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Kevin Brooks

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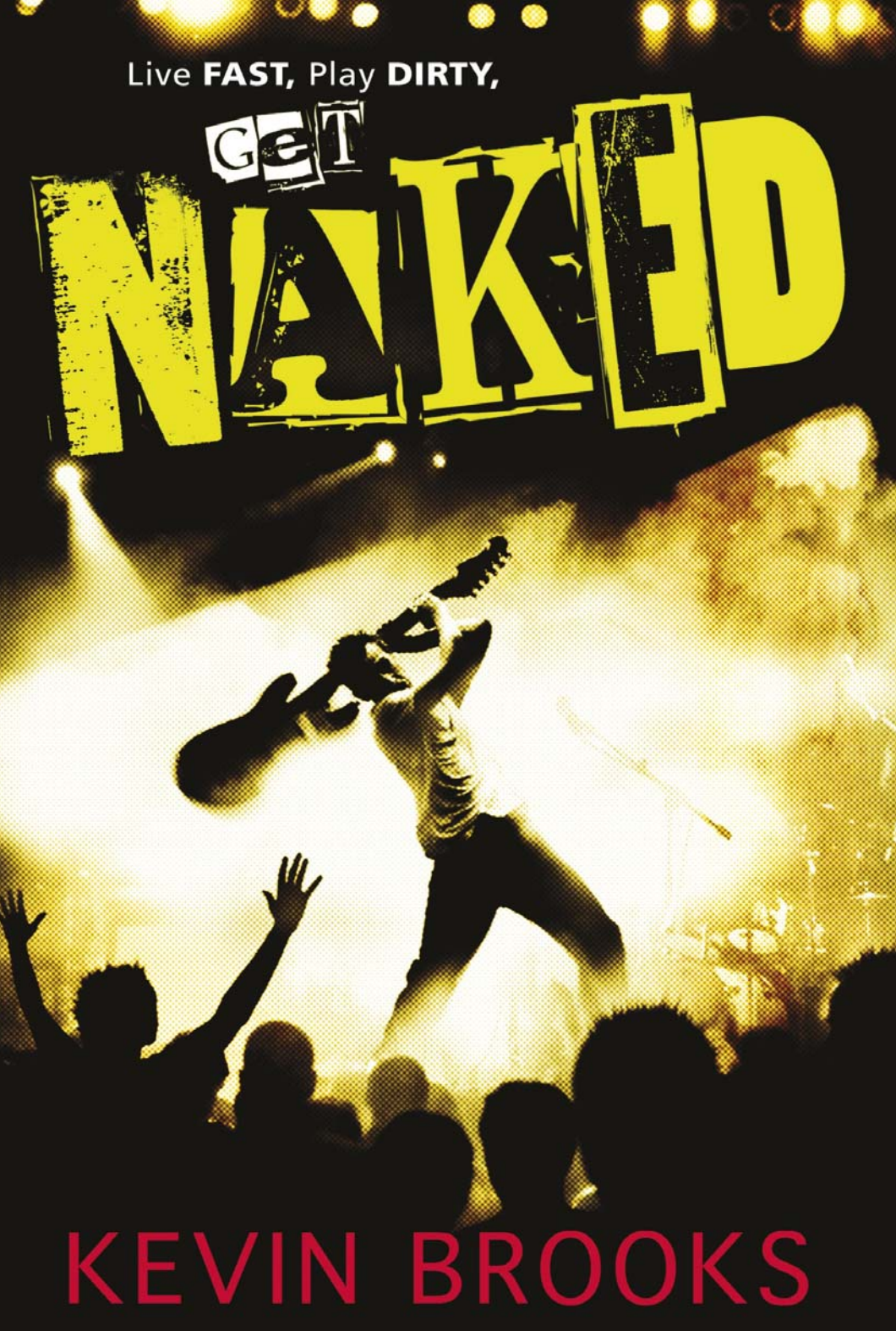
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KEVIN BROOKS

Naked

Kevin Brooks



PENGUIN BOOKS

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I

My heart was born in the long hot summer of 1976; my life was made, my love was sealed, my soul was lost and broken. It was the summer of so many things – heat and violence, love and hate, dreams and nightmares, heaven and hell – and when I look back on it now, it's hard to tell the good from the bad.

It was *all* good and bad.

Altogether, all at once.

It was everything.

It was the summer I turned seventeen. It was the summer that burned for weeks on end, melting the tar on the roads. It was the summer of madness, the summer of punk, the summer of wasted lives . . .

It was all these things.

And more.

Much more . . .

It was the summer of William Bonney.

William's story has been with me for almost thirty-five years now, hidden away behind the cross of my heart, and although I don't have to hide it any more, I can't start telling it until I've told you something about Curtis Ray. Because without Curtis, I would never have met William. In fact, without Curtis, there would never have been a story at all.

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I didn't actually know Curtis Ray when I started at Mansfield Heath School in the autumn of 1970, but I knew who he was. *Every*one knew who Curtis was; he was that kind of kid. Although he was still only thirteen at the time – a year older than me – he was already known for being *different*. He was Curtis Ray, the second-year kid with the long blond hair and the bolshy attitude, the hippy kid who wore surf beads and earrings and a black leather jacket, the kid who played electric guitar. He was the kind of boy you either loved or hated – and I'm pretty sure that even those who professed to hate him were secretly a little bit in love with him. And that applied to both the girls *and* the boys.

Of course, being a year older than me (and light years beyond my social circle at the time), Curtis wouldn't have known of my existence. I knew that *he* existed. I saw him in passing almost every day. But that's all he could ever be to me – a passing figure in the corridors at school, a reverently whispered name – *'look, there's Curtis Ray'* – a boy from another planet.

However much I dreamed about him – and I don't mind admitting that I *did* dream about him – I knew that they were only dreams. He *was* from another planet. He was cool, hip, rebelliously different. I was just different. He was so good-looking that even the girls who hated his long hair and his hippy music simply couldn't resist him. I, on the other hand, was generally considered to be 'not bad-looking . . . if you like that kind of thing'. And while Curtis seemed to know exactly who he was and what he wanted to be, my early teenage years were spent in a perpetual state of bewilderment. Not only did I have no confidence in myself, I also lacked faith in the sanity and purpose of everything around me. I just couldn't understand what the world was about,

what it was all for, what it was supposed to mean . . .

All in all, I was a pretty *confused* kind of girl. And although Curtis's girlfriends over the years were both numerous and varied (in age, type, and character), the one thing they all had in common – apart from being beautiful and sexy – was a total *absence* of confusion. So there was simply no reason for me to believe that Curtis Ray could ever be anything more than a dream to me.

But on a blue summer's day in the first week of July 1975, my dream became a reality.

I'd been playing piano since the age of five, when my mum had taken me along to my first lesson. She'd always wanted to play the piano herself, so she claimed, and it was a constant source of regret to her that she hadn't had lessons when she was a child.

'It's not too late, Mum,' I used to tell her. 'I mean, it's not like you can only learn when you're a kid, you know.'

'It's my fingers,' she'd say. 'They're not supple enough any more.' Or, 'You know what my headaches are like, darling . . . I just wouldn't be able to concentrate.'

I think the real reason she didn't want to learn was that she knew it took a lot of hard work and dedication, and the only thing that Mum was dedicated to – apart from her various addictions – was avoiding hard work at all costs. Of course, she was perfectly happy to insist that *I* practised long and hard at the piano . . . and I did. But it wasn't hard work for me, because I enjoyed it. From that very first lesson when I was five years old, I just loved everything about it – the music, the magic, the wonderful world of sounds and songs . . . melodies, tones, structures, rhythms . . . it was all so enthralling. And I was good at it too. I wasn't a virtuoso or anything, but it all came very naturally to me, and by the time I was eight or nine I was already quite accomplished. For my tenth birthday I was given my very own piano – a really nice Bechstein upright, which I still play quite a lot now – and I carried on taking lessons and studying for my grades right up until I was almost seventeen. In fact, that's what I was doing on that hot summer's day in 1975 – I was in the music room at school, practising one of the pieces I was learning for my

Grade 8 piano exam, which I was due to take in a few weeks' time.

Mansfield Heath School was a medium-sized public school in Hampstead, North London, where I lived. It was one of the first co-educational public schools in the country. The main school building, built in the seventeenth century, was one of those imposing old redbrick places with turrets and gargoyles and solid oak doors, and it was surrounded by lush green playing fields and ancient trees. The music room was in a small brick annexe building next to the chapel on the other side of the playing fields.

It was a Friday afternoon, that day, about two o'clock, and I had the room to myself. My music teacher – Mr Pope – let me practise whenever the room was free, and as I had a couple of free periods that afternoon and the room wasn't being used until three, I'd taken the opportunity to do some work on a particularly tricky passage of the piece that I was studying. So . . . there I was, alone in the music room, sitting at the piano, playing this passage over and over again, and I was concentrating so hard that I wasn't aware of the door opening and someone coming in. I just carried on playing. I'd just about got the hang of this problematic passage now, and I wanted to see how the work I'd done on it fitted in with the piece as a whole, so without pausing to rest I went back to the beginning and began playing the entire thing through.

It was a piece by Debussy, Arabesque No. 1. It's a wonderful piece of music, as light and dreamy as a perfect summer's day, and although I was still struggling slightly with some of the more technically difficult sections, that didn't stop me from losing myself in the beauty of the music whenever I played it. And when I got to the end, and the last quiet chord faded softly into the echoed silence . . . well, that was always a special thing for me. The sudden hush, the sense of the music floating in the air, the wonder of the melody still playing in my head . . .

I always took a quiet moment to savour it.

But that day, as I was sitting there enjoying the moment, the silence was broken by a soft round of applause from behind me. I turned round quickly, slightly startled, expecting to see Mr Pope, but instead of seeing the grey-bearded face of my music teacher, I

saw the smiling face of Curtis Ray.

'That was *amazing*,' he said, still clapping quietly. 'Absolutely amazing . . .'

I stared at him. He was leaning languidly against the wall by the window on the other side of the room, his piercing blue eyes fixed on mine . . . and he was smiling at me. I couldn't believe it. He was Curtis Ray . . . he was here, with me. He was smiling at *me*.

'It's Debussy, isn't it?' he said.

'Sorry?'

'The music . . . the piece you just played, it's Debussy.'

'Oh, yeah . . .' I said, still quite dumbstruck. 'Yeah . . . the first arabesque.'

He nodded. 'It's really nice.'

I couldn't help glancing at the sheet music on the piano then, wondering if that's how he'd known it was Debussy – by reading it off the title page. But the title page wasn't showing. And by the time I turned back to him, I was already feeling embarrassed by my condescending assumption that he couldn't possibly have recognized the music by ear alone.

'Sorry,' I started to say. 'I didn't mean –'

'You're Lilibet Garcia, aren't you?' he said, pushing himself away from the wall and wandering casually towards me.

'Lili,' I told him.

'Don't you like being called Lilibet?'

'Would you?'

He smiled. 'I'm Curtis Ray.'

If the term *duh!* had been around then, I would have said it . . . or, at least, I would have thought it. But these were pre-*duh!* days, and I had to be content with thinking sarcastically to myself, 'No, really? Curtis Ray? I'd never have guessed . . .'

Actually, come to think of it, sarcasm was probably the last thing on my mind just then, and I probably didn't think anything *duh!*-like at all. I was too embarrassed, for one thing. Embarrassed by the tingling feelings in my heart, by my inability to stop staring at Curtis, by the sudden realization that while he was looking as cool as ever in his cool white T-shirt and jeans (because he was in

the sixth form, and sixth-formers didn't have to wear school uniform), I was dressed in a totally uncool, and completely unflattering, pink school dress. And ankle socks, for God's sake. Embarrassing white ankle socks.

But the thing that embarrassed me most, the thing that made me feel really uncomfortable, was the simple fact that I *was* embarrassed. I *was* tingling and staring and squirming. I *was* behaving like a stupid little teenybopper. I *was* embarrassed by the clothes I was wearing. And that was all just *so* pathetic, and I hated myself for it.

But I just couldn't help it.

'You play really well,' Curtis said to me.

'Thanks,' I mumbled.

He was standing in front of me now. Not too close, but close enough for me to really see how stunningly good-looking he was. He'd always looked really good, even when he was going through that awkward thirteen/fourteen-year-old stage, but now – at seventeen – he'd grown up into a lean and hard-looking young man with a face that in some ways was almost *too* perfect to be true. It was the kind of face that seemed to have the ability to change, letting you see in it whatever you wanted to see in it. So if you looked at Curtis and believed that you were looking at the most beautiful boy in the world, that's what you saw. But you could also look at him sometimes and see a face of sadness, or heart-aching emptiness, or even cruelty . . .

But there was no sadness or cruelty in his face that day. Just a mind-blowing smile, a sheen of beauty, and those mesmerizing bright-blue eyes.

'Are you all right?' he asked me.

'Yeah, sorry . . .' I mumbled. 'I was just . . .'

I was just staring at him again, that's what I was doing. He'd taken a packet of cigarettes from his pocket now and was just about to light one.

'Are you sure that's a good idea?' I said. 'Mr Pope might be here any minute.'

Curtis laughed. 'Old Johnny won't mind,' he said, lighting the

cigarette. 'He's always cadging fags off me. I've even shared a joint with him out here a couple of times.'

'Really?'

'Yeah . . . Johnny's a bit of an old hippy at heart.' He took a long drag on his cigarette and tapped ash to the floor. 'So, anyway,' he went on, 'do you play anything else?'

I looked at him, not sure what he meant.

'Apart from the piano,' he explained. 'Do you play any other instruments?'

'Oh, right,' I said. 'Well, not really . . . I mean, I can play the guitar a bit –'

'Yeah?'

I shook my head, realizing that I was talking to someone who – rumour had it – was an absolute genius on the guitar. 'I'm not any *good*,' I muttered. 'I just know a few chords, that's all . . .'

He smiled. 'What's your favourite?'

'Favourite what?'

'Chord. What's your favourite chord?'

'G major,' I said without thinking.

He nodded. 'Yeah, that's a good one. It's got a kind of *big*ness to it, hasn't it? An openness.'

I smiled, knowing exactly what he meant. 'What's *your* favourite?' I said.

He looked at me. 'Have a guess.'

I paused for a moment, giving it some thought, but I didn't really need to. The answer was instinctive. 'E major,' I said.

His smile told me I was right.

'Can you play bass?' he said.

'Double bass?'

'No, electric bass, you know . . .' He mimed playing a bass guitar. 'That kind of bass.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I've never tried.'

'Do you fancy giving it a go?'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm looking for a bass player,' he said. 'For my band.'

'You're in a band?'

He nodded. 'We haven't played any gigs yet, but we've been practising on and off for about a year or so, and we're starting to get pretty good. The trouble is, Kenny – he's our bass player – well, he's suddenly decided that he doesn't want to play bass any more, he wants to play rhythm guitar.' Curtis took a long drag on his cigarette. 'Actually, to tell you the truth, Kenny's pretty shit on the bass anyway, so he's doing us a favour by packing it in. But now we need to find someone else . . .' He looked at me. 'What kind of music do you like? Apart from Debussy, obviously.'

It was a tricky question to answer. Or rather, it would have been a tricky question to answer if I'd tried to guess what kind of music Curtis liked and pretended that I liked it too, which I did actually consider for a moment or two. But although he wasn't really hippyish any more – his once-long hair was now hacked into something that looked like a lunatic bird's nest, and his scruffy old jeans were unfashionably, but very coolly, not flared – I naturally assumed that the kind of music he was into was the kind of music that I neither liked nor knew anything about, namely progressive rock – bands like Genesis and Yes and Pink Floyd. And if I'd told him that I liked Genesis, and he'd asked me which of their albums was my favourite, I wouldn't have been able to name one. And that really *would* have been embarrassing. So instead of trying to impress him, I simply told him the truth.

'Well, I've just got the new Cockney Rebel album,' I said. 'And I really like that.'

'Which one?' Curtis asked. '*The Best Years of Our Lives*?'

'No . . . the one before that.'

'*The Psychomodo*?'

'Yeah, that's it.'

He nodded knowingly. 'It's not as good as *The Human Menagerie*.'

I smiled. 'What *is*?'

He dropped his cigarette to the floor and stepped on it. 'Who else do you like?'

'I've been listening to the Sensational Alex Harvey Band quite a lot recently, and David Bowie . . . and I like some of the old

Rolling Stones stuff –'

'What about the Stooges? Have you heard of them?'

I shook my head. 'I don't think so.'

'Iggy Pop and the Stooges . . . you've *got* to hear them. They're incredible. Really loud and *dirty*, you know?'

'Right,' I said, not quite sure what he meant. 'And that's the kind of stuff you like, is it?'

'I like all sorts,' he said. 'The Stooges, Velvet Underground, New York Dolls . . . the Faces, Dr Feelgood.' He looked at me. 'Have you seen the Feelgoods? They played the Rainbow in January. It was fan*tas*tic. They're an amazing band – really fast.'

I smiled. 'Fast?'

'Yeah.'

'So, basically, you like stuff that's loud and dirty and fast?'

'Yeah,' he grinned. 'That's pretty much it.'

'And is that what your band's like?'

'Why don't you come along and find out? We're rehearsing tomorrow. You can have a listen to what we do, and if you like it . . .' He paused, looking at me. 'Well, like I said, we need a new bass player, and I think you'd be just right.'

'Why?' I asked, genuinely perplexed. 'I mean, I could understand it if you were looking for someone to play keyboards –'

'God, no,' he said. 'We don't want any keyboards. We just need a bass player.'

'But I've never even played a bass –'

'Doesn't matter,' he shrugged. 'You'll soon get the hang out of it. It's just like a guitar with a couple of strings missing.' He smiled. 'And, besides, it's not as if we're playing Debussy or anything.'

'Yeah, but I still don't get why you're asking *me* . . . I mean, there must be other people –'

'I don't *want* other people,' he said, his voice suddenly intense. 'I've tried other people, but that's all they are – other people. And that's not good enough. I need *special* people, people who *mean* what they do.' He stared intently at me. 'There's no point in doing *any*thing unless you really mean it, Lili. Do you know what I mean?'

'Yeah . . .' I said quietly, slightly taken aback by his passion. 'Yeah, I know what you mean.'

He stared silently at me for a moment longer, his eyes burning into mine, then all at once he relaxed again and his face broke into a carefree smile. 'Look,' he said, 'I know it's all a bit sudden, and it probably sounds kind of weird, but I just think you'd be perfect for the band, that's all. You love music, that's obvious. You can play. You're kind of kooky . . . *and* you look really good.' He grinned. 'I mean, what more could anyone want in a bass player?'

'Kooky?' I said, raising an eyebrow.

'Yeah . . .'

'You think I'm *kooky*?'

He smiled. 'It's a compliment.'

I knew what he meant, and I was perfectly happy to take it as a compliment. Kookiness was fine with me. I had no problem with kookiness at all. But Curtis had also said that I looked really good, and *that* was causing me all kinds of problems. Firstly, because no one had ever told me that I looked really good before, so it was hard to believe that he meant it. And if he *didn't* mean it . . . well, that would make him a pretty shitty person, wouldn't it? But if he *did* mean it, that would mean that Curtis Ray – *the* Curtis Ray – had told me that I looked really good. And that was something else altogether.

In fact, to tell you the truth, it made me feel so twistedly wonderful that I almost wished that he *didn't* mean it.

'So,' he said to me. 'What do you think?'

'About what?'

'The band . . . playing bass. Do you want to give it a go?'

I looked at him. 'Do you mean it?'

He nodded. 'Like I said, there's no point in doing anything unless you really mean it.'

'Yeah, all right,' I said. 'I'll give it a go.'

He smiled broadly. 'You won't regret it.'

As it turned out, he was both right and wrong about that . . . but I wasn't to know that then. And neither was he.

'This is where I live,' he said, writing his address on a scrap of

paper and passing it to me. 'We're rehearsing in my dad's garage at the moment. It's not ideal . . . but until we find somewhere better, it's all we've got.'

I looked at the scrap of paper. Curtis's house was about a mile away from mine.

'Get there for about two o'clock,' he said. 'OK?'

'Tomorrow?'

'Yeah.'

I looked at him. 'What's the band called?'

'Naked.'

'Naked?'

'Yeah.' He smiled his smile. 'We're going to be *massive*.'