

A person is walking away from the viewer on a wooden boardwalk. The boardwalk is flanked by tall, textured concrete walls. The sky is a pale, hazy blue, and several birds are flying in the distance. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

Kevin Brooks

Wrapped in White

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About the Book

PI John Craine has been hired to investigate the brutal murder of Somali youth, Jamaal Tan. The police are treating it as just another gang-related crime, but Tan's aunt claims they are trying to cover up her nephew's death.

As Craine digs deeper, he learns of the sudden death of his friend and mentor Leon Mercer. At first it appears to be a tragic accident, but he soon finds himself entangled in two deeply suspicious investigations.

And before long he comes face to face with a man he hoped never to see again.

About the Author

Kevin Brooks has written twelve children's novels and has won several awards including the Canongate Prize for New Writing, Branford Boase Award, Kingston Youth Book Award, North East Book Award, Deutschen Jug-endliteraturpreis Jury Prize, Buxtehude Bulle and the Golden Bookworm. His first adult novel, *A Dance of Ghosts*, was published by Arrow in 2011. He lives in North Yorkshire with his wife, Susan.

Also by Kevin Brooks

A Dance of Ghosts
Until the Darkness Comes

Wrapped in White

Kevin Brooks



arrow books

FIRE DEVOURS. IT consumes, destroys, obliterates. It lays the world to waste. Fire deforms. It craves disorder, its only purpose to burn and burn and light the skies until all that's left is dust. Fire has no limits. Everything burns: wood, plastic, stone, metal, flesh, bone, blood. And everything will burn in the end. Today, tomorrow, a thousand million years from now . . . at some point in time, fire will reduce everything to nothing.

But not tonight.

Tonight the fire is just another house fire.

The house stands in a secluded avenue at the edge of town. It's a pleasant area - broad pavements planted with lime trees, well-tended gardens, security lights, block-paved driveways - and the house is comfortable and spacious. Grey stone walls, rolling lawns, mullioned windows, a solid oak door set in an old stone porchway. Beyond the front door, a rolling cloud of thick black smoke is beginning to fill the hallway. At the far end of the hall, the kitchen is ablaze. The fire has spread quickly. Fuelled by the boiling cooking oil spilled across the floor, fierce flames have engulfed the kitchen in minutes. The old linoleum is melting, bubbling, smoking. Wooden cupboards are alight, the kitchen table is burning. Flames erupt from a plastic waste bin, a smouldering rug bursts into fire. The smoke thickens and billows, the heat feeding upon itself, and within a short while everything will be alight - sockets and plugs, ornaments, cookery books, the old oak beams, the smoke alarm fixed to the ceiling . . .

The smoke alarm is silent.

But even if it wasn't, even if the kitchen was filled with the shrieking siren of the alarm, the old man lying face-down on the floor wouldn't hear it. He's senseless, motionless, aware of nothing. He doesn't hear the roar of the fire, the crash of breaking glass as a crystal vase falls from the table. He doesn't see the heavy saucepan resting beside his head. He

doesn't smell the acrid stink of his own scorched hair. And as his clothing burns, and the flames begin to blacken his skin, it can only be hoped that the old man feels no pain.

1

‘WHAT DO YOU do if a bird shits on your windscreen?’

The man standing beside me at the bar was the kind of man who tells you a joke as if he’s doing you a favour. The joke itself, to this kind of man, is neither here nor there. It’s a joke. It’s funny. It makes people laugh. And that’s how this kind of man defines himself. He’s a funny man. He tells jokes, he makes people laugh. He’s a real character, this fellow. He’s the kind of man who says, ‘Cheer up, mate, it might never happen.’

And I fucking hate people like that.

But as I looked more closely at him, already weighing up how to brush him off, I realised that as well as being the kind of man who happily tells jokes to complete strangers, he was also the kind of man whose natural response to any perceived slight is to shove a broken glass in your face. He was, without doubt, a nasty piece of work. He wasn’t particularly big – in fact, physically, he wasn’t up to much at all – it was just that everything about him exuded violence. From the way he was standing at the bar – taking up far too much room, almost inviting someone to bump into him and spill his drink – to the lunatic gleam in his slightly off-kilter eyes, he was clearly a mean little bastard. He even had tough-looking teeth. So instead of just blanking him, or giving him a fuck-off look, I decided it was best to play safe and go along with him.

‘Sorry?’ I said, half-smiling at him, affecting a kind of harmlessly preoccupied look. ‘I was miles away there . . .’

‘What do you do,’ he repeated, in exactly the same tone as before, ‘if a bird shits on your windscreen?’

'I don't know,' I said. 'What *do* you do if a bird shits on your windscreen?'

He grinned. 'You don't ask her out again.'

I'd been preparing myself to force a smile whatever the punchline was, but the little snort of laughter I let out when it came was actually quite genuine.

'You like that one, eh?' the joker said.

'Yeah, not bad,' I admitted.

'I got plenty more.'

I bet you have, I thought.

Thankfully, I saw the barman approaching then, and by the time I'd caught his eye and ordered two pints of Stella, paid for them and got my change, the joker had found someone else to talk to – a big lunk of a man with a massive head, an equally massive neck, and arms like two legs of pork. From the way the joker was leaning in towards this man, the man bowing down to let him whisper in his ear, I guessed they weren't complete strangers. I should have left then. I should have just walked away. But I made the mistake of glancing at the joker and giving him a see-you-later nod, and just as I was doing that, he dismissed the lunk with a slap on the shoulder and turned his attention back to me.

'So,' he said, grinning his grin again, 'who do you fancy in the next one then?'

We were in a place called Juno's, an upmarket fitness and leisure complex on the south side of Riverside Business Park. It was a relatively new venture, having opened up just over a year ago, and it marketed itself as 'a high-class lifestyle experience' that catered for all the needs of an exclusive, membership-only clientele. As well as the usual state-of-the-art gymnasium and fitness facilities, it boasted an Olympic-size swimming pool, squash courts, saunas, spas, jacuzzis, a sports hall, a fancy restaurant, several

bars, a high-tech conference hall, and a dozen or so private rooms available to members at daily or weekly rates.

I'd never been to Juno's before - I feel sick if I go anywhere near a gymnasium - but I'd seen it in passing quite often, and from the outside it looked fairly anonymous. A three-storey pale-brick building set in three barren acres of concrete, metal fencing, and prefabricated warehouses, it had always reminded me of the kind of place where you'd find the local tax office or a citizen's advice centre or something. But on the inside it couldn't have looked less like a tax office. The top two floors were cordoned off for the night, and the only areas of the ground floor open to the public were the lobby, the sports hall, the bar, and the toilets, so admittedly I hadn't seen all that much of the place, but what I had seen was all quite luxurious, albeit in a tacky kind of way. Thick red carpeting, marble pillars, brass railings, gilt-framed oil paintings on the walls. Several of the paintings were of the same female figure - a stern and rather portly woman dressed in layers of white robing, with a garland of flowers in her hair - and there were more representations of female figures dotted around the lobby, this time in the form of sleek silver statues set on squat stone pillars. The statues depicted a series of artistically naked women, all of them impossibly lean and large-breasted, and they all seemed to be gazing upwards, with their hands raised and their backs arched, thrusting out their metallic hips as if their silver lives depended on it.

It was a strange mix of decor - part plush hotel, part gentlemen's club, part brothel - and in view of the entertainment on offer that night, it somehow seemed quite appropriate.

Tonight was Juno's inaugural 'Big Fight Night'.

According to the advertising, it was to be the first in a regular programme of 'action-packed evenings featuring some of the biggest names in professional boxing', and for one night only, non-members were 'invited to enjoy the

exclusive facilities of Hey's most prestigious leisure complex'. Which wasn't strictly accurate, of course, as the only facilities available were the bar and the toilets, and the only really big-name fighter on the card that night was a so-so heavyweight whose only claim to fame was that he'd broken the jaw of a well-known sports presenter in a bad-tempered post-fight interview on live TV. That said, though, the fights had all been pretty good so far, and everything seemed about as well run and professional as boxing ever gets, and although Juno's was no Caesar's Palace, and the attendance was no more than a few hundred at best, there was definitely something about the place, and the kind of people who were there, that somehow felt just right.

The undercard was almost over now, and a lot of people had left their seats to go to the bar while the ring was being prepared for the final preliminary bout before the main event of the evening, the one featuring the so-so heavyweight. I wasn't bothered about the main event. It was the final preliminary fight that interested me. So when the joker asked me who I fancied in it, I was torn for a moment between finding out what he knew about it, if anything, or getting back to the ring to make sure I didn't miss the first round.

I glanced across at the sports hall. The ring was still empty, and there was no sign yet of the boxers making their entrance. I scanned the ringside seats and saw Cal - my nephew-in-law and colleague - sitting where I'd left him. He seemed happy enough, staring intently at the screen of one of his many mobile phones while his thumb skipped rapidly over the keys. I took a sip of beer, thought for a second, then turned back to the joker.

'What do *you* think?' I asked him.

His answer, in essence, was that the next bout was so one-sided that it wasn't even worth betting on.

'Everyone knows the black kid's got it,' he said. 'I mean, last I heard the odds were ridiculous, 10-1 on or something.'

Which is all right if you've got a couple hundred grand to spare, but otherwise it's just not worth the bother, is it? And there's no point putting anything on the gypsy kid because he's got no chance.' The joker shrugged. 'Might as well save your money for the big one.'

The 'black kid' was an up-and-coming young fighter from Hey called Hassan Tan, and the 'gypsy kid', as far as I knew, was an Irish-born boxer from Liverpool who billed himself as Joe 'Boy' Rooney.

'Is Tan really that good then?' I asked the joker.

He nodded. 'He's the best young featherweight I've seen in years. Only turned pro about six months ago, and he's already making a name for himself. Two fights, two KOs, both in the second round. Six amateur fights, six wins inside the distance . . .' The joker shook his head. 'I tell you, the kid's going to be fighting for titles in a year or so. I mean, Rooney's no mug, he's been in with some good fighters and had a couple of decent results, but he's just not in the same league as Tan. I can't see him lasting three rounds, if that.'

'Sounds like you know your stuff,' I said.

The joker grinned. 'Well, you got to know what's what, don't you?'

I nodded, gazing casually around the bar. 'This is where Tan trains, isn't it? In Juno's, I mean. This is where he works out.'

'Yeah . . .'

'Looks like a good set-up.'

'It's the best.'

'And I hear he's got a good team behind him too - top trainers, ambitious management . . .' I looked at the joker. 'Do you know Curt Dempsey?'

The joker's smile suddenly went cold.

I said, 'He owns this place, doesn't he?'

The joker shrugged. 'So I've heard.'

'Right,' I said, nodding again. 'I was just wondering, that's all . . .'

‘Wondering what?’

‘Well, I’ve been thinking of joining, you know . . . applying for membership of Juno’s.’ I grinned, patting my stomach. ‘I really need to get myself in shape.’ I smiled at him. ‘Are you a member? I mean, could you put in a good word for me or something?’

He stared emptily at me. ‘Ask at reception. They’ll give you a form.’

‘Right . . . and you think it’s worth it, do you? Becoming a member, I mean. Are the facilities really as good as I’ve heard?’

The joker looked away for a moment, gazing round the bar, then he turned back and stepped towards me, his eyes fixed coldly on mine. ‘You know what really pisses me off?’ he said quietly.

I almost said, ‘Is this another joke?’ but I quickly thought better of it. Instead, I just kept my mouth shut and stared back at him.

‘What really pisses me off,’ he went on, leaning in even closer, ‘is people who ask too many questions. It makes me start wondering who they really are and what they really want. Do you know what I mean?’

‘Hey, I’m sorry,’ I said meekly, holding up my hands and backing away. ‘I didn’t mean anything. Honestly, I was just asking—’

‘Well, fucking don’t, OK?’

‘Yeah, of course . . .’

He carried on staring at me for a moment or two, and I carried on looking as submissive and spineless as possible – which wasn’t all that difficult – and then eventually, seemingly convinced that I wasn’t worth wasting any more time on, he just gave me a final tough-guy look and said, ‘Go on then, cunt, get the fuck out of my face.’

And I wandered away, smiling contentedly to myself.

After I'd gone outside for a quick smoke, I went back into the sports hall, sat down next to Cal, and passed him his beer.

'Thanks,' he said, taking the pint from me without looking up from his phone. 'You took your time.'

'I was talking to someone at the bar.'

'Yeah? Anyone interesting?'

'Not really.' I drank some beer and looked around. The hall was filling up again, people coming back from the bar carrying trays of drinks, finding their seats, sitting down. I turned back to Cal. 'He told me a joke,' I said.

'Who did?'

'The man at the bar.'

'Was it funny?'

I told Cal the joke. He laughed. I said, 'It's not a bad joke, is it?'

'Not bad at all.'

'Do you think it's OK to like it?'

He looked up from his phone. 'What do you mean?'

'You know . . .'

'No, I *don't* know.'

'Is it acceptable?'

'*Acceptable?*'

'Yeah. I mean, is it offensive or anything?'

Cal thought about it. 'No, I don't think so . . . it's just a play on words, isn't it? You assume that the bird in question is a seagull or something, a real bird, because that's the kind of bird that's known to shit on windscreens, but then you find out that in this case the word "bird" is being used in its slang sense, meaning a girl or young woman, and you're suddenly presented with the image of being out on a date with a girl or young woman who for some reason shits on your windscreen.'

'Which is funny.'

Cal grinned. 'Yeah.'

‘But actually,’ I said, looking at him, ‘if you were out with a girl, and she did shit on your windscreen, she’d probably be suffering from some kind of mental illness, wouldn’t she? I mean, a sane person wouldn’t shit on your windscreen, would they?’

‘They might if they were really angry with you about something.’

‘No,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘They might shit *in* your car, but they’re not going to bother climbing up onto the bonnet or the roof to shit on your windscreen, are they? Only a certified lunatic’s going to go that far.’

Cal was laughing now.

‘We should both be ashamed of ourselves,’ I said, keeping a straight face. ‘Laughing at people with mental problems . . . it’s disgraceful.’

‘You’re right,’ Cal agreed, still laughing. ‘There’s nothing remotely funny about it at all. I can see that now.’ He looked at me, grinning madly. ‘You’re a wise man, Uncle John. I really don’t know what I’d do without you.’

I smiled back at him. ‘Have you heard the one about the tiny piano and the twelve-inch pianist?’

The Tan-Rooney fight was delayed. No reason was given for the hold-up, and no one seemed too bothered, we all just sat there waiting patiently until eventually things started to get moving again. The MC got back into the ring, the two ring-girls reappeared – both over-tanned, over made-up, and barely dressed in tight shorts, tight spangly vests, and ridiculously high heels – and eventually the boxers were introduced. There were no big fanfares, no special effects or dramatic entrances, the MC simply announced the fighters by name – Rooney first, then Hassan Tan – and once they were both in the ring, he read out their respective details: age, weight, fight record, home town. There was a smattering of boos and jeers for Rooney, and Tan’s introduction was greeted with loud cheers and some half-

hearted chanting from the back of the hall - *Has-san! Has-san!* Tan raised a gloved hand in appreciation, but he didn't make a big deal of it. He was too focused to get involved with the crowd - bobbing up and down, throwing punches, keeping himself nice and loose. I was watching him closely, and even at this stage it was obvious that he was a class act. He looked calm and confident, perfectly in control, totally unfazed by everything around him. Not once did I see him so much as glance at his opponent. He wore plain black shorts, no tassels, no fringes, nothing fancy. And although he was fairly slight, and a good two inches shorter than Rooney, he looked to be in really good shape - strong, powerful, well balanced. He had a light olive complexion, high cheekbones, and a very faint oriental look to his eyes.

The MC had left the ring now and the referee was giving his last instructions to the two fighters. They nodded their heads, touched gloves, and went back to their respective corners.

As the trainers climbed out of the ring, and the expectant buzz of the crowd grew louder, Cal leaned over to me and said, 'You're really enjoying this, aren't you?'

'I'm working,' I reminded him. 'It's just part of the job.'

'Yeah, but you're still enjoying it.'

I smiled. 'It's the sport of kings, Cal. The noble art, the sweet science—'

'It's two guys beating the shit out of each other.'

The bell rang, and I turned my attention back to the ring.

As soon as the fight started it was obvious that the joker was right about Hassan Tan - he *was* in a different league. Rooney was the more aggressive fighter - constantly barrelling forward, his head down, shoulders hunched, fists pumping like pistons - but very few of his punches actually landed, and those that did were mostly on Tan's arms and shoulders. Tan, meanwhile, was just biding his time, effortlessly moving around the ring, happy to let Rooney tire himself out, while at the same time taking every opportunity

to catch him hard with a straight left jab to the head. Unlike Rooney's punches, Tan's were telling and accurate, and by the end of the first round there was a cut over Rooney's right eye and a visible swelling under his left. He was struggling for breath too, and as he went back to his corner and sat down, he already looked like a beaten man. Tan, on the other hand, was unmarked and barely even sweating.

As one of the ring-girls climbed somewhat ungracefully into the ring and began strutting her stuff - to the inevitable chorus of whistles, hoots, and crude comments - I gazed around the seats nearest the ring, trying to spot Curt Dempsey. From what I knew of him, he rarely missed a chance to show his face in public if he thought it would benefit him in any way, and as this was his club, and Hassan Tan was supposedly his protégé, the least I would have expected from Dempsey was a ringside appearance at this fight, if not at any of the others. But so far I hadn't seen him all night, and as I looked around now, there was still no sign of him.

In the second round, Tan began stepping things up. He started throwing more jabs, working on Rooney's cut eye, and as Rooney reacted to the barrage of left jabs by raising his guard more and more, Tan suddenly unleashed a devastating volley of body shots - four or five clubbing punches that caught Rooney just below the ribs. He staggered to one side, clearly hurt, and when Tan hit him again with a perfect right hook to the head, Rooney almost went down. I was expecting Tan to finish him off then, but Rooney was an experienced fighter, and he knew how to buy time - blocking, clinching, boxing dirty, using his head - and somehow he made it to the end of the round. I couldn't see him surviving another one though, and I began to wonder if the joker's prediction that Rooney wouldn't last three rounds was more than just an idle guess. Maybe he really did know what he was talking about. Maybe it wasn't so much Rooney's experience that had got him through the

second round as the fact that Tan had been holding back, because maybe Tan knew – as the joker did – that all the clever money was on a Rooney KO in the third. This was boxing, after all. And boxing isn't exactly the straightest business in the world. So it wouldn't have surprised me in the least if Rooney had gone down in the third. But he didn't. In fact, if anything, as the round went on, it was Rooney who began to get the upper hand. Which really *was* surprising. Especially as he didn't seem to be doing anything different. He was still using the same basic tactic he'd used in the first round – barrelling forward with his head down, throwing as many punches as he could in the hope that one of them might do some damage – but Tan seemed to have forgotten how to deal with it. Instead of skipping out of Rooney's way and constantly stinging him with a sharp left jab, or switching his attack to his body, Tan was just defending himself now – backing off, blocking, clinching. And he seemed to have lost his air of self-belief too. He no longer looked in control.

'What's the matter with him?' I muttered.

'What?' Cal said, looking up from his mobile.

'He's not fighting any more.'

'Who isn't?'

'Tan . . . there's something wrong with him.'

Cal glanced up at the ring. 'Maybe he's hurt.'

I shook my head. 'He's not hurt.'

In fact, it struck me then that he looked more confused than hurt, as if he had something on his mind, something that troubled him. A couple of times I saw him glance over at his corner, and towards the end of the round, as Rooney had him backed up against the ropes, he quite clearly turned his head and looked out over the crowd towards the back of the hall. Rooney landed one then, a short right hook to Tan's chin. It wasn't a killer punch, but it was enough to remind Tan that he was in a fight, and for the next ten seconds or so he actually threw a few punches himself. But

there was no real venom to them, and by the time the bell rang there was no doubt that Rooney had won the round.

I was watching Tan really closely now, and as he went back to his corner and sat down on his stool, it was clear that he was seriously bothered about something. As soon as his gum shield was out of his mouth he started arguing with his trainer, whispering furiously in his ear. His trainer snapped back at him, hissing through his teeth. Tan glared at him, cursing and shaking his head, and when his cutman tried to give him a drink he angrily swatted the bottle away. More words were exchanged, and then the trainer said something that seemed to stop Tan in his tracks. As the bell sounded, Tan gave his trainer a resigned-looking nod, the trainer shrugged sadly and patted him on the cheek, and Tan got to his feet, blew out his cheeks, and got ready to carry on fighting.

He didn't last very long.

The round started off promisingly enough, with Tan reverting to his skip-and-jab routine, and for a while I thought he'd sorted himself out, but after about thirty seconds he mistimed a jab and momentarily lost his balance, and as he stumbled to one side Rooney caught him with a left hook to his belly. It didn't look like much of a punch, but Tan gasped and doubled over, and Rooney was onto him in a flash. A vicious uppercut to the chin, a clubbing right cross to the side of his head, and Tan was down and out. The referee jumped in and started to count, but everyone knew it was already over. Tan was flat out on his back, his trainer was rushing across the ring, and Rooney was up on the ropes, his arms raised in triumph. The crowd, meanwhile, were jeering and booing.

'What's going on?' Cal said, looking round.

'He threw it,' I said, shaking my head.

'What?'

'Hassan Tan . . . he threw the fight.'

Cal looked at me, puzzled by my annoyance. 'Is that a problem?'

'It is for me,' I sighed.

'Why?'

'Because now Ada's going to kill me.'

MY INTEREST IN Hassan Tan had begun four days earlier when his aunt had showed up at my office in Wyre Street. It was a cold January morning, the rooftops opposite my second-floor window still glittering with frost, and nothing much was happening. Things had been quiet since the lengthy Christmas and New Year break, and although it was the middle of January now, there was still no sign of any work coming in. Times were hard, and the private investigation business, just like everything else, was struggling to survive.

That morning, as usual, I was sitting with Ada on the battered old settee beneath the window in my private office, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, chatting idly about this and that, just passing the time, waiting for something to happen. Ada is my only full-time employee. An overweight and perpetually grumpy old woman, with very poor social skills and the dress sense of a bag lady, she does almost everything for me. She's my secretary, my receptionist, the office administrator. She looks after all the paperwork, the contracts, the finance, and - in her own special way - she looks after me. And despite all her faults, and maybe even because of some of them, I'm inordinately fond of her.

For the last couple of days we'd been trying to work out if there was anything we could do to get the business going, but so far we hadn't come up with much.

'No one's got any money,' Ada said simply, 'that's all there is to it. The economy's fucked, the banks aren't lending, businesses are cutting back, and everyone's maxed out their credit cards to pay for Christmas.' She took a long drag on her cigarette. 'It's not just us, John. I was talking to

someone at Mercer's the other day, and they said their business is down at least 50% on last year.'

I nodded. Mercer Associates is a large corporate investigation company based in Hey, owned and run by two old friends of mine, Leon Mercer and his daughter Imogen. When times were better, Mercer would often subcontract some of their smaller cases to me, but that hadn't been happening for a while.

'The whole country's fucked,' Ada went on. 'The only people making any money at the moment are pawnshops and loan companies.'

'That's what I like about you, Ada,' I said. 'You're always so full of optimism.'

She shrugged. 'I'm just being realistic, that's all. There's no point in pretending everything's OK when it's not.'

'Yeah, well . . . maybe if things get really bad there'll be some more riots, only this time the entire social order will start to break down and we'll descend into a state of anarchy. *Then* I might get some work.'

Ada shook her head. 'If we descend into a state of anarchy, no one's going to bother hiring a private investigator, are they? In a lawless world, if you thought your wife was having an affair, all you'd have to do was follow her yourself, catch her with her lover, and then kill them both. Problem solved.' Ada looked at me, a glint of amusement in her eyes. 'No one would need you any more. You'd be redundant.'

'Yeah, but I'm your employer, don't forget. So you'd be redundant too.'

She smiled. 'I'd get by. I'm resourceful.'

'What, and I'm not?'

'You wouldn't last ten minutes.'

'Why not?'

'Because—'

It was at that point that the door to the main office swung open and a sad-eyed black woman wearing a thick woollen

coat and a bright red headscarf came in.

'Can I help you?' I asked her, getting to my feet.

'I'm looking for Mr Craine.'

'I'm John Craine,' I told her. 'What can I do for you?'

'My name's Ayanna Osman,' she said. 'And I'm hoping you can put my mind at rest.'

After asking her if she'd like some coffee, which Ayanna politely declined, Ada left us alone in my office and I showed Ayanna to the chair in front of my desk. She had the kind of face that doesn't give much away, but I guessed she was probably in her early forties, and I got the impression that she'd been through a lot in her life. She had the world-weary look of someone who's learned the hard way that showing your true feelings can sometimes be dangerous.

As she settled herself down in the chair, and I sat down opposite her and took out a pad of writing paper, I found myself wondering where she came from. Her English was excellent, but it clearly wasn't her first language, and my best guess was that she was originally from somewhere in Africa but that she'd been in the UK for quite some time. Even as the phrase 'somewhere in Africa' entered my head, I realised what a ridiculously inept and narrow-minded description it was, and that if I'd said it out loud my ignorance could quite possibly be taken as an insult. And for a second or two I actually felt quite uncomfortable with myself. But then I thought - *well, firstly, you didn't say it out loud, did you? And secondly, all it really means is that you're reasonably sure she comes from an African country, but that your knowledge of African countries is insufficient to allow you to be more specific.*

'Before we start,' Ayanna said, refocusing my attention, 'can I ask if there's a fee for this?'

'For hiring me?'

'No, I mean for the consultation. Do you charge for the consultation?'

I shook my head. 'You only have to pay if you hire me. We usually ask for a part-payment in advance, and then we'll bill you for the remainder of the payment when the job's finished.'

'Right . . .' she said, a touch hesitantly. 'And whatever I tell you now, is that in confidence?'

'If you do decide to hire me,' I explained, 'we'll draw up a contract that guarantees your confidentiality, but until then I can't promise anything.' I smiled. 'There's no one else here though, it's just the two of us, and unless you confess to some heinous crime, I'm quite happy to respect your privacy.'

She nodded. 'I hope you don't mind me asking.'

'Not at all,' I said.

'It's just . . . well, it's always best to know where you stand, isn't it?'

'Of course it is.' I looked at her. 'So, Ms Osman—'

'Ayanna, please.'

'Right,' I said. 'And I'm John, OK?'

She nodded again.

'So, Ayanna,' I went on, 'how can I put your mind at rest?'

She started off by telling me about her nephew Jamaal, but then all of a sudden she went off on a tangent and began talking about her sister, Sudi, and how it wasn't really Sudi's fault that she'd abandoned her children soon after leaving Somalia . . . and within a minute or two I was totally lost.

'Hold on a second,' I said, holding up my hands. 'I'm getting a bit confused here.'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'It's just that it's a long and quite complicated story, and I'm not really sure how much you need to know and how much I should leave out.'

'All right,' I said, picking up a pen. 'Well, the first thing I need to know is what it's actually about.'

'Right . . .'

I looked at her, waiting for her to go on, but she still seemed unsure what to say. 'Is it about your sister?' I asked.

'Not really . . .'

'Your nephew then?'

'Yes . . . yes, it's about Jamaal.'

'OK,' I said. 'So let's start with him. He's your sister's son, is that right?'

'Yes.'

'Full name?'

'Jamaal Tan.'

I wrote it down. 'And his mother's full name?'

'Sudi Tan.'

'How old is Jamaal?'

'Seventeen . . . or rather, he *was* seventeen. He died last year.'

'How did he die?'

'He was killed, murdered.'

I stared at her. 'Murdered?'

She nodded.

I said, 'And where did this happen?'

'Here . . . in Hey.'

'When?'

'27 August last year,' she said. 'It was a Saturday.'

I paused for a moment, thinking back to last year, but I couldn't remember hearing anything about the murder of a teenage boy, and I found that hard to believe. Hey has its fair share of violence and death, but it's no worse than any other medium-sized British town, and any murder is still rare enough to be a big deal, let alone the murder of a teenage boy, so I should have heard something about it, especially as it's part of my job to know what's going on in this town.

'What happened to him?' I asked Ayanna.

'Jamaal's body was found in one of the underpasses down by the river,' she said quietly. 'He'd been badly beaten, sexually assaulted, and stabbed to death. A man walking his dog called the police early on Sunday morning.'

I frowned. 'And this was definitely in August last year?'

'I know when my nephew was killed, Mr Craine.'

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'it's just that I don't understand why I haven't heard about this before.' I looked at her. 'I mean, as far as I know, there hasn't been anything about Jamaal's murder in any of the papers, local or national, and there was nothing on the news, TV or radio . . .'

'There was one newspaper reporter,' she said. 'A young man, he came round to my flat with a photographer a few days after Jamaal was killed. He said he was from the *Hey Gazette* and was writing a story about my son's murder.'

'He thought Jamaal was your son?'

She nodded. 'I didn't want to speak to him. I told him to go away. He carried on asking me questions, but when the photographer took a picture of me, I just slammed the door in their faces.'

'Did the reporter try getting in touch with you again?'

'No.'

'What was his name?'

She closed her eyes, trying to remember. 'I think it was Morton, or Morgan . . . something like that.'

I wrote down the names. 'And nothing about Jamaal was ever published in the *Gazette*?'

She shook her head. 'I haven't seen anything in any of the papers.'

I thought about that for a while, wondering if it really was as unusual as it seemed, and it did cross my mind for a moment that maybe I was wrong, maybe some murders just don't make the news, for whatever reason. Maybe it happens all the time? If something doesn't make the news, you're not going to know, are you?

I shook my head. A seventeen-year-old boy, beaten, raped, stabbed to death . . . and that doesn't make the news? It was definitely unusual.

I looked at Ayanna. She was sitting very still, just staring down at her lap, a picture of long-suffering patience.

'What about the police?' I asked her.

She looked up. 'They aren't being very cooperative with me.'

'Why not?'

'That's what I was hoping you could find out.'

I paused, staring at her, momentarily reminded of a woman called Helen Gerrish who'd come into my office just over two years ago. I could see Helen now, sitting in the same chair as Ayanna, telling me of her dissatisfaction with the police, asking me to see what I could find out . . .

I'd found out a lot for her.

And even more for myself.

I'd awoken ghosts, some of which were still haunting me now, and I wondered for a moment if it was happening all over again.

'All right,' I said to Ayanna, shaking the memories from my mind, 'tell me everything you know about Jamaal's death.'

She knew he'd been stabbed twenty-two times, and that at least four of the knife wounds would have been fatal. She knew he'd been punched and kicked repeatedly, and brutally beaten around the head and body with some kind of blunt object, most likely a baseball bat. He'd suffered a fractured skull, three broken ribs, and a ruptured spleen. He'd been found with his trousers pulled down, and there were indications that he'd been raped. Twenty-eight wraps of heroin and thirteen rocks of crack cocaine were found in his pockets. Ayanna also knew that as yet no one had been arrested or charged in connection with Jamaal's murder.

I wrote all this down, and then I asked her to take me through her dealings with the police. She told me that the officer in charge of the investigation, Detective Inspector Gavin Lilley, had spoken to her and Jamaal's older brother, Hassan, at some length on the day Jamaal's body was found, and that at first Lilley had seemed reasonably understanding and sympathetic.

'He apologised for having to ask us so many questions so soon after Jamaal's death, but he said it was vital to gather as much information as soon as possible in order to find out what had happened.'

I nodded, noting down Lilley's name. I didn't know him personally, but I'd heard of him.

'I did my best to answer all his questions,' Ayanna went on, 'but it was . . . well, it was difficult. I have to be very careful.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, as I said, it's a long and complicated story . . .'

I smiled. 'I've got the time if you have.'

She sighed. 'My sister and I were brought to this country in 1999 to work as domestic staff for a wealthy Russian businessman. When we arrived in London, the man who'd arranged everything for us took away our passports and told us they wouldn't be returned until we'd paid off the fee we owed him for bringing us over and arranging our accommodation and employment.' Ayanna shook her head. 'The fee was so large that even if we'd earned any money it would have taken us years to pay off, but the Russian never paid us a penny.'

'You worked for nothing?'

She nodded. 'We weren't the only ones. Most of the others were either African or East European, and we were all in the same position. We'd all had our passports taken away, so we had nothing to prove we had a right to be in the country, and it was made perfectly clear to us that if we went to the authorities without any documents, the best we could hope for was a long spell in prison, and for those with children, like Sudi, they'd never see them again. But there were stronger threats too, stories about those who *had* tried to contact the authorities, or those who'd decided to leave the house and try their luck on their own, and how these people had simply disappeared without trace.' Ayanna sighed again. 'So we all just did what we were told. We cleaned,