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## **CHAPTER 1**

# Bad timing

It's all over the news again, in the papers and on television. Another kid has been shot dead, so it's all grieving parents telling us how little Billy was such a good boy and all. Telling us how little Billy only played football and was never involved in any trouble. Yeah, sure.

And of course the police are going to be moving heaven and earth, leaving no stone unturned. Yeah, right.

We've heard it all before. And there's the usual bunch of quotes from friends and neighbours. There they are, telling us what a nice neighbourhood it is and how shocking

it all is and how they can't believe that it's happened right on their doorsteps. And of course, Princess Diana Syndrome has kicked in; you know, the bunches of flowers as close to the scene of the tragedy as the police will let them get. Mostly they're placed there by people who never even knew little Billy. It's on the telly, right, so everybody wants to be a part of it. What a bloody country this is.

And the reason I'm thinking about this now, while I'm riding home on my beaten-up BMX, is because I'm feeling the weight of what's in the canvas bag strapped to my back. It's books, mostly – as you'd expect, with me coming home from the library and all – but it's the other thing that's in there that puts the pressure on my mind. It's the gun.

Bad timing. It's bad timing that put the gun there. They say that timing is everything. I read that all the time. Well I got my timing all wrong, staying late at the library like that. Late, so that it's near dark when I turn onto the estate where I live. Late as I notice, as always, the line of young trees planted alongside the road

that have been stripped or pulled out, the remains of some pathetic attempt by the council to make our area look nicer. Late as I notice, as always, the casual rubbish and the broken glass in the gutters. And inevitably, I notice the cans. Wherever you see the cans, you can pretty much picture the loose gangs of kids around my age and younger, even, wearing Burberry caps like it's standard issue uniform or something. You can hear them swearing, drinking, shouting, chucking stuff about. The kind of casual loutish behaviour that makes the rest of us feel uncomfortable... makes us cross over the road, walk quicker, head down, no eye contact. But, hey, I'm not judging them, I come from these streets just like they do. The estate is a mass of red brick semi-detached houses built in the fifties. A land fit for heroes is what my teacher says they were trying to build. Bet they never envisaged just how the children of heroes would turn out.

So anyway, like I say, I'm riding home from the library, and I'm deep into the estate. I see them, of course, as I approach

the boarded-up old pub, the Heart of Oak. There are about seven or eight of them, boys that I know from the estate and from school. And I see the uniform of Burberry and the hooded sweatshirts and trainers and track-pants and they're fooling around and spilling into the road. There's a lot of shouting and swearing and raucous humourless laughter. I hear a bottle smash. And one of them is pissing up against the wall of the pub. Right there in plain sight, with the street-lamp like a stage spotlight giving him a moment of fame. Chavs like these are part of the local furniture here where I live. They're not friends. And I'm riding on the other side of the road and I'm sure as hell not going to look over at them. As often as not that's all it will take for them to feel affronted and offended. And then it *would* be time to be afraid. So I'm just going to ride on by.

'Hey Davies, over here.'

I hear the words just as I see him step out into the road and point at me. Roddy Thompson is a big lad and boasts three

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders or ASBOs as they're commonly known. Dreamt up I reckon by some arrogant prat who lives in wealthy and isolated splendour with no idea how the rest of us actually live. Do they really think an ASBO, regarded as a badge of honour by the rest of the crew, could possibly be the answer? And just take a look at Roddy Thompson – do you think he fears one of those orders for one second? Yeah, right.

I bet you're wondering why I don't just pedal hard and get the hell away. Well if you're wondering that, then it's obvious you've never even *been* to an estate like mine, much less lived on one. And just where are you going to run to? So, swallowing back the pulse of fear-driven vomit that's leapt into my throat, I turn my bike towards big Roddy and coast to a halt right in front of where he's standing.

Big Roddy grips hold of the handlebars of my bike, but even he must know that I'm not going anywhere until he's finished with me. I see the letters that he's tattooed himself onto the fingers of his hand. I saw

this old film once, and there was this ancient actor who had 'love' and 'hate' tattooed on his fingers, and I guess that must have been shocking, back then. Roddy has the letters K – U – C – F on the fingers that I'm looking at. I'll leave you to work out the actual word that he spelled. Probably the only word that he *can* spell.

'Where are you goin' Davies?'

'Just home.' I look beyond Roddy and the two or three others that have gathered around too close for my liking. In the dark shadows in an alcove in the far wall of the pub, I can see Sammy Williams. And someone else. A girl. Sammy has his back to me, but I know it's him. The girl I don't recognise, because she's beyond him and her back is pressed against the dark bricks. It's obvious to me, and to anyone else passing by, that they are having casual and brutal sex. Right there in the open. Like dogs.

Others of this little gang have surrounded me now. They're not saying anything but they stand very close, invading my space. It's



uncomfortable, but I say nothing. I feel one of them tugging at the canvas bag strapped to my back. It's like he's pulling on it or leaning on it, so that I sag and have to brace myself against being pushed to the ground.

‘What’s in the bag?’

I turn my head, but can't work out which of the grinning louts has spoken.

‘Just books.’

Even I can hear the little quiver of fear in my voice. I'd wanted to sound cool because they'll sense the slightest hint of fear like wild animals do. I've blown it.

‘What do you want books for, you ponce? You think it *makes* you something?’

Snarled words from behind me again. A push at the bag on my back, so that I nearly fall over, bike and all. Roddy, gripping tight to the handlebars, holds it steady.

‘No, no – I just...’

‘You just think that school shit is going to get you somewhere.’

I’m looking at Roddy and he’s looking past me to the kids behind as he speaks. I feel the pressure on my canvas bag loosen up. I’m standing straight. And I’m shaking, right? I’m scared now and no point hiding it. They could probably see *that* from space. I don’t answer, just look past Roddy. I don’t want to look anyone in the eye. Beyond Roddy I can see Sammy Williams starting to walk towards us. He has the dead eyes of a shark, but he doesn’t move as smoothly. He’s shuffling, stoop-shouldered and slack-jawed. Without a care in the world, he’s wiping his dick on the *Nike* track pants he’s wearing, then tucking it away. He doesn’t care who’s seen. Behind him, the girl is making a half-hearted effort to smooth down a short skirt. I don’t recognise her, but then I’m not looking at her face. If she was ever wearing anything under that skirt before, she’s making no effort to do so now. I’ve seen everything. And she’s seen me looking, but she doesn’t care. I’ve seen enough of her to notice that she’s nothing special.

Over-heavy make-up and hair pulled back tight in a 'Croydon face-lift'. Maybe she could be really pretty, but you couldn't really say with her looking as she does now. Sammy is right up behind Roddy and the girl is standing just behind Sammy and to one side. I feel like I'm on stage and that all eyes are upon me. I look up at Roddy and he must see that I am scared shitless, because he just grins and shakes his head.

'Nah, that school crap won't make you something. But this will.'

Roddy reaches inside his navy blue zip-up hooded sweatshirt... and I see three small patches sewn onto the arm as it flashes across, close to my face. ASBO ASBO ASBO – one for each of the three he's been given; a neat piss-take. But I'm not going to smile at it. It's all I can do not to whimper with fear. I'm expecting a knife – they all carry knives and they're all happy to use them. My eyes must be wide and wild and I can smell the cigarette smoke, the spliff smoke. I hear the rattle of a can in the gutter behind me.

And then there is Roddy's hand, right in front of my face. And it's not holding a knife at all. It's holding a gun. I must just gasp out loud because they're all laughing at me.

'This will make you something. This is what counts around here.'

He says this like we're standing in South Central Los Angeles or the Bronx in New York or something. But we're on a council estate in England. Since when did you have to have a gun to amount to something in a place like this?

I'm focused on the blue-black metal, shiny like there's a fine film of oil coating it. And the black rubber hand grip. Roddy points it right in my face.

'This could blow your head right off.'

He's not laughing as he says this. I'm not laughing either. Especially when he leans beyond me, and I feel my bag open and feel something being dropped inside. I know what that something is. Roddy has his hands on

my shoulders. He's looking me right in the eye, so that I have to look down.

'I want you to keep that for me for a while – don't mind, do you?' He sneers, all sarky. And I'm shaking my head even as I'm trembling. He seems happy with that reaction.

'That's good. Tell you what; you can have her if you want.' He turns his head and indicates the girl with the Croydon face-lift standing behind Sammy. I look up and see her taking a long drag from a cigarette and blowing the smoke out of her nostrils.

She notices me, but I look away because, to tell the truth, I'm embarrassed as much as I'm afraid.

'Go on, you can have her. We all have.'

I shake my head, I just want to go.

'Suit yourself. But look after that thing in your bag now. It will only be for a couple of days. Keep it safe.'