PROLOGUE

The boy in the supermarket moves slowly between the aisles. It is early on a Saturday morning, and the reflected glass of the automatic doors shows the candyfloss pink sky above Friesly. A very sweet colour.

But the boy already knows the view like the back of his hand.

The tall, winding spire of the old cathedral, the red-brick buildings where people sleep and eat and live. The chimneys that curl with plumes of smoke on cool days like this one. And the statue of the old man with the thick beard, the wide-brimmed hat, the pigeons that continually coo at his feet. That's Sir William Barker, of course. The boy wrote an essay about him and his factories for school once. Then there are the glinting shutters of the not-yet-open Asian clothing shops. Beside them, the ramshackle barber's where Jafari Williams stands with his bad back and cuts hair. And the launderette with the peeling sign.

The sleeping cats on strips of corrugated cardboard the homeless also nap on. The skipping ropes left in the middle of the road. The green of the faraway moors.

Everything is quiet in the mornings. Not echoing with

the *rat-a-tat* of screeching wheels and fast cars, scores to settle, drug dealers, and people dying amid the deals. Everything is bathed in a rosy glow. It makes Friesly feel less like a throbbing wound and more like a heartbeat. Steady. Alive. So the boy keeps his back to the view. In the sixteen years of his life he's memorized it all. It's written on the inside of his eyelids.

He doesn't realize that one of his socks is falling lower and lower on his ankle though.

Well, the boy had made sure to tuck both of those socks inside the ends of his grey joggers when he'd woken up, slipped his sliders on, and anticipated his mum's wishes. It didn't matter to him that those socks were still wet with *wudhu* from the morning prayer. He'd headed to Mahmood's Foods – the large international supermarket out by Sir William Barker's statue – for the cereal and breakfast biscuits he knew his family loved.

But now, in the dull glow of the supermarket lights, one sock dips down his right ankle. It itches at the bone. And there is a yawn itching at the corners of the boy's mouth. He stretches it open, wide as a mile, before dashing a large box of sugary cereal into his basket. *Oh yeah*, he thinks, picking up the custard-flavoured biscuits his mum's always going on about. And then a pack of chocolate straws for his sister, some *halal* rashers for his brother. *Can't forget those.*

He makes his way past the meat counter, laden with lamb chops and mince out front, and an aisle that smells like chopped chillies in airtight packages. The boy smiles a *salaam* to the uncle at the till. He readjusts a jacket which is large and puffy for the slanty January sunlight.

'Keep the change, Uncs,' he says.

Old Qasim Mahmood doesn't stop thumbing his well-used prayer beads, the silver hairs in his beard catching in the shop's glow. He grunts a response.

The boy picks up the carrier bag full of shopping he walked down two cobbled streets for. It's pale and white, see-through and flimsy like chicken skin. It barely weighs anything for him. But the boy still exaggerates a groan as he brings it down off the loading part of the till.

The way home requires no map. Just muscle memory. The steep, winding streets, the hedges bare and dry in the winter months. He's smiling on the short walk, one of those *halal* rashers already between his teeth, a still-rosy sky up ahead. He texts his mum that he's got the goods.

What would you do without me? whooshes to her text inbox.

'Oi. What do you think you're doing out here?' whooshes into his ears.

The boy falters, teeth hitting fleshy tongue instead of rasher meat. The taste of blood floods his mouth as he faces the police officers standing in front of him. They stare Zayd Ali up and down. They repeat their question.

'You heard us. Don't act stupid. What do you think you're doing out here?'

TWO AND A HALF YEARS LATER

PART ONE: STRANGERS

featuring:
a newspaper article – an accident – a stone woman – Barker Summer Festival – spray paint – a video game – a broken washing machine – a leather wallet – the police – a running route – a barber – a piggy bank – three troublemakers – a napkin rose – the first haiku – PC Chris – aloo gobi sandwiches – jalebi – a field of grief – ice cream – a wedding portrait – a playground – an old kiss – and a homeless man

CHAPTER 1
AMIR

There's a newspaper stand outside Mahmood's Foods that's all rusted metal and creaky wire. It gets warm in the sticky heat. It's right beside the saggy cardboard boxes full of fruit, the little plastic bags you can stick the fruit in, and the bottles of cola-smelling carbonated fizzy drinks that have been there for so long they taste like supermarket dust. I learnt that the hard way.

Anyway, the important headlines for the day always get put on display on that stand. They're kept behind this dark criss-cross mesh thing that stops the newspapers from flying away in the dull breeze, and the headlines are written so big you can't miss reading them. Not that I'm into reading and books and that.

I just remember that once, a few years back, when I was thirteen, the newspaper stand had this headline on it in massive letters:

FATAL TRAFFIC ACCIDENT LEAVES LOCAL BOY, 16, DEAD

With my brother Zayd's name in the article. The local boy.

Even now, I don't like remembering the details of what happened to him. In my opinion, Zayd was the best brother in the world. A nice guy. Proper smart, sick at *FIFA*, and the worst singer ever. He could've gone to uni. Not for singing obviously. The guy used to try and make everything sound like Elvis after this one time when we were all going into town, and we were looking for a normal radio station in my mum's car, and he accidentally put the oldies one on, and this weird hound dog song started blaring out. We all burst out laughing. He always found excuses to make his lip go weird and go *ah-ha-huh* after that. It was so stupid. So funny.

Still, the article said there was an unnamed eyewitness who'd seen the whole thing. How Zayd died.

There was an actual person who saw the entire traffic accident.

The police in their uniforms.

Zayd running into the busy street because they were after him.

The bright headlights of the Express Deliveries van with the angel's wings painted on the side. White like the snow we'd hurled at each other in the winter months, me with gloves on, him with none, just cackling like a maniac.

The lights and wings becoming blurred as the van's heavy wheels ran over his body.

Zayd's carrier bag full of biscuits and sugary cereal scattered over the tarmac. Along with one outstretched arm, a hand holding on to nothing. And his blood.

The unnamed eyewitness said it wasn't true what the police were saying. That they'd gone after Zayd, chased him down, because he was dealing drugs and transporting them beyond

Friesly. To Lowbridge, to Bramracken, to Hent, and everywhere around us. The unnamed eyewitness said it was a case of mistaken identity, that he hadn't been the one they were looking for, and Zayd must've been scared, and that was why he ran. Not because he was a drug dealer or a criminal or anything. He was just scared. He had been scared.

But there weren't any clues in the newspaper for who the unnamed eyewitness was.

There was just the name of the lady who wrote the article.

Zakiya Bhatti. *A journalist with an eye for injustice*, the little biography about her said. No picture or anything. Just that line.

Back then, I asked Qasim Mahmood – the old guy who owns Mahmood's Foods – to give us the newspaper. I didn't have any money to buy it. I just needed it. I was a kid, and I needed to show it to my mum, who kept crying at our kitchen table, and to my uncle Nadeem, who kept patting her shoulder and looking off into the distance, like he couldn't stand seeing her cry at all.

Fiza, my sister, was too young to know what the newspaper article meant.

She was nine, just tall enough to reach my waist.

I don't remember if she even realized Zayd was dead or not. She just kept trudging around the empty silence of our house, asking us if we wanted to watch *Gladiator*, that old movie with Russell Crowe, for the hundredth time. Looking back, Zayd probably shouldn't have shown her it so young. But us lot were always climbing trees, making swords out of branches, fighting together in the colosseum that was our back garden.

Qasim Mahmood gave me that newspaper. He didn't say anything when he passed it to me. He didn't even look at me properly. I thought it was like my uncle and my mum all over again. I don't think people like looking at other people when they're crying.

'Ma,' I remember I called out when I got home. She was sitting on the sofa, with Fiza curled up asleep next to her, the both of them facing a blank TV screen. No *Gladiator* on. No nothing.

'Ma, look.' I shoved the newspaper in her face. 'Look, this says Zayd wasn't doing anything wrong –'

She kept staring at the blank screen.

'It says someone saw he wasn't doing anything wrong.'

She moved the newspaper away from her face.

'Look –'

She moved the newspaper away again.

'Look –'

There were tear stains on her cheeks. Like when rain goes down a window sill and later on you can still see where it dripped down.

'Amir,' she said, and I saw the corners of her lips turn down and go wobbly, 'I'm tired today. Too tired to read. Will you make us a cup of tea? You always make the best tea.'

I went into the kitchen and opened the cupboard for teabags. Sugar. A dash of fridge-cold milk. I left Mum's mug on the table because I knew her hands got too shaky to hold it when she started crying. She took my hand when I passed by though, and sat me down, and she held me by her side until

my cheeks were dry and the rest of me warm with sleep. Her tea stayed untouched. Warm for a bit. Then cold.

I waited for a long time after that.

I waited for her to stop being too tired to read the newspaper article I kept at the bottom of my underwear drawer in mine and Zayd's room. I thought Fiza would be old enough one day, and we could find out who the unnamed eyewitness was together, and then everyone would stop muttering all these lies about our brother.

'He deserved it,' people said behind our backs. And with their eyes when they looked at us joking around the shops in town, and with their mouths when me and Fiza were late out of school because of detention. 'He was guilty. Good for nothing. A criminal, a thug. Otherwise he wouldn't have run away in the first place.'

I checked the newspaper stand outside Mahmood's Foods for more articles by Zakiya Bhatti every day. Three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

When it was hot out. When it was cold out. When the Asian clothing shops got new stock and threw away the old weird-wigged mannequins in last season's *choori dar*. When Wash 'n' Wear's creaky old painted sign peeled an extra layer off in the heat. When my mates got us rotisserie chicken from inside Mahmood's Foods and we ate it together, trying to avoid oily stains on our school ties and blazers, licking our fingers by the pavement, laughing at nothing.

I shivered in my parka in January, looking at the newspaper stuck behind the criss-cross frame.

I felt cooler in my basketball shorts in June, squinting at headlines across the tarmac. I looked up Zakiya Bhatti's name online, too. Tried to find a phone number or something. But nothing came up except a press profile with an email address. I messaged it a lot. I never got a reply.

Eventually my mum didn't cry at the kitchen table any more. She stopped letting her tea go cold. But she found new reasons to be tired. Stuff that was as hard as our dad leaving us for a *gori* and a new family, but never harder than Zayd dying.

Fiza caught up, as well. She knew Zayd was dead.

But it was still just me checking the newspaper stand outside Mahmood's Foods for Zakiya Bhatti's name. Finding nothing.

'Oi.'

'Oi, what? Fiza, I'm older than you, it's my sixteenth birthday in, like, a month. You can't talk to me like that.'

I could practically hear her rolling her eyes on the phone. 'Can you chill out please? Stop acting like you're the boss of me.' And then, in response to me saying nothing: '*Fine.*' Fiza made her voice even girlier than it already was. 'Amir *paapu* . . .'

I swear I cringed so bad at her calling me that sappy brotherly nickname I missed a goal in *FIFA*. And then my mates' cackling was so loud in my headset it didn't even matter that I wasn't wearing it properly.

'Look, Fiza –' my grip on my phone got tighter, my fingers struggling over the cracked screen – 'just tell me what you want already. Unless it's something for Uzair. Then I don't care.'

I really hated our cousin. He lived next door. He was older than us, always did *salaam* to our mum, and always had different car fresheners in his pockets. Mint, pine tree, sandalwood . . . Old-man smells. He was always trying to get me to go for a drive with him in his banged-up car as well, get desserts from Long Road out by the river. Always acting like he was driving a Lamborghini Gallardo or something. *Kasmey*, he was a proper beg.

'What the hell, Amir,' Fiza moaned down my ear. 'You're so mean to him. At least he's helping out at Nishaan right now! Unlike some people . . .'

I knew she was pacing up and down in the back room where we stocked the frozen samosas and pakoras, waving her hands about as she told me off. My almost-teenage sister, the perfect little madam, doing the first extra waiting shifts of the summer at our mum's restaurant for fun. I would've had to do those waiting shifts at Nishaan too, but I'd just done my GCSEs, so I was allowed to chill out for two weeks before it was back to being just like her and stupid Uzair and his little brothers. Everyone was always running between packed-out tables, taking a billion orders for parathas, five types of *salan*, samosa chaat, paninis, wraps, burgers, chips, and don't forget the mint sauce.

'Alright, listen.' I imagined Fiza cocking her hip. 'Mum's saying can you take the bins out? She forgot it's bin day tomorrow.'

'Fine.'

'Also, can you shower? I bet the living room stinks of boy sweat.'

It was my turn to roll my eyes. 'Oh yeah?' I said. 'I bet you lot stink of *salan*.'

I hung up before she could shout at me. Because Fiza probably did stink! Everyone who even took one step in Nishaan ended up reeking of garlic and onions and a really good curry. It was the curse of having a great chef like our Mohamed.

I told my mates I had to go after that. I'd already embarrassed Manchester United that game, barely even gotten us any goals. They were all shouting at me to stay on, but the bins were looking a bit rank outside, and the living room did smell a bit disgusting in the jammy afternoon heat, and my mum would definitely kill me if I left it like that.

Lace curtains letting no breeze in. A plate of cut-up apples going brown on the table.

So I held my breath and took the bins out. I swatted away bare flies by the outside kerb. I got some shade though. That was because of the overgrown hedges our right and left neighbours still hadn't cut. Nearly all of them were sitting outside anyway, enjoying the hot weather, listening to whatever random Bollywood song the ice-cream man had for his van that week, or to the crunch of worn tyres that meant the fruit-and-veg guy was coming round. Bare green chillies, potatoes, tomatoes, garlic bulbs for only a quid. The old aunties had been doing the same thing every day for weeks, ever since school broke up for GCSEs. They sat on the warm stone walls, fanning their faces with their dupattas, watching their kids as they played cricket using old crates for stumps, talking about everyone and everything while peeling potatoes or chopping ladies' fingers for *pindiya*.

Including us lot always being late putting our bins out. But that was better than some of the other stuff they said about us Ali kids.

I watched this lanky kid tell his little brother to 'run man, what are you doing, start running', when he hit the ball proper far. The little brother got so confused, hearing that. Like he'd somehow forgotten the rules for cricket. Then he started running, a split second too late, with this big toothy grin, all bright on his face, and the lanky one started cheering, with the same toothy grin, their cricket bats dragging loudly behind them.

I started smiling, too. Just watching them, from the shade. Just seeing them together. Until I wasn't any more. Smiling, I mean. I went back inside after that.

'. . . He may have passed away in 1819,' the TV blared as I opened all the living-room windows and started spraying air freshener everywhere, 'but Sir William Barker's legacy of helping to end child exploitation in millwork is part of Friesly's history. The Barker Summer Festival will return in August, but you can discover more details about the man himself in a new series, starting tonight at nine p.m . . .'

I don't know what it was about hearing that same name we always got taught about in school, and seeing those film shots of Sir William Barker's bearded stone statue in the middle of town, but it really pissed me off. It was all we ever heard about: Friesly, the birthplace of Sir William Barker. Friesly, the small town in West Yorkshire where the old mills that little kids used to work in still stand, and where there's a little train station that random old people like to come and take photos of.

That's north Friesly of course. Us lot, we're south Friesly.

And sure, there's nice streets for shopping here. Bits of green fields and too-steep hills that make for good leg workouts. Architecture for days. You can't hate a place like this unless you love it, too. Because there are also druggy gangs running the streets in south Friesly. People getting stabbed on street corners, turning everywhere we walk red. Addicts and crackheads stooping to knock on windows of stopped cars at traffic lights for change. Kids dying in traffic accidents because the police scared them so bad – and killed them.

Anyway, I don't get it. I never have. Why some people get to be remembered so long after they've died, with a statue and a big song and dance every few minutes and some people don't. Not in the same way. Not at all.

My mum and sister were all chatter at dinnertime that night:

'Amir –' Fiza's elbows were on the table again, crashing into her plate of lamb biryani – 'you should've seen this guy eat all these gulab jamun today. Innit, ma? He was worse than Amir! He kept going even when I thought he was about to stop!'

'Well,' I said, 'some of us are growing boys, not shrimpy little gets like you.'

'Who you calling a shrimp, you stupid cheeseburger?'

I burst out laughing. 'Cheeseburger? Who taught you that one, your best mate Juveria?'

Mum sighed when we started aiming kicks at each other: 'Wouldn't it be nice to eat some lamb *biryani* with my kids in peace?' she moaned to the heavens. 'I think so! I think it would be nice!'

We helped her clear the table afterwards though. We wiped everything down, turned the TV on, and the kettle. I showered. Fiza shouted at me for not cleaning the shower afterwards. I shouted at her for thinking it was fine to shout at me in the first place. But I reread the newspaper article again, halfway through taking out a new pair of boxers.

I thought of my brother, and the angel's wings on that van, and the carrier bag spilling the groceries out on the side of the road.

Downstairs, the TV was playing that advertisement about Sir William Barker again.

The next day, I took the spray paint cans we were supposed to be saving for fixing the paint job on Uzair's banged-up car out of our garage. I thought that the bus shelter opposite the statue of Sir William Barker looked like a good spot for Zayd's name. With the sun warming it up on the other side, stopping it from getting cold.

CHAPTER 2
EMAN

'I'm telling you –' Farida aunty crossed her arms over her long black jilbab, her back as curved as her long hooked nose – 'if the mosque committee gave us more money then maybe we'd be able to drum up more publicity for these community projects you keep bringing up. Hmm, Maariyah? Don't you think? I've heard these days they're putting more money into hosting *halal* speed-dating events than into fundraising for the homeless. *Astaghfirullah*, like speed-dating can even be *halal*.'

'I don't know, Farida.' Balqis aunty winked at me from across the freshly mopped chequerboard floor in Wash 'n' Wear. 'Maybe if you'd tried it earlier, you wouldn't be single at sixty-four.'

Steam seemed to rise from Farida aunty's flared nostrils. 'What did you just say, Balqis?'

My nani looked hurriedly at me. Old Maariyah Malik was immediately desperate to hush her best friends' squabbling, their swearing in multilingual tongues. But two pairs of bony fists and a billion insults about 'overgrown moustaches' and 'looking like a donkey' were already flying in the middle of the launderette.

Nani was really good at distracting Farida aunty and Balqis aunty though – in those days, always with a reference to the benefits of charity work, a phone tree, gathering donations for the homeless.

She had a tiny stub of a pencil in her hand, and her big Nokia phone nestled between her shoulder and her cheek.

'*Acha meri gal sunno!*' her crackly voice bellowed. 'Listen to what I have to say! Are we telling people to donate their unwanted things to make the mosque look better? No! We're doing it because we know the homeless need blankets and food and the things we take for granted!'

The list of necessities, along with who would supply them, that she was always writing down on the back of an old receipt was simple and clear:

So-and-so was down to drop off toothpaste.

Her cousin had a few jumpers she no longer wore.

His brother-in-law was sure there were a few dented cans of tuna he no longer needed at his takeaway on the outskirts of town.

And deodorant.

Dried mango slices and pruney-looking raisins for snacking on.

Shoelaces and hair ties. Soap. Leave-in shampoo.

These things always needed to be chased up though. These people had to be prodded into remembering their capacity for goodness. And Nani never minded doing the prodding. Even when it was the kindred spirits she'd gathered by her side since childhood that she had to prod.

'Take it back!' Farida aunty yelled now, about that comment regarding her dating history.

'Why?!' Balqis aunty said. 'I just spoke the truth!'

'Yes, and God loves the truth!' Nani agreed, her Nokia still nestled under her ear, the eyes behind her large googly glasses squinting at a number she'd written down just yesterday. 'God loves when we are kind to our brothers and sisters in Islam, too! So why don't we apologize, hmm? All of us! It'll be fun!'

I had a different idea of fun though.

I just ried to focus on the game I was playing on my phone. The intricacies of *Ball*, Level 27, always making my eyes go funny with concentration.

But I couldn't help the smile taking over my face listening to all of this.

And I could tell that Nani was trying to stifle the laughter coming out from under her command of our Mirpuri language, too.

Even if she was trying to act all busy and solemn and serious. I could always tell when she was close to cracking. Her smile always turned her eyes into little crescent moons.

'And you call yourself a Muslim,' Farida aunty huffed at Balqis aunty. Then she busied herself with tugging her black *dupatta* tighter around her head. 'Exposing other people's flaws like this, laughing at other people's flaws like this . . .'

Her grimace was already disappearing though. Farida aunty's rage disappeared completely when Balqis aunty started pulling at her arms, when Nani searched for a non-existent dimple in her gaunt cheek.

'Don't you know, Farida?' My grandma cackled, her head thrown back to reveal the silver of her plaited hair. 'You should by now. We only love to tease.'

This was a usual weekday in the summer holidays for me. The aunties' arguments in Wash 'n' Wear, the rasp of my nani's language, the sunlight drifting in through the overhead windows, the dry street dirt that mingled with a fresh laundry-powder breeze . . .

It was all as much of a constant as the bright sounds and twinkly lights of *Ball*, leaving squiggles and shapes on the backs of my eyelids.

As the sound of my mum's car, crunching into the gravel of our driveway when she was finished with her evening nursing shifts at Friesly General Infirmary.

As the coloured-in GCSE revision posters for science and maths still hanging on the rough wallpapered walls of the bedroom I shared with Nani.

Beside the drawings and doodles of my favourite video game characters, of course. Sonic, Mario and Tails. Tails, who Nani especially loved for looking like a particularly happy cat she'd had in the village of her youth. '*Mano*,' she sometimes hummed fondly at that sketch while standing by our big dresser, rubbing half of the strong-smelling green tub of Vaseline into her wrinkled skin.

'Ah!' I yelped, watching my phone screen light up with another level defeated. Level 28, winking and blinking and disappearing in front of me. 'Ah!' My trainers tapped a rhythm against the chequerboard floor. 'I did it!' I looked for Nani's eyes. 'I did it!'

I'd never gotten that far in *Ball* before. People on the forums online said even getting past Level 20 was impressive.

'Well done!' Nani beamed at the sight of my giggling face.

She offered me a thumbs-up that felt as warm as the gold wedding bangles on her wrist. And even though there was all this distance between us – the silhouette of the squabbling aunties, and the sound of customers on the weathered stoop beneath the peeling Wash 'n' Wear sign – I gave her a thumbs-up back.

Pretty soon all the usual faces were dragging their bin bags full of washing from the flats south of the river and Nani and the aunties were ready to greet them. Smiles for the tired nods, small talk for the change in coppers. A helping hand for the stained pushchairs, aching backs, sleepless eyes, hungry happy kids.

Azrah Bhatti aunty was there, too. But she was a lot richer than our regulars. She lived north of the river. That was where the water ran clear, the pavements were swept regularly, blossom trees dropped their pretty pink petals, and the buses always came on time.

'Don't forget, Eman,' Nani said as she grinned in the face of a gummy little toddler, 'washing machine number twelve is your responsibility.'

'Hmm?' My thumbs were flying over Level 28. Soon to be Level 29. 'Um, *jee*, Nani.'

Her walking stick sounded far away in seconds, her mouth already grumbling in response to whatever Azrah aunty was saying about her apparently very expensive clothes and our apparently very rough handling of them.