For Chloe, my love

JANETTA OTTER-BARRY BOOKS

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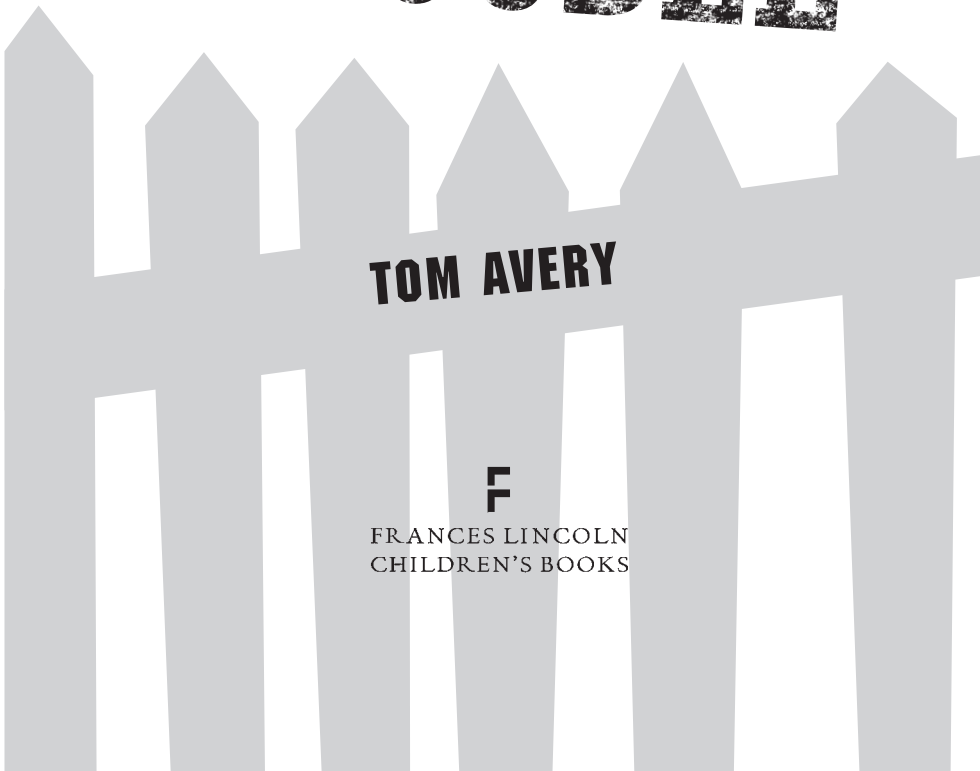
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TOO MUCH TROUBLE



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CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Prologue

The gun was much heavier than I expected. I struggled to hold it steady, two feet out in front of my face. Heavy, cold and terrible. I had seen several guns, hundreds if you count those in films and on television, but I had never held one. I had certainly never pointed a gun at someone's face. I had never threatened to take away a person's life.

'Give me the piece, Emmanuel,' said the large man without a trace of hesitancy, as I stared at his face through the sights of a pistol. His slow, accented drawl resounded with the sure confidence of a man who was used to obedience. 'Give it to me, boy!'

My hands shook as my resolve began to break.



Chapter 1

If you stay really still and really quiet, people don't notice you. Even if they're looking straight at you. Even if they're asking you questions. Even if you're answering them. I was good at not being noticed. No one had noticed me for years.

You can be too quiet. There's quiet and then there's 'weird quiet'. If you're weird quiet you definitely get noticed. I knew a boy called Akeeb Aslam, he was weird quiet. He got taken out of my class. After that he had to talk to Miss Harding every break-time about how he was feeling, and other stuff that teachers think pupils need to talk about. I didn't want that to happen to me.

If that had happened, the game would, almost certainly, have been up. If that had happened, people would have started asking the right questions, the kind of questions that could have caused trouble for more than just me.

This is not the story of how I stayed quiet, how I slipped under the radar of so many teachers. This is the story of questions being asked and trouble being encountered. It starts on my last day at my first secondary school; I was in Year Seven.

It starts here because I want you to see my last ordinary day before guns and threats and 'real' crime entered my life.

That day my geography teacher, Mr Banks, was asking us all where our families came from. We were meant to be learning about why people move to different countries. He called it migration. I knew all about migration.

He had asked a few pupils before me. Some from England, some from Pakistan. A lot of the pupils who went to that school were from Pakistan. A lot were from England too. Then it was my turn.

'Emmanuel,' Mr Banks said, 'could you tell the class where your family come from?'

Be quiet, but not too quiet, and never answer too

quickly either. Weird keen and weird quiet, they both get noticed.

After trying to look thoughtful, I replied, 'My mum's from France and my dad's from Central Africa, sir.'

'Wow! Where did you grow up, Emmanuel?'

'A bit in Africa and a bit here, sir.'

Mr Banks kept on going. 'Where do you call home then?'

I just shrugged.

'Thank you, Emmanuel,' Mr Banks said. Then he moved on to Billy. Billy's mum and dad were just from England. Mr Banks didn't say 'wow', but I'd rather my parents were from England.

I guess I could have said I was from anywhere. Portugal would have been cool; I could have said I had gone to school on the beach.

But lying is not really my thing. Generally you don't need to lie. It's so much easier to leave out bits of the truth than to add in lies.

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I walked home with Asad and Ikram. They were brothers, twins in fact, and probably the smallest

Year Sevens in the whole school. They had lots of cousins all over the place though, so nobody messed with them.

'Don't stop it, pop it and lock it, never gonna stop, you can't stop me!'

Ikram's phone was blazing out the latest Lil' Legacy track. We were all trying to rap along. Everyone loved Lil' Legacy at my school: everyone who counted, anyway.

'What you doing this weekend then, Em?' asked Ikram. He emphasised my name by kicking a Coke can into the road. I watched the can sail off the pavement and jolt to a halt as it hit the wheel of a parked car on the other side of the road.

'Nothing much. Might head into town. Maybe play some football. What about you two?'

'Goin' to our cousins in Bradford, innit,' Asad replied. 'Yousef's gonna show us his new car. He's gonna be driving soon.' Asad mimed his cousin driving along, bopping his head to show the music playing and turning his head from side to side in challenge to the other imaginary motorists.

Ikram continued. 'Yeah, he thinks he's gonna be a bad-man then. But I reckon Uncle will have him back at college.' Asad's mime ended with him

crashing the car – he jolted around as if he'd been electrocuted.

Asad and Ikram were easy to be friends with. They hardly ever asked big questions and they would do all the talking if I let them, which suited me fine. They didn't even know where I lived. They knew I had a little brother but I had taught him enough not to go shouting his mouth off. I thought I had taught him how to not be noticed too.

I left the two brothers at the gate of their house as usual. I could see their grandma twitching the heavy floral curtains. I knew that if I hung around I'd get fed, but I had to pick up Prince, my brother. And besides, if you go to dinner at someone's house, they ask you questions and it causes trouble when you don't answer.

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Prince used to walk home on his own, but the school had stopped him when he couldn't (maybe that should be wouldn't) tell them how far it was to his house. I had been picking him up for a few weeks and I did not like it at all. I walked through the gates of the playground just as the bell went. Parents as far

as the eye could see, all waiting for their kids. I said hello to a few people, parents of friends and parents of Prince's friends. I never stopped to talk if I could help it.

'Emmanuel!' I heard a call behind me. I turned round to see a lady approaching me. Someone's mother, maybe Prince's friend, Harry's. 'Hello, honey, is your mum around?'

I looked to each side. Wasn't it clear that my mother wasn't around? 'Sorry, she's at home,' I replied.

The lady reached into her bag and pulled out a little slip of paper. She handed it to me as she said, 'Could you get her to give me a call, honey? We wanted to see what day Prince could come over for tea.' The piece of paper had a phone number on it and a name, 'Judy'.

'All right,' I said, as I pocketed Judy's phone number.

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I had gone to St Mary's Primary School, now Prince's school, for just under three years. I joined near the beginning of Year Four.

It's much harder not to be noticed at primary school

than at secondary. You have one teacher all the time who tries to get to know the whole class. Then there's dinner ladies and teaching assistants and old ladies who just come in to hear you read, all keen on asking the 'cute little kids' questions. It's definitely harder at primary school, and I admired the way Prince did it.

He shone so bright that no one could see the boy underneath. He was one of the school's 'most promising' pupils; he was in the football and hockey teams; and, if anyone had taken him, he could have taken part in a national athletics competition.

I found it much harder than Prince. Teachers tried to call home four times about my behaviour. I learned quite early on, that to get by you sometimes have to do things that are 'unacceptable'. And 'unacceptable' behaviour sometimes led to fights: fights in which my temper always got the better of me.

When teachers phoned the number they had on my record, they only ever got an answer-phone. It was my uncle's answer-phone, and he was almost never at home.

'Why don't we have any other contact numbers for you, Emmanuel?'

I'd shrug, looking down at the floor. For some reason the teachers liked you to look at them when they were telling you off, even though this often made them angrier. I always tried to steer clear of the angry teachers, because my temper would only get the better of me too and, worse than anything, teachers hate you answering back.

'Well, do you know your parents' work numbers?' the teacher would continue.

I would shrug again. Shrugging makes teachers angry, but not as angry as not answering and certainly not as angry as lying - just the right amount of angry. The kind of angry where they are ready to give up on you, which was fine by me.

'You don't know any other phone numbers? Emmanuel, you are in Year Five now, you're not in Reception. You need to take some responsibility!' At this point the teacher's voice would be rising.
Whatever you do, do not answer. Glance up at them, looking as sorry as you can, then look back down. This is the best teacher-calming move I know.

Luckily, some teachers let it drop. They'd phone just that once, maybe leave a message, maybe write a note in my planner, maybe ask me about it the next day. They usually wouldn't even notice if

no response came back – they had dealt with the situation.

Prince just got the regular letters home. Events, days out, school fetes, you know, the usual. Anything that needed signing, I'd sign. I signed as Victor Anatole. That's our uncle's name. I signed my own letters too. Like I said, teachers usually aren't that careful. I'd even signed Emmanuel Anatole on a few letters, when I'd not really been thinking. As long as they have a signature in their hands most teachers don't mind.

Looking back now, I know that the teachers must have been asking some questions. I'm sure that they discussed the two boys whose parents never showed up to parents' evenings. But no one asked the right questions.

There were teachers who really tried to care for me and Prince. Asking us how we were getting on. Asking about life at home. Asking about our parents. But I guess it's difficult to carry on caring when all you get is shrugs in reply.