

Prologue

He slept like someone already dead. Face down. Not moving, except for the flare of his nostrils as the breath moved in and out. It was the heat that woke him, his T-shirt wet against his back. He sat up, eyes half closed, cotton sheets thrown carelessly to the floor. His mouth was heavy with the taste of sleep, and his body cried out for water to cool itself down. The room was covered by darkness, disguising morning as night, and he tripped on a shoe as he stumbled towards the door. Still in a daze, he felt his way down the stairs, resisting the light switch as he kept full consciousness at bay.

The journey to the kitchen was slow, and it took a while before he could angle his head under the tap and taste the cool rush of water in his mouth. Satisfied, he filled a glass and began the climb back to bed. It was only then that he heard it, soft and low – the hum of voices drifting from underneath the sitting room door. He sometimes forgot to turn off the television, and he approached hesitantly, his touch light as he pushed the handle down. It was almost completely black inside. He reached for the lamp, his eyes alert as they adjusted to the glow. The room seemed to be just as he had left it the night before – ordered without being tidy, his coat discarded on a chair. As he moved to retrieve it, he saw the

shape – the crown of a head peeping above the back of the sofa, the hint of a body, perfectly still.

‘Who’s there?’

He barely recognised his own voice, strangled by fear.

‘Who’s there?’ he said again.

No reply.

Eyes trained on the figure, he reached for the bookshelf that lay to his left. His fingers crawled silently along the ledge, wrapping around the spine of the first novel they found. He held it aloft, carefully feeling the weight in his hand. Then he propelled it through the air, praying it would keep flight. The book crashed to the floor before it reached its target, but the figure didn’t flinch, continuing to face straight ahead. He grabbed the lamp as he edged towards the sofa, ripping the plug from the socket as he prepared to strike.

‘Don’t move . . .’

His voice faltered as his feet shifted forwards. He swallowed the bile creeping up his throat. As he rounded the sofa, he saw a man, sitting completely still, body slightly slumped. The intruder stared at the television, seemingly mesmerised, pale face lit by the glare from the screen, eyes not blinking, chest rigid under a thin shirt. There was no sign of life as the city waited for morning – an unknown stranger, dead before dawn.

PART I

Chapter One

Leah

I jolted awake, struggling to breathe. It was late. I had had another nightmare. The air was muggy and still as London embraced the height of a freak summer. I switched on the fan beside me, listening to the buzz of the blades as I reached for the notebook by my bedside, scribbling what I could remember before the details began to blur.

I had been recording my dreams for months now, convinced they held secrets from my past. I replayed the dream I had just had, straining for images I had already forgotten. I remembered there had been a wood, but the colours of the leaves kept changing; the moon shrank then grew; the trees multiplied. My phone screeched under my pillow, the volume dulled by the fabric above. I searched for it with my left hand, the pen in my right moving fast across the page.

‘Ma’am?’

Randle, my detective sergeant, his voice calm and unhurried down the line.

‘There’s been a body. They found a suspect running away from the scene . . .’

I waited.

‘He won’t talk. The suspect – he says he’ll only speak to you.’

Chapter Two

Leah

I dressed fast, pulling on a light leather jacket. The murder had taken place in another borough, but I had been requested by name. Randle had been told no more than that, and I walked out into the night, wondering what lay ahead. A group of boys loitered aimlessly in the courtyard, puffing out their chests through a haze of marijuana smoke. I had lived on the World's End council estate for over a year, so they knew I was police. They stared at me, daring me to approach, their defiance making them seem younger. I looked back, impassive – next time I wouldn't be as nice.

I heard Randle's motorbike before I saw him, midnight-blue helmet obscuring his face. He slipped it off as he pulled up beside me, pushing his dark blond hair back off his forehead. His blue eyes smiled when they found me, but his lips stayed neutral as he assessed my mood. Randle was confident without swagger in a way I had once found irritating but had slowly grown used to. He had shown his loyalty, but my boundaries remained. I tugged at the zip of my jacket, the small crease between my eyebrows deepening – we were colleagues; we didn't need to be friends. I reached for the spare helmet he held out towards me, climbing behind him without a word. Randle didn't need my encouragement – he was self-assured enough.

‘How fast can you get us there?’ I said.

He half turned. I saw the edge of a grin before he covered it with the midnight-blue shell.

‘Hold on tight, ma’am.’ The click of his visor closing. ‘Wouldn’t want you to fall off.’

Sarah Franks had rented a tiny flat above a newsagent’s in a run-down part of Elephant and Castle. It was a depressing place to live, but a sadder place to die. The paint had been scraped off the door, exposing splintered wood, and a metal rubbish bin overflowed with fast-food wrappers spilling out of black plastic bags.

‘Stop here.’

I had to shout to be heard over the engine. Randle tilted the bike towards the pavement, straightening effortlessly as we came to a halt.

I could see the circus of police and bystanders ten feet in the distance – the chaos of camera phones and overlapping voices as one person’s tragedy became another person’s sport. I assessed the picture in front of me: concrete building cordoned off to repel rubber-neckers; all available exits sealed to secure the scene. Blue lights blinked in the darkness, announcing violence. Three police cars, badly parked, gleamed white in the street. There was no obvious sign of forensics. The crime was still fresh; the victim still here. The night was heavy and hot, and the officer standing guard shifted uncomfortably in his uniform as a drop of sweat slid down his neck.

‘DI Leah Hutch and DS Ben Randle.’

I flashed my badge, striding past before he could delay us with questions. He opened his mouth, but I had already moved on. A woman in a grey, shapeless suit blocked our route to the entrance.

She had rolled up her sleeves, revealing heavily freckled arms; dark red hair pulled tight off a pale, unblemished face.

‘DS Lu Hoffen.’ Her voice was friendly, but her green eyes betrayed her. ‘You don’t remember me . . .’ She stared through me. ‘I heard you transferred back from Leeds last year.’

It took a moment, then an image, long forgotten, appeared in my mind. She had been called Louise when I first knew her – blonde, fuller-faced, more eager. Over a decade later, the dye had gone, along with the sincerity of her smile. There was a hardness to her, but life on the job could do that to a person – dead bodies and long days not everyone’s dream.

‘You’ve done well for yourself . . .’ she said.

Her eyes were still speaking, but she swallowed the words before they came out. Her grip was limp when I shook her hand. We had trained together in my early days in London before I went to work in Leeds for ten years. I was now her superior on paper, but her expression told me it was a fact she would rather ignore. There were those who thought my promotion was about ticking diversity boxes, but I didn’t let that bother me. I wasn’t trying to win a popularity contest; solving cases sufficed.

‘Thanks.’

I accepted the compliment she hadn’t given. Lu Hoffen was free to think that her lack of advancement was because of the colour of her skin, but from what I remembered of our time together, she had struggled to get results.

‘Welcome to Elephant and Castle,’ she said. Again, her face and her words failed to match. ‘We’re honoured to have you.’

Her sarcasm didn’t deter me. I hadn’t chosen to get up in the middle of the night to encroach on another borough’s case.

‘I’m here to help, not to take over.’ I nodded towards the building. ‘What are we dealing with?’

She turned her back as she answered me. ‘You can see for yourself. Let’s get you kitted out.’

I took my time as I slid the first nitrile glove over my fingers, savouring the seconds before a new atrocity lodged itself in my brain. Lu hovered, her gaze flitting between me and Randle. She watched, eyes half closed as he slipped the loose, plastic sleeves over his boots. She wasn’t the first colleague to show an interest in Randle, but I didn’t see it myself – his features were too chiselled, his face too ordered, even with the slight break to the nose. He had an easy way with people; he didn’t view the desire to be liked as a weakness – a few more years on the job and he would be in no doubt that it was. We followed in silence as Lu led the way down the narrow corridor. Randle moved carefully behind me, head stooped to avoid the low ceiling. A naked bulb hung from a cable, illuminating the trail of bloody footsteps painting a path to the front door of the victim’s flat.

We entered a bedsit with a bath and toilet tucked into the far corner; a polyester curtain had been pulled back to reveal a sink, the ceramic chipped on the side of the basin. Soiled clothes and empty bottles lay in small mounds on the torn linoleum. The air was thick with the scent of stale beer and bad wine, and a poorly made bed was crammed into one corner, too large for the space.

Sarah Franks must have been crawling towards help when her body had failed her. Blood spattered her torso with lines of red flowing from a wound on the side of her neck. Her right arm stretched towards a mobile phone she would never reach. Her eyes were open, dulled by death. The floor was littered with shattered

porcelain and pizza crusts – I imagined her panic as her final meal slid from her lap. She was half dressed in a vest top and tattered tracksuit bottoms, heavily stained and ripped at the thigh. My first thought was to hope I was suitably clothed if I were ever found dead.

‘I heard there was a suspect fleeing the scene,’ I said. ‘Where is he?’

Lu nodded.

‘This way,’ she said.

We moved down the stairs, out through a narrow doorway. The street at the back was much quieter, with none of the fanfare we had seen at the front. A lone police car was positioned opposite, half-hidden under a plane tree. An officer stood guard by the passenger door, legs splayed, chin determined. Beyond him, I could see the outline of a figure, hunched behind the seat.

Lu’s voice was too loud in the silence.

‘We found him running from the scene with blood on his shoes and hands.’

She opened the door and took a step back.

A man in an expensive blue shirt sat with his head angled away from us. Thick, black hair curled into the nape of his neck. His hands tugged at the linen of his tailored trousers; his shoulders rolled inwards. His wrists were red where the handcuffs had rubbed, olive skin beginning to bruise. He didn’t look up at first, then he turned towards me.

‘Leah,’ he said. ‘Leah Hutch.’