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Opening extract from
Terror Kid

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Chapter 1

Riot in Progress

Rico stood and stared as the shopping trolley flew through the air and smashed through the sports shop window. The boots and shoulders of the rioters had already weakened the toughened glass, and the force of the trolley caused the whole pane to shatter and collapse. Before the glass had even settled, a sea of people charged into the shop. The rioters danced, they chanted and they celebrated as they left the shop carrying balls, bats, trainers and football shirts, anything they could pick up and carry away.

It was a hot, sticky Friday night in Birmingham, but the riots happening there had started five

days earlier when a young woman had been shot dead by police in Leyton, East London. Young people all over London were angered, and started protests and demonstrations. On one of those demonstrations a police officer pushed another teenage girl to the ground and kicked her whilst she was down. A bystander filmed it all on his phone and uploaded it to the Internet, and then the anger spread. The demonstrations turned to riots, and in a few days the riots had spread west to Bristol and north to Wolverhampton, Salford, Nottingham, Manchester and Rico's city, Birmingham. The British people, mainly young people of all races, all faiths, and many with no faith, were rioting up and down the country. They had had enough.

Rico Federico stood on Dudley Road and watched as shop after shop was smashed, rushed and then emptied. A large number of police wearing hard helmets and dressed in heavy black protective clothing gathered at the top of the road carrying shields. The police charged but they were outnumbered by the mob and were soon forced back to watch from their lines. A police car and

a bus were set on fire. Fire alarms, car alarms and burglar alarms rang out from near and far, and Rico seemed to be the only one standing still. He turned a full circle to see the destruction all about him. Suddenly someone put their arm around his shoulders and ran their fingers through his hair.

‘Rico, it’s showtime,’ a voice shouted in his ear.

It was Karima. Karima was the tough, fiery daughter of Somalian refugees and the closest Rico had to a best friend, but they were very different in character. Karima was charismatic and had many other friends. Rico just had Karima. She was into kick-boxing and grappling; Rico couldn’t beat a doll up. Karima was loud, cool and streetwise; Rico wasn’t. Karima was addicted to social networking sites; Rico didn’t care for them. But even though Rico wasn’t interested in chatting to people online or collecting hundreds of online friends, he was definitely into computer hardware, computer programming and his computer repair business. He was really into computers. But to relax they both loved playing computer games. Karima just loved the thrill of winning, whilst Rico would spend time modifying the code and changing the graphics. They were an odd couple.

Rico was surprised to see her.

‘What you doing here?’ said Rico, looking at the gang of other people that she was with.

‘Shopping, man,’ she said with a wide grin on her face.

‘Shopping?’ Rico replied disapprovingly.

‘The revolution has come, let’s go shopping!’ Karima shouted, beckoning him on as if into battle.

‘It doesn’t work like that,’ said Rico, taking her arm off his shoulder.

Karima and her gang ran off into a phone shop to continue their shopping, and Rico began to walk away.

Everybody, it seemed, was doing something, either heading to a shop to get free stuff, or leaving a shop with their hands full. Some carried their loot on top of their heads, some on bicycles, and others used shopping trolleys from the very shops they had looted. It was so easy. The police were at one end of the street, but the rest of the street belonged to the looters, who just took what they wanted and left at the other end. As he walked away Rico heard his name being called behind him. It was Karima and her gang. They ran past

him with their hands full of boxes and bags.

‘See you later, brov,’ shouted Karima as they ran off triumphantly.

Rico carried on walking up Dudley Road and before long he had left the rioting behind and reached the road where he lived. As he turned the corner a police van screeched to a stop. Four officers jumped out of the van and ran up to him, but Rico wasn’t worried, he was calm and ready to explain that he had nothing to do with the riots. But there was no time for that; he was taken straight to the ground before he could say a word.

‘Where’s the stuff you took?’ asked one officer.

‘I didn’t take any stuff.’ Rico’s face was being pushed into the ground, his lips pressed against the pavement, making it difficult to speak.

‘You’re under arrest for theft!’ yelled the officer.

‘But I haven’t taken anything!’ shouted Rico as he was picked up and thrown into the cage at the back of the van. The van door was slammed shut. Rico was alone, and there was silence. Then the van drove off at high speed. It wasn’t the first time that Rico had been picked up by the police for no reason. Rico could only think about his parents and the stress his arrest would cause them. They had

worked so hard to get where they were now. Both his parents were Spanish Romany. As children in Spain, his parents had been spat at, beaten up and refused education. But they had been determined to make a new life for themselves. They came to Birmingham where his father had worked as a builder and then started a small building firm of his own. It was doing well but then they decided to have a family. Then he got work in the city planning department. He was quickly promoted so his rise from nomad to city planner was fast. His mother started her new life in England sewing shirts in a sweatshop, and then she went to college, studied hard, did her training, and became a nurse.

Rico's parents had often taken him to the library as a young boy and as he grew older he had read about the history of the Romany people. But he didn't identify himself as Romany, He was a Brummie; born and bred in Birmingham, with a Birmingham accent. With his straight nose, light skin and mousy hair, no one would guess he had Romany roots, not even other Roma people. He didn't smile much, he didn't hang out in gangs, he didn't follow the crowd, and he didn't care what

people thought of him. Friends came and went, but that didn't worry him. He didn't use the word 'politics' much – like his parents, he didn't care for political parties, but he did care about people. In the library and inspired by his parents' lives he had searched out stories of how other people struggled and fought for their rights and of how sometimes people's rights were taken away from them. Like millions of other people he watched the news on television and saw wars and famines around the world, he saw how people were forced to flee their countries for safety, and how one group of people could oppress another, and when he had listened to all the politicians talking and making excuses, he still couldn't understand why. Why people did the things they did to each other, and why decent people didn't rise up to end the conflicts and inequalities in the world. He was sensitive to the suffering of others, but just feeling sorry for them was not enough: he wanted to help them, he wanted to do something. He was angry, but his anger was silent. He hated violence, but he wanted to change the world. He just didn't know how.



Chapter 2

Fire in Progress

The police van arrived at the station, and Rico was taken by two officers to the front desk. It was a busy night. Rico was waiting for the Enquiry Officer to process two people in front of him when he heard a commotion outside. He could hear officers shouting, telling their captives to be quiet, but they got louder and louder as they got nearer. Rico kept looking ahead until they entered the station and he heard his name.

‘Rico. What’s happening, bad boy?’ It was Karima. She was grinning as if nothing was wrong.

‘What kind of a question is that?’ said Rico. ‘Can’t you see they’ve arrested me?’

‘So what stuff did you get?’

‘Nothing. You know I was just walking home and minding my own business,’ Rico replied.

‘You see,’ said Karima, pointing to Rico as if he was a naughty boy. ‘You should have done some shopping, brov, at least you would have done something to get arrested for.’

The others, three boys and one girl, all began to laugh, but Rico, not wanting to engage with any of them, just turned away and looked at the back of the boy in front of him.

‘They’re laughing, but even you know this isn’t funny,’ said Rico.

One of the many arresting officers now standing in the reception area shouted, ‘Right, that’s enough. Keep your noise down.’

Karima and her friends continued to laugh and snigger, ignoring the seriousness of their situation. Karima, as usual, was the leader of the pack and did most of the talking, working hard at giving the impression she was having fun. Rico always thought that Karima overdosed on fun to overcome the pain of her childhood. She had seen too much brutality of war in her homeland. But Rico didn’t do fun. Outside of his family, Rico

just couldn't find much fun in the world to be joyous about.

The Enquiry Officer at the front desk checked them in and they were all formally arrested, then they were separated and led away for questioning. Rico was taken to a room where he was told to sit down by the officer who had arrested him. The officer sat opposite him but said nothing for a couple of minutes. When he did speak he did so quietly, and slowly.

'Right, young man, listen to me carefully. My name is Detective Constable Holland. I'm going to give you a few more moments to think about where you are, and then I want you to tell me who called you out onto the streets tonight, and where you hid the goods that you stole.'

Rico wasn't playing his game.

'I don't need any more moments. I don't need anything from you. What I need is to go home, because no one called me out, I didn't steal anything, and you got nothing on me.'

'We got something on you all right,' said the officer, maintaining his low, serious tone.

'What?' asked Rico.

'We saw you walking down Dudley Road, we

saw you talking to your criminally minded friends, and we know that you entered at least one shop on the Dudley Road and helped yourself to some stock. My colleagues are looking at CCTV footage as we speak, so soon, if you can't remember, I'll be able to show you what you've been up to. So you might as well tell me now. That way we save time and get this stuff done with quickly.'

Rico cracked a small smile. 'It's all good then. I can't wait to see this footage.'

'Good,' said the officer. 'I suppose you're now going to demand a lawyer and you're going to tell me that I should respect your human rights.' He pointed to the door. 'Well, what about the human rights of the people you're robbing out there? Hey, what about them?'

Rico was unmoved. 'I don't need a lawyer, and I ain't said anything about my human rights. I just want to see this footage you have of me.'

Another officer put his head around the door; Officer Holland saw him, and said, 'I'll be back.' And left the room.

Rico sat looking around the pale, empty walls for five minutes, then Detective Constable Holland

returned and opened the door as wide as it could go.

‘Right, pick yourself up, you’re free to go.’ He seemed to speak reluctantly, acting as if the conversation they’d just had hadn’t happened.

Rico slapped the table and spoke angrily.

‘You see. I’m sick of this. So where’s this footage of me? There isn’t any, is there? No, you lot just lost control of the streets, so you just start picking up everyone you can to make up for your stupidity.’

The officer stared angrily at Rico. ‘What’s this? You want to stay, do you? I’m sure it can be arranged.’

‘I’m sure it can be arranged too, but whatever you lot do you can’t scare me. Stop and search me as much as you like, arrest me as much as you like, you don’t scare me,’ said Rico. ‘Give me my stuff and let me go. I don’t need to stay here any longer.’

Rico stood up and followed the officer out to the reception. As they arrived Rico saw his father confronting the desk sergeant. His father was short, but he made the noise of many men as he stamped his feet, banged his fist on the desk, and pointed with his other hand, shouting at the sergeant.

‘Let me in. I want to see my son now. You have no right to keep him here.’

The desk sergeant shuffled some papers around and replied without looking up.

'I told you, sir, we're bringing him out to you. Raising your voice will not speed up the process.'

'Process. What process? You don't have any process, you're just a bunch of crooks and liars. And don't call me sir. Now, where is he?'

'Here I am,' said Rico.

'Over to you, Sarge,' said the officer.

Rico's father, Stefan, shouted, 'Rico. Have they charged you?'

'No. They can't touch me,' Rico replied.

'You haven't heard the last of this,' said Stefan to the desk sergeant. 'I'm going to lodge a complaint.'

'You're free to do so,' said the desk sergeant, who then waved Rico over. 'I need you to sign for your possessions and you can be off.'

Rico's father carried on at the desk sergeant.

'You think you can do whatever you like? Well, you can't. This is the fifth time you've picked him up this year, for no reason at all. He's fifteen, what do you want to do, give him a criminal record before he's sixteen? You haven't heard the last of this. You wait. This isn't the end.'

Handing over a see-through polythene bag with

Rico's belongings, the sergeant said, 'He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

'The wrong place at the wrong time?' shouted Stefan, his voice getting even louder as he repeated the sergeant's words. 'The wrong place at the wrong time? That's what you lot say every time you pick him up. The wrong place at the wrong time. He was born in this area, he lives in this area, he goes to school in this area, and he keeps getting picked up in this area. So now you tell me, where is the right place at the right time? Come on, tell me.'

'Come on, Dad, let's go,' said Rico.

Rico and his father left the station and began to walk home. The air was thick with smoke, the streets were busy, sirens could be heard all around, and tension marked every face. As they got to the bottom of the road a car screeched round the corner and sped towards the station. Rico and his father turned to look. The car came to a sudden stop. Two arms appeared out of the side windows, both holding lit petrol bombs, which they threw at the police station. One hit the police station sign, and the other landed in the doorway. The car sped away, going from nought to sixty in six seconds, and

Rico watched as the flames got bigger. The steps to the police station were ablaze, flames began to cover the door, police officers ran out spraying foam from fire extinguishers. Rico turned and began to head towards the station. 'We have to help them, Dad,' Rico said.

His father grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

'No, Rico,' he said. 'They're taking care of it themselves. It's got nothing to do with us. We're just in the wrong place, at the wrong time.'