids could see him now, they’d think he was messing. On the streets, JJ reps the endz. He was stealing rims before his time in the Young Offenders’. He’s boxed up bare kids and he ain’t afraid of stepping to no one if they show him disrespect. But he’s got a soft side. I see it when he’s with his nan. I see it when it’s just us. Not all the time, just glimpses.

We take the stairs, even though they smell of piss. At least with stairs you can scatter if you come face-to-face with the wrong types. In the lift, you’re a target. It’s mainly tinies round here, but from time to time you get the mandem paying a visit. That’s the thing about tower blocks; you can’t tell who’s round the corner.

The authorities don’t know we’re cotching in JJ’s nan’s flat. If they knew, they’d move us out. That’s what they do. They take you away from the only fam you know and put you with a bunch of strangers in endz you don’t know. It happened to JJ bare times. Care home, foster home, care home, foster home. The only place he ever called home was Winford Court with Mrs Jenkins. He was there for two years. She was a good woman: strict but kind, like a real mum. That was a crazy flat. It was filled with all the most noisiest and troublesome types, but it was JJ’s home. Then they told Mrs Jenkins she was too old for fostering and the next week they emptied out that flat and scattered the yoots across the endz. JJ’s new mum was a bitch. That’s why we’re up here with JJ’s nan. Nan looks after us with her benefits and we look after her with the food and the washing and that. We got it all worked out. It gets jarring from time to time, fetching this, wiping that, saying things over and over, but at the end of the day, it’s JJ’s nan. She’s all the blood fam he’s got left – except his blood mum, if she’s even still alive. JJ don’t talk about that crackhead no more.

‘I been hearing things, Roxy.’

‘What things?’ I look sideways at JJ, a faint grin tugging at my lips. Roxy’s the name he calls me when I done something bad. It comes from when we used to mess about on the estate, chucking balls at windows and that. This old woman on the first floor, Mrs Adeyemi, she had it in for me badly. Used to scream and shout and threaten to

call the boydem when I showed my face. This spurred me on more. I'd put stones through her letterbox, roll her plant pots down the walkway and lay out scraps from the bins on her windowsill to attract the pigeons. Then one day she did call the boydem. They cornered me and tried to pin an ASBO on me. But then JJ stepped in. He said it was my sister doing all the mischief, not me. 'Sister?' said the officer, looking confused. 'Who's that, then?' JJ's eyes travelled to the pile of rocks I'd heaped up outside Mrs Adeyemi's door that morning. 'Rocks...' he looked at the officer. 'Roxy.' It didn't work, but the name stuck. It still makes me bubble up inside when I hear it.

'Everyone's saying you been excluded.'

The bubbles pop. I get this cold shiver run through me as my mind flips back to classroom and I see the drip, drip, drip of Shalina's blood on the floor.

'Who's everyone?'

JJ pulls on the lead as the dog tries to fling itself down the steps. 'Lol heard it from Kai.'

I try and swallow but there ain't enough spit in my mouth. Kai's Lol's cuz. She's in the year above me at Pembury High. Lol's one of the boys down the Shack. I ain't thinking about Kai or Lol, though. I'm thinking about me.

'For how long?' says JJ.

I focus hard on the steps as my legs carry me down. I don't wanna meet JJ's eye.

'Forever.'

JJ don't say nothing. I keep on looking at the steps, trying to stop my mood from going into free-fall. I been excluded before. I got excluded so many times from Langdale Girls' I got transferred to Pembury High. Then I got excluded from Pembury High every time I did something bad. But this is different. This is me being chucked out the system for good.

Schools ain't supposed to chuck you out. They say you can come back if you spend how much time in isolation – all alone in a classroom with no other kids and different breaks and that. Truthfully, I don't mind it that much. When you been moved round

as much as I have, you don't get tight with the rest of the class. I got fam on the roads. I don't need no other fam. Maybe if I said sorry for what I done then I could do more time in isolation and then they'd let me go back for my Year 11 at Pembury High. But that ain't gonna happen. They ain't gonna let me back, coz I ain't gonna apologise to Shalina Amlani. I'd rather do ten years in isolation than that. Anyway, there's only one week left of term and then in September I'll be sixteen and they won't need to bother asking me back no more. Way they see it, I'm out of their hair and they're glad of it. Kids like me and JJ, they never wanted us in the first place.

We hit the street and I try and shift my thoughts onto something else, but it's like my brain's got other plans. All I can think about is the fact that on Monday I ain't got nowhere to go. Tuesday the same. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday... It's all over. No more school.

I never liked school, but it don't seem right that it can just end like that. One minute everyone's telling me what to do, where to stand, what to say, then the next they don't give a shit about nothing I do. Feels like I'm being cut loose.

I nearly let out some of the stuff in my head about my life and how I just wasted all them years and come out with no grades, no nothing – but then I suck it back in. JJ went through all this when he got kicked out – and worse. Ain't no point in saying what's already been said a million times. I hate school anyway. I hate the teachers. I hate the rules. I *hate* Shalina Amlani and the SE5 scum. I'm done with it. We both are. Me and JJ, we can look after ourselves.

The Shack's one of them council schemes where everything's big, shiny and new. In the yard there's bowls and ramps and rails for the skaters and inside there's settees and decks and a studio where you can lay down tracks. It's gotta cost bare p's to run and it ain't getting the numbers it should, but that's the council's fault for putting it where they did. They thought by putting it right on Peckham Road they'd get yoots from both the north and the south. SE5 and SE15. They probably thought *rah, job done, that's cleaned up our streets*. They don't understand. You ain't gonna get *nobody* crossing that road to come cotch at the Shack from SE5. The last person to step in these

endz from there got the side of his face sliced off.

There's dubz all over everything, but it's neat dubz with artwork and words, not like the type you get on Kestrel Estate. All round the skate park there's high metal railings with spikes on top and cameras looking down. I don't mind the cameras here, coz the Shack ain't the type of place where you're gonna get up to no mischief. Anyway, it's only Lazy doing the watching.

Lazy's the man who sits in the hut. We call him that coz of his lazy glass eye, not coz he's lazy, although I reckon he ain't the quickest in Peckham. Tell the truth, he don't need to be. The man's got fists the size of my head and arms like punch bags. Word is, it took six men to pin him down and scoop out his eye. Nobody knows what the fight was about. Ain't nobody brave enough to ask.

Lazy nods as Geebie yanks us through. I check for faces we know, but outside it's all just tinies. JJ ties the dog to the door and we cruise in, then I nearly head straight out again on account of this grinding noise that's blasting through the speakers. It's like someone's drilling into the mic. Vinny waves from behind the glass, all winks and smiles from under his cap as he shows some kid how to do something on the sliders.

Vinny's the youth worker. He's one of them ex-gang members gone clean. He rolled with some crew in North, but then his brother got shot dead so he changed his lifestyle and moved to South. He talks about it sometimes, takes his cap off and shows us the scar that runs all the way down one side of his shiny bald head. *Rab, you gotta keep out of gangs*, he says. It's different for us, though. We can't just move out the endz, just like that. If you're stuck in your endz, you're better off affiliating with a crew than going off on your own. Everyone knows that.

The grinding noise fades and a thumping bass kicks in, making the whole place shake. I lose my jacket and follow JJ to the pinball machine, which has got this mass of bodies clumped round it.

'What's good?' JJ breaks the circle and makes room for me.

Standing in front of us is this kid in a pair of white baggies and an over-big hoodie. You can't see his face coz it's hidden under a cap

and then another hood and then these white Skullcandy headphones, but we both know who it is. No need to see the shaved ginger head to know it's Twitch. You can spot him from Denmark Hill on account of his boosted designer labels. That and the jiggling about.

I reach up and swipe the headphones off his head. That gets his attention. He turns on me with his red piggy eyes, all hyped, then he sees who it is and drops his shoulders.

'Ite?' I yell. There's feedback coming through the speakers now. 'What's good?'

'You ain't heard?' he yells back.

'Heard what?'

Twitch is hopping about like he's been mainlining bennies. He's always like this – always jumpy, always busting the latest garmz, always running his mouth off. He's OK, for a street rat. You can't believe nothing he says and you can't trust him with none of your stuff unless you want it to disappear, but he's alright. I still count him as close.

'Heard what, blud?' JJ moves in.

Twitch looks at us like he can't believe we don't know. He even stops hopping for a sec.

'Tremain Bell,' he says. '*He's out.*'

3

‘You sure we gonna get in?’

JJ carries on walking. ‘I’m sure.’

‘How you sure?’

‘I know people.’

‘What people?’ I’m practically running to keep up. It ain’t easy, what with the high heels and the bling round my neck going jingle-jangle with every step.

‘Just people, alright?’

I ain’t gonna say no more. JJ affiliates with half the Peckham Crew, I ain’t got no doubts he knows people. Like me, JJ’s got connects – people he knows from the roads and that. I was just asking *what* people. It ain’t my style to turn up at a party without knowing who got me in. And this ain’t no average party. It’s a party for Tremaine Bell, the leader of the biggest gang in South. They’re holding a shubz in celebration of him getting out. There’s gonna be some names up Peregrine House tonight.

Peregrine House is a tower block, like all the other houses on Kestrel Estate. There’s three – Peregrine House, Falcon House and Merlin House. They all look exactly the same, like they’re made of giant grey Lego bricks that turn black at the bottom, with this mess of dubz all over the garage walls. The only difference is the types that hang there. Merlin House is mainly fast-talking white boys in boosted cars with blacked-out windows and gangsta rap blaring. Peregrine’s for yardies – the likes of Tremaine and the rest of the Crew. Falcon House is no-man’s land. It’s the one that’s closest to Peckham Road, so it gets used as a shortcut for all types – problem being, they got road works going on all summer, so the exit’s boarded up. That’s how Reggie Bell got killed. He got caught down a dead end with nowhere to run.

‘Wait up, blud,’ I call out. JJ’s leaving me behind.

He stops and turns round, barely looking at me as I catch up. Something ain’t right – I feel it. JJ never snubs me like that. I wanna

ask what's up, but I know this boy. He ain't the type to just say it.

'Rah, gonna be the whole crew there tonight.' That's my way of asking.

He don't reply.

'Gonna be big, man. What's the chances we get a visit from SE5?'

JJ just shrugs. I ain't getting' nowhere.

'Could get serious, fam. Reckon we should've got tooled up, you feel me?'

Nothing. It's starting to piss me off now.

'Reckon we should go back and get some? I got this vibe, you know? Like something's gonna kick off?'

'Alesha, *allow it!*'

I stop, practically falling off the pavement. His voice scares me. It ain't like a voice I ever heard before – not on JJ. That's the voice of an angry man. He ain't *never* talked to me like that, not in my whole life.

I keep walking, but this time I don't keep up – I leave a distance between us on purpose, getting slower and slower as we head for the shadows of Kestrel Estate. I got this sick feeling inside me, like I been poisoned. I ain't feeling this party no more. Something ain't right. The words of my old social worker pop into my head and I can't push them out. *That boy's too together. One of these days he's gonna explode – and you don't wanna be there when he does.*

I never believed her. Never believed nothing them social workers said. They didn't know JJ. All they knew was what they heard off other social workers. JJ had this rep as a thief and a bad boy, which was well-deserved, but that don't make him dangerous. This ain't no explosion, anyway, but it makes me think. Something's up. I don't know what, but something ain't right with JJ tonight.

I catch up with him on the stairs. He's stamping his way up like he's trying to punch a hole through every one of them concrete steps. I just follow on behind, thinking maybe I'll ask him when we get to the top.

Turns out I don't get to ask him no questions, coz at the top of the stairs is this scrawny ginger yoot dressed head to toe in Nike.

‘Ite?’ says Twitch, slotting in with us like he knew we was coming. JJ don’t even look up – just heads off along the walkway that leads to 204.

I follow the sound of the beat, too angry inside to say hi.

‘Sup, Alesha? You goin’ the drink-up?’

I shoot him a look for his dumb question. ‘Nah, blud. I’m up here for the views.’

Twitch just nods and falls in step like everything’s cool. There’s a giant yardie on the door of 204, all patterned hair, gold chains and this massive scar running down his neck. His arms don’t hardly fold across his chest for all the muscles.

‘Say, whaya bring?’

I pull out my Smirnoff. JJ must be already inside. I guess his rep was enough to get him in.

The man pockets my bottle and then stoops down, looking straight at Twitch, who’s jiggling from side to side next to me.

That’s when I see what’s going on. Twitch ain’t got nothing to bring, so he’s using me to get into the party. I ain’t cool with that. I ain’t cool with that at all.

The yardie don’t move. He just keeps on staring at Twitch until finally the boy starts digging around in his pocket and brings out this battered old phone. It’s an iPhone, but it ain’t the latest model and the screen’s all cracked, held together with tape.

The yardie takes the piece of junk, squinting and turning it over in his hand, slowly, so we get a good view of the Crew tat that runs all the way up his stacked arm. I can tell he ain’t impressed.

‘I’m with her,’ Twitch shrugs, like he don’t care what the yardie’s gonna do to him, which ain’t the case, I know it. This is big man territory.

The yardie swings round to stare at me, his eyes dark and suspicious. He’s so close I can hear the air coming and going through his nose.

‘Him come wid yuh?’ he snarls.

I’m pissed off with Twitch. I don’t like being used as a free entry ticket – especially when he don’t even ask me up-front. True, Twitch

don't have the easiest life, just like the rest of us. But that don't make it OK to use your bredrin to blag your way through doors.

I look away from the yardie's face, staring through the gold chains at the scar on his neck. It's thick and ugly, like a snake that's buried itself under his skin. I can't stop myself thinking, *rah, if that's what he come away with, what's left of the other man? What sort of lickings does this yardie get into?* I ain't pissed enough with Twitch to let him find out.

'Yeah, he's with me.'

Long seconds later, we're in the flat. I look around, clocking familiar faces straight away. Grindsman, a boy I know from the roads, is on the decks, wearing white sunglasses even though it's close to dark in here and the air's thick with smoke. In the kitchen by the bottles of spirits I clock Squeak, another boy I count as close, and scattered about is elders JJ knows from the Crew. On the settee, surrounded by jezzies in push-up bras is this tonked yardie who looks like one of them bodybuilders on the TV. I know who it is, but he don't know me. Even after how many years I recognise Tremaine Bell's crooked nose and mean-looking eyes.

No sign of JJ. *Whatever*, I think to myself. He can take his beef someplace else. I got my own to be dealing with.

'Wasteman!' I yell in Twitch's ear. The beat's so loud I can't hardly hear my own voice.

'Appreciate that,' he yells back, ignoring my tone. He's already looking around, scanning the place like he's looking for things he can steal.

'I don't like being taken for a ride.'

He looks up at me from under his cap and nods, all solemn for about a second before he gets back to jiggling.

This jars me some more, but I ain't got the energy to push it. Thing is with Twitch, you know you ain't gonna get nothing back from him as he ain't got nothing to give. And you ain't gonna teach him a lesson coz he already knows all the lessons – he just don't apply them to himself.

'Get me a drink,' I snap, watching him bounce off, his knees working double time inside the baggy jeans. His story ain't all that

different to JJ's, what with the crackhead mum and foster homes and care and that. He's been living on floors since he was ten. But they turned out different, JJ and Twitch. JJ's got a rep as a thief, but the way he plays it, that's a skill. Twitch thieves too – but in a bad way. He's known as a boy who takes anything from anyone, even fam. JJ hangs out with the big men and busts the latest threads, wearing this look on his face the whole time like he's cool as ice. Twitch just looks like he's gonna piss his pants.

The music's so loud it's hurting my ears, so I move to the concrete ledge that's stuck to the side of the flat. There's bare people out here – enough to bring down the whole thing, I reckon, but right now I'm too hyped to care if it does. I'm angry at Twitch, but mainly I'm angry at JJ. He ain't got no right to talk to me like that. He snubbed me, back there. If it was anyone else, I wouldn't care, but this is JJ. This is fam.

I squeeze through the doors just as half the mandem come barging through the other way, all swagger and big talk. It riles me some more the way they look through me, but I ain't gonna mouth off at the mandem. Anyway, I get it. I'm invisible in these parts. I ain't one of the boys, but I ain't one of the girls neither, coz I don't do the whole high heels and hot pants thing. Makeup, yes. Nice gold hoops, yes. Tight plastic top and thong showing? Nah. I hate them jizzie types. The girl two doors down from my mum, name of Shakira, was a jizzie. She didn't get no respect. Didn't care who did what to her, that girl. Seriously, I'd rather have a rep as a brawler than a rep as a sket.

'Oi!' Someone bundles past me, following the boys back inside. 'Oi, watch y'self, blud.'

I stumble back against the grey bricks, making way for whatever's kicking off inside. The mandem's turned round and they're squaring up to the one who's stepping to them. My heart picks up speed. He's got his back to me, but I know them shoulders. I know the shape of them cornrows.

'What?' The biggest of the group gives JJ this slow, meaningful look and I get this hollowed-out feeling inside me. He's dressed in black and he's got these little marks shaved into his eyebrow. I know

that man. It's Kingsley Wright – the one who led the mandem through Kestrel Estate and got Reggie Bell killed.

JJ just stands there, don't seem to care who he's talking to. 'You just disrespected the girl.' He jabs his thumb over his shoulder at me.

I freeze up. There's six of them and one of him and this Kingsley man's got a rep as a dangerous type.

'Comes, then.' Kingsley straightens up and steps to JJ.

I shrink back into the shadows, not wanting need to see what happens. I seen it too many times.

'Apologise.'

'Yeah blud, for what?' Kingsley's got a mad glint in his eye. I'm shaking now. Don't know what to do. I want JJ to stop but I know there ain't no point in me getting involved.

'For your attitude.'

'Jokes, bruv.' Kingsley laughs. His boys give each other side-smirks like JJ's said something dumb.

JJ don't move. I watch him from behind; see his shoulders lift as he puffs himself up. I feel my stomach dissolve inside of me. I know what happens next. This is gonna get messy and the way the numbers is stacked, I know where most of the mess is gonna be.

Then something happens. JJ drops his shoulders and pushes past Kingsley, storming off into the shubz. The boys just stand there for a bit. Clearly they ain't never seen this before. By the time they work out what's going on, JJ's ghosted.

I scoot through the bodies, following the path I saw JJ take and guessing the rest. I find him charging down the walkway outside the flat, heading for the stairs we just come up.

'JJ?' My heart's still pounding. 'JJ!'

I overtake him on the walkway and stop dead, trapping him between me and the yardie on the door. Ain't no one else around, so I guess the mandem ain't got no interest in following up.

'You gonna tell me what this is about?'

He shrugs, leans back on the railing and looks at the floor.

I let out this massive sigh – relief from the lucky escape, mixed with rage at the way he's behaving. I ain't gonna beg. I'm gonna wait

for him to talk.

He ain't talking.

Minute later, he still ain't talking. I'm watching him. He's still looking at the concrete, leaning back on the rusty rail. As I watch, he pushes himself off and takes this deep breath. He side-steps me and launches himself at the wall opposite, punching it hard with his fist.

There's a thud and a cracking noise, then JJ bends double, rubbing his knuckle. It's bleeding. Probably broken.

'JJ!' I push my way over, force my face up against his so he has to look at me. 'What's going on?'

'We're screwed,' he says, wrapping his broken hand in his other one.

'What?'

'We're screwed.'

'Screwed how?'

'They're putting my nan in care.'

I feel something drop inside me.

'They did an assessment,' he carries on. 'Say she ain't fit to live on her own.'

'She don't live on her own,' I blurt. 'She's got us.'

'She *ain't* got us,' JJ says, staring at me.

I open my mouth to argue, then shut it again, working out what he means. A coldness creeps into my belly. *Housing don't know we're there*. I don't say nothing, just reach in my pocket for a tissue and start mopping up the worst of the blood on JJ's hand. Feels like *I'm* the one who's been punched.

Things have been good this last year. It's been cosy in the flat with me and JJ and his nan. Sometimes too cosy, but we made it work. It was our only option. Now we're homeless. We're street rats, like Twitch and the rest. Like JJ said, *we're screwed*.

'Leave it.' JJ shakes his head, chucking the tissues on the floor. It's gotta hurt with all that blood, but he's pretending it's fine. He's like that with everything – fronts it so no one can see how he feels. I know, though. I *know*. It ain't just the idea of being homeless that's troubling him, neither. It's nan. It's the thought of them taking her

away. No matter how mad or troublesome that woman can be, she's still his nan. He don't want them to take her away.

'What we gonna do?' I ask.

He shrugs. 'I dunno.'

We stay like that for a bit, me looking at him, him looking at the bloodied tissues all over the floor. After a while, his head lifts up.

'Your mum's...?' He says it so deep and quiet I don't hardly hear it.

I look at him, trying to work out whether I got it wrong. Did he just say that? I can't hardly believe he did. This image slides into my head: her crumpled body all black with bruising, like an old banana that's been kicked about on the floor for a week. Eyes closed up, lips burst open, an empty bottle of vodka lying by her side. I look about me, at the wall, the inky sky – anything, just to put the images out of my head. I stare at JJ, angry at him for even saying the words.

'That ain't an option.' I give him a look that says *end of*.

I breathe out, trying to bury the thoughts somewhere deep in my head but they keep bubbling up, like water that won't go down the plughole. I hate that flat. I hate the whole estate, even though the estate's where me and JJ spent how many years, crawling and running and playing with stolen balls in that little concrete yard. I hate that whole place coz of what used to happen when the sun went down and I had to go back to that nasty little flat.

JJ looks like he's about to say something, but he don't get the chance coz something comes cartwheeling down the walkway towards us, bouncing off the walls, arms and legs sticking out in all directions. We step back. The figure rolls past, blood leaking from his head, a groaning noise coming out of his mouth. I look closer as he crawls to the stairs. Black batties, black hoodie.

'...man's gonna *cut you up*,' comes this deep, booming voice from the doorway of 204.

Me and JJ swivel. The yardie's still there, muscles bulging, arms crossed. But it ain't his voice that's echoing off the concrete. It ain't him who's dusting off his hands like he's just bruised every piece of flesh on Kingsley's body. It's the man with the crooked nose and

mean eyes, his head covered by a neat black doo-rag. It's Tremaine.

The groaning noise fades into the distance as Kingsley limps his way down the steps behind us. My eyes stay locked on Tremaine and I feel myself tense up. He's looking at us, all slow and careful, gold tooth winking out from the side of his mouth.

'It's *you*,' he says, in this voice that's seriously deep. I guess he must be twenty or something now. He takes a step forward, into the dim light of the walkway, and I see his eyes is fixed on JJ.

I glance sideways. JJ's face is like stone. He's looking back at Tremaine with zero expression. This is what JJ does best, I remember. He stays cool in situations.

'It's you who stepped to my man.' Tremaine comes along the walkway, eyeballing us like we're lumps of dog shit.

JJ nods, once. I'm getting nervous. The likes of Tremaine Bell don't like nobody stepping to his boys, even if it was the paigon that just got chucked out.

As he gets close, he holds out his hand for a low four.

'*Respect.*'

My body relaxes. JJ just holds his expression, returns the low four, don't say a thing.

'So you know,' says Tremaine, his mean black eyes not leaving JJ's. 'That sideman ain't one of the Crew no more.'

JJ does a small nod. This is why he reps the endz. He knows how to handle himself.

Tremaine straightens up and looks at me, like he's only just clocked me. Then he laughs. It's a mean laugh – the type that makes you freeze up inside.

'What's this?' His eyes flick to JJ's, just quickly. 'Man's doing his own private business?'

'Nah, blud.' JJ comes over all casual. 'Just getting some air.'

Tremaine moves closer, smiling, but it ain't like no smile I seen before. His eyes could burn holes in your skin, they're so sharp.

'Don't look like air from *here*,' he says, eyes flicking down to the pile of bloodied tissues then up again. Now he's looking at me. One eyebrow lifts up in this nasty way.

I stumble backwards. My heel hits the back of the railings. I'm telling myself to stay calm and keep cool, like JJ, but I can't coz Tremaine Bell is staring at me, waiting for an answer, and my head's filling up with pictures of wire-clippers and blades and scalpels and –

'We been kicked out,' I say, coz the heat of his stare is too much and it feels like my head's gonna explode. JJ won't like me shooting my mouth off about our situation, but I didn't know what else to say. And anyway, maybe I done us a favour. Maybe we can get lucky, like this boy Lol knows from the roads, name of Push, who moved into this place above a barber shop on Rye Lane that's run by the Crew. He got a place to cotch and bare cash, just for doing favours for the elders and running deliveries round town.

Tremaine's doing this thing where only one half of his mouth lifts up. His eyes slide sideways to JJ, then back to me. Then he starts nodding, slowly.

'I got a crib for you,' he says, like he's making plans in his head. I can't swallow. I just keep staring back at him. 'Cotch there for free, yeah? Just do the odd job for the mandem.'

My head spins round to look at JJ – I can't help it. This is the answer to all our problems. Word is, you can make a bag a week off the elders. Ain't no jobs that pay that kind of sterling – no jobs *at all* for fifteen-year-olds with no address and no qualifications. And as for protection, it don't get much better than cotching with the Crew that's got the endz on lock. That's what I'm thinking, but I ain't gonna mess things up more by opening my mouth and blurting it.

I'm still looking at JJ, feeling Tremaine's eyes dancing between us. After a long time, JJ starts to nod.

'Safe.' He's playing it cool. 'We'll think on it.'

Tremaine smiles, with his whole face this time, the gold tooth glinting. 'Be sharp, yeah? Man's got tings runnin'.'

4

The security guard's checking me as I pick the garmz off the rack. I feel his eyes on the back of my head like lasers. It's the same everywhere you go. Shops, cafés, even walking down the street. They clock you like they don't clock nobody else. They follow you about the store, tracking your movements with suspicious eyes. Way I see it, if they make out I'm up to no good, I might as well get up to no good. I grab two of everything so I got a big pile to dump on the spotty white boy when I leave the changing room.

'Can I try these on?' I give the boy a nice smile and he hands me a disc saying 1, which is dumb as it means I only have to give one thing back to him after. That ain't my plan, though. That amount of thieving would just be madness. Besides, I ain't in the mood for a proper lift – I'm just killing time before going back for the night. Tremaine's place ain't the type of crib you wanna cotch in any more than you have to.

The changing room's like a cupboard: small and nasty with boxes stacked up on one side and a hook on the door that's hanging upside down. I lock myself in and get straight on with the job, kicking off my creps and trying the trackies on for size.

There's only one pair that fits nice round my bum, which is good coz that's all I got room for. I take out my tool, pop the tag, check for labels and pull up my old McKenzies over the top, feeling fly. I get a buzz out of thieving. It's my only skill, but it's a good one to have. JJ reckons I'm good coz I started young. When I was little my mum used to take me round the shops. She used to make an effort with herself back then, so the mandem used to stop and chat her up. I kept myself busy in the pushchair, filling my pockets with stuff from the shelves I could reach. She never said nothing when we got back to the flat and these handfuls of chocolates and crisps would tumble out onto the floor.

I reach up to the loose ceiling tile above my head and chuck the dead tag where it belongs. Then I move onto the tees. I'm done in

five minutes – bust my way out the changing room and dump the spares and the disc on the rack.

‘Any good?’ mumbles the kid, which proves he’s dumb, coz I’m already halfway through the shop wearing four of his tees and a pair of trackies. Some people don’t deserve a job. There’s kids I know who can’t get work emptying sanitary bins. But white kids, they ain’t got such a problem. People look at them differently. No one cares that Pizza Face is getting paid to watch people rob his shop.

I head straight for the exit, feeling a shiver run through my body as I step towards the knucklehead on the door. I done this hundreds of times. It should be a breeze, but you can’t take nothing for granted. There’s always this chance you left a tag on, or the rolled-up trackies pop out the bottom, or it turns out the spotty kid can count after all. There’s bare things that can go wrong.

I’m only a few steps away from the scanners, looking straight ahead at the pillars that hold up the shopping centre. The knucklehead’s checking me – I see him even though I ain’t looking his way. My legs feel wobbly, like old springs in a broken mattress. I keep walking; keep heading for the trickle of late-night shoppers. Three steps to go. Two steps. One step.

‘Scuse me, Miss.’

I ignore it. It’s in my head. My mind plays tricks on me sometimes. I hear the bleep of the alarm, imaginary voices telling me I been nabbed. I keep walking, keep looking at the pillars. My feet take me into the spindly flow of people but my head wants to turn.

‘Scuse me, Miss!’

I get this jolt through my heart as I realise the voice is for real. The security guard’s hollering at me, his heavy footsteps echoing off the shiny floor.

Keep walking, I tell myself. *Lose yourself*.

‘Miss!’

The footsteps sound close. They sound like the footsteps of someone who means business. My heart’s beating double time. I got two options: play dumb or split. He’s getting close now. I’m telling my legs to shift it, but they won’t – it’s like I’m stuck in slow mode. I

feel a hand on my shoulder.

“Scuse me, Miss.”

He comes round the front of me, squints at my eyes. My heart feels like it’s gonna explode in me. Thoughts of JJ’s time in the Young Offenders’ try to creep in my head, but I squeeze them out. I gotta stay calm. Look cool.

‘Yeah?’ I say, flashing the same smile I gived Pizza Face.

He’s panting, the clapped bastard.

‘You dropped these.’

I look down and feel all the fear leak out of me like I’m wetting myself. He’s holding out a bunch of pink knotted wires: my headphones. I let out the gulp of air I been holding, grab the things and disappear.

By the time I hit the exit, my whole body’s shaking. I feel dizzy and high, like I just smoked my way through a Z. I breeze out, taking deep breaths and feeling this mad smile creep up my face at the thought of the brand new threads I got on.

It’s nearly eight o’clock and the light’s fading, but the air’s like steam, pressing down on me and making me sweat. It’s tropical – like Jamaica, I reckon, even though I never been to Jamaica. Ash, one of the boys from the Shack, went to Trench Town with his uncle when he was small – says all he can remember is two things: the heat and the guns. He says London’s getting like Trench Town. He says soon we’ll have schools with different doors for the kids from different streets so they don’t have to walk down other kids’ roads. Maybe we’re getting the heat, too.

My skin’s turning slimy and I must’ve left a label on, coz something’s itching against my neck. When I get to Rye Lane, I stop down the side of the phone shop and peel off the layers, one by one. Just as I’m bundling them up, my phone buzzes.

WUU2?

It’s JJ.

Aylesham, I type back. WBU?

I grab hold of the label down the back of my neck and tug, waiting for JJ’s reply. He went off this morning to give Geebie away to some

kid on the estate and stop by to check on his nan in the place she's been put, but now it's night-time and he still ain't back.

New Cross

I read it before it's even buzzed, looking at the words and trying to work out where that place is. It's somewhere in South, but that's all I know. *New Cross*. This vexes me. JJ ain't got no business up New Cross. I guess he's hanging with a new set now. These last few days, since we moved into the place above the barber's, JJ's been rolling tighter with the Crew. The mandem's been learning what he can do and putting his skills to good use. JJ knows his rims. He can tell what's under the bonnet of practically any car on the road and he knows what bits is worth what. He knows how to drive, too. There ain't nobody on the roads who knows his wheels like JJ.

I stare at the phone, thinking about what JJ said to me when he come in last night – or more like this morning. The strips of sunlight was just starting to spread across the little room and he was on a high. He was buzzing.

He says it feels different, even walking down the street. People look at him different, like they got proper respect. He says he knows they ain't gonna step to him coz of his affiliations. He says he feels *safe*.

I push the phone back in my pocket, rolling the spare garmz into a ball and using them to wipe the sweat off my forehead. No one feels truly safe. There's always troubles, issues, things that can happen. That's why I keep the knife down my sock, just in case. No matter how deep you roll with the Peckham Crew, you can still be unlucky. Look at Reggie Bell.

My skin's cooled a bit so I carry on walking, feeling my legs slow down as I close in on the barber shop. It's all bright lights and mirrors and silver swivel chairs and you can hear the reggae pumping through the glass. From here, it don't look so different from any other salon on Rye Lane. It's got the same faded posters in the window showing the same tonked black men winking at you with their neat plaits; the same special offers and late-night opening hours. You wouldn't know that the back rooms was filled with one of the biggest businesses in

South. You wouldn't know that thousands of pounds of food goes in and out that place every day, the Queen's heads stacking up in the pockets of Tremaine Bell and the mandem. You wouldn't know the floor of the over-hot store room upstairs was a home for more than a dozen yoots each night, but it is – and I'm thankful it is.

The garmz stay bundled up close to my chest as I step through the door. The man in charge gives me this little nod from his desk and I head through the curtain at the back, knocking on the door that leads upstairs.

There's a stamping noise, then a jangle, then some cussing, then another jangle and finally the door flies open.

The smell of draw hits me in the face, nearly sending me back through the curtain. The kid with the keys has these glazed eyes that stare at me like he don't know who I am. Seriously, I don't think he knows who *he* is, let alone me. Crow, that's what they call him. Now I see why.

'Yeah...?' His 'fro looks like a giant mushroom on top of his head and he's got this wisp of black fuzz on his lip that looks like it blew there from the floor of the barber's.

'I'm cotching here, blud.' I push past.

He practically falls away from the door and I climb up the creaky stairs that feel like they're gonna rot away under my feet. The smoke's even worse upstairs and I can't hardly see my way to the corner where me and JJ left our stuff. It don't help that the window's been boarded up, so all we got for light is this one little bulb hanging from the ceiling, which just shows up the dubz and the old scrap of carpet that ain't quite big enough to stretch across the whole floor.

Crow falls his way up the stairs and rolls over to where some other kid's puffing away against the wall. There's a whispering coming from nearby and through the smoke I can just make out the boobs and legs of a bunch of skets. I know they're skets, even though I can't see their faces. They're sitting by the boarded-up window, doing something with their hair. That's what they do. They get all dolled up, hair and nails and underwear, then they drop their knickers for the first man to come along. Most of them do it for p's. Some of them think they're

gonna hook a gangsta and get all the latest threads and ice and champagne on tap. Some do it to get knocked up.

Sometimes I think *rah, maybe my mum was one of them – maybe that's why I ain't never met my dad*. Maybe *she* was one of them skets who got herself knocked up on purpose to escape from the life she was in. That's why they do it. It ain't just to get housing or benefits, like they say on TV. It ain't greediness. They do it coz they wanna escape. They think they'll get love off a baby like they ain't gonna get off no one else, and that's gonna make their lives better. They don't think about the crying or feeding or red-faced tantrums – they just think about the love and the new life they're gonna have. It ain't just for the p's.

The thought of p's makes me tense up inside. I've only got a tenner left from my share of the iPad we robbed last week. My belly's growling at me; I ain't had nothing to eat all day. Part of me wants to run back outside and spend the whole lot on popcorn chicken and fries and beans, but I know I gotta crush that idea. I feel around in the dark 'til I hear the crackle of plastic. Ginger nuts.

Suddenly I'm shivering. Maybe it's the sweat on my skin or the weed in the air or the money thing in my head, but it feels like I'm sitting in the middle of this freezing black cloud and there ain't no way out. I can't get warm. I rub my arms and hug my body as I the biscuit crumbles in my mouth, but I can't stop the shaking. I put one more layer on, then another. Slowly I feel the blood coming back. As I do, I hear this creaking on the stairs and I feel myself freezing up again – only this time it ain't from the cold.

It's slow, heavy footsteps. Must be someone with a key, too, coz whoever it is didn't knock... he just come right up.

I squint at the hatch, where this shape's appearing in the smoke. I can't see details – only the size of his shoulders. *Big* shoulders.

'Whaya smoke?' He sniffs the air like he ain't impressed.

Nobody says nothing. I sit proper still, waiting for someone to reply. It's the tonked yardie they use to guard doors and that – the one with the scar down his neck. Masher, they call him. I don't hardly know nothing about him, but I know enough to keep my mouth shut

and not mess about.

‘I need somebody t’drop supm f’me.’

There’s more silence, then there’s this clonking noise, like someone’s dropped a big bag of potatoes all over the floor. I squint into the haziness and see it’s Crow. He’s conked right out. The other kid starts pissing himself, moaning and groaning like he ain’t never seen nothing so funny in all his life.

‘Ona na ‘ear mi?’ growls Masher. ‘Mi say mi’ad supm t’drop. Mi looka fifty pound for d’job, yeah?’

The kid stops rolling around – guess he’s worked out from the yardie’s voice that this ain’t no laughing matter. At least, that’s how it seems, but seconds later he’s off again. It’s like the rest of us is missing the joke.

I ain’t thinking about jokes. I’m thinking about the fifty and the things I could be doing with it. Masher’s standing at the top of the stairs, breathing deep like he’s about to land a fist in the first face he sees.

‘I’ll do it,’ I say quickly. The way I see it, Masher’s rage is brewing and the longer I leave it, the more angered he’s gonna be. Plus, there’s fifty in it for me and right now I need all the p’s I can get.

The floor creaks as he leans in my direction. I can see him looking over at me, then at the skets, then me again. I know what he’s thinking. *Ain’t she with them?* I sit up straight and stare back at him, making it clear I ain’t no jezzie. Truth is, he’s seen me bare times before, but he don’t remember. People like Masher, they don’t need to remember people like me.

‘Whoya gun carry ma tings?’ he asks, all slow and suspicious.

‘I got wheels,’ I say, thinking on my feet and hoping JJ’s left the bike in the usual place.

There’s this long gap that feels like it lasts ten minutes. The air’s starting to blow clear and I see his eyes, all beady and black, looking at me. He’s studying me, I feel it – working out if he can trust me.

‘Whaya nem?’

‘Alesha.’

He nods. ‘Come dis way, mi give you da tings, yeah?’

5

‘Then some snake calls the fedz and they come down with the vans and that, cut off all the roads and Omar gets nabbed.’ Twitch rocks on his pedals, wobbles a bit, then makes a grab for the concrete table. ‘Word is, he got done for assault.’

‘Assault?’ The tinies crowd round.

‘Yeah.’ Twitch nods, spinning the pedals like it’s some kind of drum roll. ‘Of a *police officer*.’

The little ones make these noises like they’re impressed. They believe anything, they do. You could tell them shaved heads was the latest thing and there’d be all these kids with shiny little heads, angry mums chasing them round the roads.

Ash is eyeballing Twitch. ‘Assaulting the boydem?’

Twitch nods again. When Twitch nods, it ain’t like one of the slow, meaningful nods like what the yardies do – it’s frantic, all happening inside his hood so you can’t see the look on his face.

Ash side-eyes him like he don’t believe a word. He ain’t the type to stand for no bullshit. He’s a few years older: tall, groomed and smart. He got eight GCSEs last year. Vinny says he could’ve gone to university, but he ain’t got the sterling for A-levels so he’s sticking round here. Sees himself as the next big thing in grime. I’ve heard his beats – he plays them in the studio. I reckon he could make it. If anyone’s gonna get out of these endz, it’s Ash.

I ain’t saying nothing about the Omar Cox thing. There’s word buzzing round the barber’s, but everyone’s saying different things and you don’t know who to believe. Anyway, I ain’t got time to be sitting round gassing when I’m there – I’m too busy earning p’s.

Two hundred and fifty in less than three days. That’s what I made. I’m swimming in p’s and it’s easy money, too. Just peddling around the roads, dropping off packets and picking up coils of notes. Pick up, drop off. Fifty quid. Pick up, drop off. Another fifty. I know half the faces around the roads, too – boys like Benji and Pepper who used to run around with us kicking balls at Mrs Adeyemi’s window and older

types I know from the estate. There's risks, I know, but not big risks for someone like me. The boydem sees a girl peddling her way through Peckham – what they gonna do? Arrest me? Anyway, I'm quick on a bike. I ain't gonna get nabbed.

Ash leans back on the concrete, watching as Lol takes over the questioning. Even just looking at Lol makes you laugh. He's short and scruffy and wears these over-big glasses with thick black frames. He don't take nothing in life too seriously.

'What type of assault was it? Sexual? Sick! Omar Cox is a battyboy – I knew it!'

Twitch looks vexed that his story ain't being taken seriously.

'He was busting a niner, they say. He got –'

'Omar was?' Ash steps forward again, eyes narrowed.

'Yeah,' says Twitch in this wavering voice. 'They searched him and found the ting and that's why he got hyped and moved to them.'

Ash eyes Twitch suspiciously, same as me. Omar Cox ain't the type to carry a piece and get hyped. He's one of them cool, smooth-moving DJ types who stays on the right side of the law. It's true that he's tight with the Crew, but only coz he's been linking with Tremaine's sister, Sharise, for longs. I can't see him busting a niner.

Ash looks like he's got more questions inside him, but before he can get them out there's stirring in the group.

'There weren't no ting,' says JJ, coolly breaking the circle and shaking his head at Twitch.

I feel myself grinning inside as all eyes swivel to JJ. He was there, in the action, not like Twitch. Twitch is just making up stories.

'What d'he go down for, then?' Twitch squares up to JJ like he don't wanna back down.

'*Verbal* assault.'

Everyone goes quiet – even Twitch. We all know what that means. Verbal assault is like the deadliest crime. It's deadly coz they can pin it on you, no matter what. Ain't no need for evidence to nab you for verbal. No stolen goods, no bag of food, no bruises or blood; just the words that come out your mouth – or the words they *say* come out your mouth. No one knows what Omar said to the fedz. What he said

don't hardly come into it.

'Shit, blud.' Twitch is the first to speak. 'That's bad.'

'Well...' JJ catches my eye and I'm surprised to see his lips curling into a tiny smile. 'If they press charges, they might be in for a little surprise.'

Confused looks fill all our faces. I tuck in tight, waiting for the explanation, but just as JJ opens his mouth there's this sound of raised voices from the gates. Something's kicking off.

The whole lot of us turn and stare. Lazy's there with his back to us, moving all slow and steady like he does, trying to block someone from coming in. It happens all the time; we get bare unwanted visitors at the Shack. But this ain't no ordinary unwanted visitor. The figure who's ducking and diving and mouthing off ain't no six-foot yardie with an axe to grind. It's a white woman, aged thirty or so, with loose blonde hair and spindly arms that's waving madly all over the place.

Someone says it's the fedz, someone else says no, coz the fedz always come in twos and they don't wear no dresses and boots like that. Then a row breaks out about what undies wear and if they work Saturdays and what they'd want with a bunch of yoots in a skate park. We watch this white lady dodge round Lazy and head for the shredders on the half-pipe, her straw-coloured hair blowing about, giving her the look of a mad woman. I'm thinking how she got the same sort of style as my old piano teacher at Pembury High, Miss Merfield – all flappy garmz and long legs – but I don't say it coz no one else knows Miss Merfield. And anyway, there's too much chatter going on.

'Who's that?'

'What's that she's giving out?'

'Dunno blud, but she ain't got no business here.'

'Lazy's moving quick, man. Look.'

'That's what I mean – she ain't got no business here.'

'That ain't *quick*.'

'Lazy don't do quick.'

My eyes stay trained on the woman, who's blazing round the skate park in these big brown boots, her knees and elbows jaggedly sticking

out of this dress that looks like it's made of old curtains – all criss-crossy reds and browns.

One of the tinies flies off the mini-ramp and lands in a pile on the floor. The woman heads straight for him, says something that makes him laugh, then scoops him up and gives him this red, shiny card like a giant ticket. She moves onto the next one. Seems like she's going round the whole place handing these red things out.

I'm squinting my eyes, same as JJ and Twitch and Ash and Lol, but I ain't looking at the red things no more. It ain't the woman's skinny arms or flappy dress. It's her boots. Brown and old with bare scuffs at the toes and laces criss-crossing all the way up the outsides – I know them boots. That's when I realise. It *is* Miss Merfield.

'Hi... ...d'you know...' I catch bits of words on the breeze as she flies about, panting and looking around. Miss Merfield's got these big round eyes that always make her look scared and confused, but mainly I don't think she is. She ain't the type to get scared or confused.

Lazy's lumbering up the hill after her. Vinny's hanging out the studio door and next to him in the window of the Shack is this line of little faces, peering out as Miss Merfield hurries round the park.

She busts her way up the slope, heading straight for us. My mind flips back to the time she come looking for me, in the early days when I didn't turn up to my piano lessons coz I couldn't read music and it all seemed like a waste of time. She stamped her way through the form room door in the middle of lunch, not caring about the whispers and stares and giggles. Made her way straight for me and then said in that strict, quiet voice, *Don't you dare give up*. She's got the exact same look on her face – only this time she ain't coming straight for me. She ain't clocked me yet.

I keep waiting for her to catch my eye, but she's too busy flicking her head this way and that, pushing red cards into the hands of Lol, Ash and more of the tinies... She rushes up, fumbling with her stack of red cards, then does one of them double-takes as she hands one to me. A confused smile rushes up her face.

'Alesha!'

Tell the truth, I think she's more surprised to find me here than the other way round, even though she's the one who ain't got no business round here.

It don't feel right to say her name, not with the others around, so I just say 'hi', like I don't hardly know her. Then I feel bad. I *do* know her.

Miss Merfield ain't like most teachers. She's young, for a start. But it ain't just that. Mrs Page was young and she was a bitch. Miss Merfield's different. She's weird, but in a good way. First thing she said when I turned up for lesson number one, full of cussing and ready to split: *D'you want a cup of tea?* That's what she said – to me. A teacher was gonna make me a cup of tea. That's when I knew Miss Merfield was different.

'I was wondering...'
She still keeps looking about her. There's wisps of hair stuck to her forehead and her cheeks is glowing pink. The smile's still there, sort of, but it's all tense, like it's an effort to keep it on her face.

Straight away, Smalls steps to her. That's what he does, being twice the size of the rest of us. Most days, it feels good to have him checking for us, but right now I'm seeing them giant fists as a liability.

'Leave it, Smalls,' I say, like I'm cool with some white woman coming up the Shack and knowing my name.

Smalls takes a step back, his arms still tense. Miss Merfield's eyes latch onto mine and she gives this little nod that I guess means *Thanks*.

'How are you?' She looks over her shoulder quickly. Lazy's cruising up the skate park. 'Are you... Are you doing OK?'

I shrug. Ain't hardly gonna get into real talk with Miss Merfield right now.

'D'you know if you'll be coming back to Pembury High in September?' she asks quietly, smoothing her dress like she knows this conversation ain't really happening.

Smalls steps to her again before I can answer.

'Look, Miss. You wanna tell us your business here?'

I raise a hand, like I used to when Geebie got mad, but the thing

is, Smalls is right – she gotta tell us what she wants or she’ll be chucked out – I mean, *chucked* out. Lazy’s huffing and puffing his way towards her and Vinny’s wandering out the studio looking vexed. At this rate, she’s gonna be picked up and carried off.

‘Right... yes.’ She don’t exactly look scared, but she’s flustered. ‘Sorry.’ Miss Merfield’s eyes flick up at Smalls’ like she’s giving him some respect. That’s smart, I think to myself. That’s the right thing to do.

‘I’ve been mugged,’ she says, looking at me then all the other faces behind me. ‘I had my iPhone taken and...’ She holds up this stack of red cards and finally I see what it is she’s been giving out. ‘...this ring.’

It’s one of them notes covered in shiny film, like the signs saying ‘Staff only’ at school, only I ain’t never seen one this bright before. In the middle is this zoomed-in picture of a silver ring with a diamond-like rock and these flecks of blood-coloured stones round the edge. There’s one word below in big black letters: MISSING. Under that is a phone number and more words.

She’s holding it out like she wants me to take it. I feel for her, so I take it, even though I know it’s gonna end up on the floor or in the bin.

‘It’s the ring I want back,’ she says, just as footsteps come up behind her. Her eyes link with mine. ‘The phone was old – just... just the ring.’

Miss Merfield’s smart enough to not put up a fight with Lazy. She just clomps off in her big brown boots, looking over her shoulder and catching my eye as she goes.

‘I’ll pay for information!’ she says, nearly tripping over Lazy’s foot. ‘Five hundred pounds if I get it back! My number’s... on the...’

Something goes off in my head. Suddenly Miss Merfield’s got my attention. I look down at the thing in my hands and check the words. Five hundred is what it says. For a ring? I take another look at the stone with its flecks of red, then roll up the plastic in my hand, thinking *rah, maybe I could do something with this*.

Soon as Miss Merfield’s gone my brain whirs into action. I got the

connects to find this ring of hers. If she got robbed in these endz, I reckon I'll know the person who thieved it. I pull out my phone, but I don't even get as far as scrolling through names coz something pops into my head. I remember the last time I seen an old iPhone.

'Twitch? You –'

That's when I realise, Twitch has ghosted. There's blank faces staring at red bits of card, but Twitch and his tiny bike ain't nowhere to be seen.