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Kimberley Chambers

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Kimberley CHAMBERS

Life of Crime



HarperCollins *Publishers*

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Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2018

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Cover photographs © Traven Milovich/Arcangel Images (warehouse), Stephen Carroll/
Arcangel Images (figure)

Cover design © HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2018

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Source ISBN: 9780008144739

Ebook Edition © January 2018 ISBN: 9780008326418

Version: 2018-08-15

Dedication

In memory of my dear friend Ronnie's son
Lee John Richardson
1974–2008

Epigraph

‘We are all in the gutter, But some of us are looking at the stars’

Oscar Wilde

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PROLOGUE

I was thirteen the first time I ever got arrested and can remember it as though it were yesterday. I was driving a stolen Ford Escort MK 2, my feet barely able to touch the pedals, yet I'd still been able to handle that car like a man.

Cigarettes, I'd been caught with. Illegal ones that'd been brought into the country from Belgium via France. Yet no matter how hard the Old Bill interrogated me, I never admitted to where I'd really got those fags from.

'One of life's losers, that's what you are. You'll never amount to nothing, you stupid little bastard,' my mother bellowed when the Old Bill brought me home.

'Only fools break the law. You're an idiot, boy,' my schoolteacher hissed in my ear the following Monday morning.

Well, I've got news for them. I ain't no loser, neither am I a fool. A bastard perhaps, thanks to my embarrassment of a mother having no idea who my father is. But I'm a winner, and ever since that day I've been determined to prove all the doubters wrong.

I was gifted with charm, good looks, the gift of the gab and intelligence – all the tools a man needs to make it to the very top. And if I need to trample on a few people's lives and feelings to get there, then so be it.

Well, that's what I used to think, anyway. But I've since learned different.

Sometimes in life – especially when it's a life of crime you're involved in – things don't go to plan.

My name is Jason Rampling and this is my story ...

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Spring 1994

Johnny Brooks glanced up from his newspaper and looked at his daughter inquisitively over his thin-rimmed reading glasses. ‘And where do you think you’re off to, young lady?’

‘Only to the Sunday market with Trace. I’ll be back before dinner.’

‘Haven’t you forgotten something?’ Johnny asked shirtily.

Twenty-one-year-old Melissa sighed. She was running half an hour late as it was; she’d promised to be at Tracey’s by eleven. ‘What?’

Johnny gestured towards the child who’d caused so many arguments and so much personal heartbreak. ‘Your mum isn’t well enough to look after your son today. She’s gone back to bed with a migraine.’

‘Another one? Can’t you keep an eye on Donte, Dad? Please. I promise I won’t be long,’ Melissa asked hopefully.

‘No. I bloody well can’t. He’s your son and you knew your life would change when you decided to have him. Your mum’s run down lately. I don’t want you putting her under any more pressure. It isn’t fair, swanning off whenever you feel like it.’

Melissa Brooks picked up her son and glared at her father. ‘Come on, Donte, let’s get away from the old bigot. If you were white, he’d be happy to take you to the Working Men’s Club with him. But he hates taking you anywhere because you’re mixed-race.’

‘That’s a lie and you know it, Mel. I like to enjoy a pint on a Sunday and relax. Not baby-bloody-sit a toddler. You made your bed, you lie in it.’

When the front door slammed, Johnny Brooks cursed. He was old school and loathed the fact that she’d got herself knocked up out of wedlock. But that wasn’t the reason he was so tetchy of late. His beloved wife was dying – the doctors had found a cancerous tumour on her brain – and nobody else in the family knew, bar him.

‘You’re late,’ Tracey Thompson snapped.

‘I know. Sorry.’

‘Bloody hell, Mel. I told you to dress up a bit. You could’ve made more of an effort. And why’ve you brought Donte with you? You said you’d be leaving him indoors.’

‘My mum’s not well again so I had to bring him. And it’s pouring with rain, case you hadn’t noticed, that’s why I wore my Timberlands. You’re not wearing those high heels, are you? Your feet’ll get soaked.’

Tracey studied herself in the hallway mirror. Her long blonde hair wouldn’t be blown out of place as she’d used half a can of extra-strong lacquer on it. Determined to impress, she was wearing her ripped faded jeans, short denim jacket, a belly top that showed off her recent piercing and red stiletto sandals. ‘How do I look?’ she asked, satisfied that she looked incredible.

‘Nice. But it’s nippy out so you’ll probably freeze to death. Never mind. You wanted to stand out, didn’t you?’

Tracey chuckled. She had her eye on a lad who worked at Dagenham Sunday Market, hence her getting so dolled up. ‘Come on then, bitch, let’s go.’

Johnny Brooks sipped his pint while discussing yesterday’s football results. Rainham Working Men’s Club was his regular Sunday lunchtime haunt. Stepney born and bred, Johnny lived in South Hornchurch now and owned a successful builders’ merchants. Everybody knew him in Rainham as that’s where his business was. Back in the day, he had been a decent amateur boxer. Although at five foot eight he wasn’t the tallest of men, he was sturdy like a bull, and had carved out quite a hard-man

reputation for himself over the years. He was forty-eight now and had recently had his ginger hair cropped to cover up the fact his hair had started to recede.

‘Your old pal’s just walked in, Johnny. I thought he was still in the clink,’ said Scottish Paul.

Glancing around, Johnny’s expression turned to one of anger. Craig Thurston had been a business associate of his – until they’d fallen out over money. Carol had warned him to steer well clear of the man in future and Johnny hadn’t even known he was out of prison.

‘He’s coming over, Johnny,’ Brian the Cabbie added, well aware there was no love lost between his pal and Thurston.

At six foot three, Craig Thurston was a lump. He’d made good use of the gym while in prison and sauntered towards Johnny with a cocksure grin on his face. ‘Well, well, well, if it ain’t my old mucker, Brooksy. Got that dosh you owe me, have ya? Only I’m collecting my debts now I’m a free man again.’

‘Do one, Thurston. I owe you sod-all and you know it,’ Johnny spat, even though that wasn’t entirely true.

‘Not the way I see it, pal. Fifty grand I lost, thanks to you, and I want it back.’

In no mood to part with any money or even discuss what had happened, Johnny stuck to his guns. ‘Your own stupidity lost you your dosh, just like it lost you your livelihood. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to finish my pint in peace.’

Craig grinned, showing the one gold tooth he’d treated himself to before he got ripped off; he knew exactly which buttons to press. ‘A little birdy told me your Melissa got herself knocked up. What’s your little grandson called again? Shoeshine boy?’

Johnny flew out of his seat and shoved Thurston against the wall. ‘You leave my family out of this.’ It wasn’t Johnny’s fault that a mate of his had done a runner with Craig’s dosh.

Hearing the barmaid threaten to call the police, Thurston’s pal grabbed him by the arm. ‘Come on, Craig. Let’s sort this another time.’

Craig pointed a finger in Johnny’s face. ‘I want my dosh, Brooksy – or else. Made sure you got yours, didn’t ya, you slippery piece of work.’

‘Or else what? You come near my daughter or grandson, I’ll fucking kill ya, d’ya hear me?’

‘I wonder what your Carol would say if she knew you were shagging your secretary?’ Craig tutted, his eyes twinkling with devilment. ‘Shirley Stone’s her name, isn’t it? Blonde, big tits, I can see the attraction. Might have to have a crack at her meself.’

Still able to throw a decent punch, Johnny flew at Craig like a raging bull.

When Craig fought back and Johnny ended up sprawled across the table, smashing their beer glasses, Brian the Cabbie and Scottish Paul intervened. ‘Leave it now, Johnny. Can’t you see he’s trying to wind you up?’ Brian urged.

‘Craig – your bail conditions, mate. Old Bill are on their way,’ Craig’s pal warned.

Johnny had winded him, but Craig put on a brave face as he walked backwards towards the entrance. ‘See you again soon, Brooksy. Give my love to Carol, won’t you? I’ll be paying her a visit before long, tell her.’

‘Go near Carol and I’ll kill ya,’ Johnny threatened.

‘Ignore him, mate. He’s all talk. I’ll go up the bar, get us another drink,’ Scottish Paul said.

‘Don’t bother. I’m going home,’ Johnny snapped.

‘Don’t go outside yet in case he’s still there. Your face is already cut. You don’t want Carol to know you’ve been scrapping, do you?’ Brian the Cabbie warned.

‘I’m not fucking scared of him,’ Johnny bellowed, storming out the club.

There was no sign outside of Thurston or his pal and as Johnny stomped along the road, he was furious. Not so much at Thurston – he was just a lowlife, chancing his luck. It was himself Johnny was livid with. If he didn’t have secrets in the bloody first place, there’d be no cat to let out the bag.

‘This is all I bloody well need! That smell is making me feel sick. Whatever you been feeding him?’ Tracey wrinkled her nose in disgust. ‘You’re gonna have to change him, Mel. No way are we going near the shoe stall with him stinking of shit. Put that good-looking bloke off for life, that will.’

‘Stop the car then and I’ll find a toilet. He’s only two, Trace, he can’t help it,’ Melissa snapped. She and Tracey had first met at school aged eleven and had been best pals ever since. They clashed though, fought like cat and dog at times, but never over anything too serious. Petty things. Tracey was a selfish cow and had no real understanding of children or their needs. A typical spoiled only child, she was.

Tracey pulled over on the corner of Church Elm Lane. ‘That pub’s open. Sort him in there,’ she ordered, holding her nose with one hand while frantically spraying her Angel perfume with the other. Her lovely Ford Fiesta currently smelled like a public toilet.

‘Don’t cry, darling. Mummy’s going to change you now,’ Melissa whispered in Donte’s ear. He was a good boy, her son. Rarely played up and seemed content and happy in his small world.

Ignoring the glaring barmaid who made a cutting remark about the toilets being for customers’ use only, Melissa marched into a cubicle, locked the door and began the none too pleasant task of cleaning her son up. Sometimes she yearned for her old life back. Before she had fallen pregnant, herself and Tracey had been out raving every weekend. They’d even had a girlie holiday in Ibiza, which was amazing.

It had been at a rave that Melissa had met Donte’s father. Joel Wright had an immediate effect on Mel that no other lad had before. He’d been eighteen, same age as she was back then, and he was self-assured and handsome. Swept off her feet, she’d slept with Joel the third time they met up and was pregnant within eight weeks of meeting him. Unfortunately, he’d turned out to be a bullshitting user. But even though she sometimes missed her old job, friends, nights out and that free-as-a-bird feeling, she had never regretted the decision to have Donte and bring him up as a single mum. He was part of her, her very own little soldier, and when his smile lit up the room Melissa felt like the luckiest girl alive.

‘Drink, Mummy, drink,’ Donte mumbled. He had only recently started talking more fluently.

‘In a minute, darling. There’s a nice clean boy,’ Melissa beamed, lifting her son in the air.

When Donte looked at her with his big brown eyes, held her tightly around the neck and whispered the words, ‘Love you, Mummy,’ Melissa’s eyes filled with tears. His scumbag of a father had never even seen him; her beautiful boy deserved better.

Shirley Stone was mopping the kitchen floor when the doorbell rang. She wasn’t expecting any visitors, she usually spent Sundays alone. ‘Johnny!’ she gasped. ‘Whatever you done to your face?’

‘Had a scrap and fell on some glass. Looks worse than it actually is. We need to talk, love.’

At thirty-eight, Shirley was ten years younger than Johnny. She’d worked for him for the past eight years as his secretary, and when she’d separated from her husband in 1988 their affair had started shortly afterwards.

‘You’ve got blood on your shirt too. Want me to wash it for you?’ Shirley offered. ‘You’ve got a couple of clean shirts in my wardrobe.’

‘No. Leave it,’ Johnny sat on the sofa, urging Shirley to do the same. She was a busty blonde, very pretty, and from the moment she’d started work for him there’d been an instant attraction.

‘We’re going to have to call it a day, for now at least,’ Johnny said, before explaining he’d got into a fight with Craig Thurston, who’d threatened to spill the beans to Carol. Their affair certainly wasn’t common knowledge. A couple of colleagues knew, one had even caught them in a compromising position recently, but Johnny had no idea how Thurston had found out. Somebody had betrayed him, that was for sure.

Shirley’s eyes welled up. Johnny had been adamant from the very beginning that he loved Carol and would never leave her and Shirley had accepted that. ‘OK. If that’s what you want.’

Johnny stared into Shirley's pale green eyes and stroked her cheek. 'It isn't what I want, but I have little choice. There's stuff you don't know about Carol's illness and she needs my full attention right now.'

'Did you find out what was causing those migraines?' Shirley enquired. Johnny often spoke about Carol, and Shirley had met her loads of times when she popped into the yard. She was a nice woman and Shirley liked her, but she couldn't help the way she felt about Johnny.

'Yeah, we did. But I can't go into detail, Shirl. I promised Carol I wouldn't say a word to anyone – even the kids don't know yet. I'll have to give up working for a while, so Ken'll be running the yard. Between you and him, I know things'll run smoothly in my absence.'

It didn't take Einstein to work out whatever was wrong with Carol wasn't good, so instead of being narky with Johnny, Shirley hugged him close to her chest. 'You know where I am if you need me.'

Johnny kissed Shirley on the forehead, then stood up. 'Thanks for being so understanding. I'll see myself out.'

'So, what's he look like, this bloke? How old is he?' Melissa enquired. Ever since she'd visited the market last week, Tracey had been harping on about some hunk on the shoe stall.

'Does my hair look all right? My lipstick isn't smudged, is it?' Tracey asked, trying her best to walk steadily on the uneven pavement. Her feet were freezing. Five-inch stilettos really were not practical to wear to a market on a chilly, wet day.

'Yeah, you look great.'

'I already told you what he looked like. Don't you listen to anything I say?' Tracey complained. 'He looks a bit older than us, blond hair, curtain-cut, and he's lovely and tall. Wait until you see his eyes – piercing blue, they are. He reminds me a bit of Bros – Luke more than Matt. He's gorgeous. Make sure you say that Donte is yours, won't you? I don't want him to think I've got a kid. Oh, and try on as many shoes as you can. Pretend you can't make your mind up.'

'I'm not taking these boots on and off, Trace. Be easier for you to try the shoes on.'

'No it won't. While you're trying the shoes on, I can talk to him, find out some info. Please, Mel. I'd do it for you.'

Knowing full well that Tracey would sulk if she didn't agree, Melissa reluctantly mumbled, 'OK.'

The distinct smell of fried onions hit Melissa as they neared the burger van. The cold wet weather obviously hadn't put people off shopping, as the market seemed busier than usual.

'We're nearly there,' Tracey announced excitedly. She had no idea what the lad's name was, but he'd definitely seemed interested in her last week. He'd chatted to her and her mum for ages, and as they'd walked away he'd treated Tracey to a lopsided grin and a wink.

'Is that him?' Melissa asked, pointing to a blond guy who had his back turned to them. He was tall and was wearing a tan leather box jacket and faded jeans.

'Don't bloody point. Just act normal,' Tracey hissed, her heart racing.

When the bloke turned around, Mel was rather taken aback. He didn't remind her of Bros – he was far better looking in her opinion. His blue eyes twinkled as he winked at Tracey and said, 'Back again.' He then turned his attention to Donte, who was happily playing with his toy car in his pushchair. 'All right. Is he yours?' the hunk asked Melissa. His eyes were the deepest blue she had ever seen and she could certainly understand why Tracey fancied him.

'Yes. He's two now. Say hello to the man, Donte,' Melissa urged.

'Hello, man,' Donte mumbled, too engrossed with his car to look up.

Jason chuckled, crouched and held out his right hand. 'Hello, Donte. I'm Jason. What ya got there, mate?'

Slightly peeved that Jason was paying far more attention to Donte than her, Tracey held her stomach in, pushed her boobs out and tapped him on the back. 'My mate needs a new pair of shoes,

but she's not sure what style she wants. Something with a heel and glamorous, like mine,' she said, waving her left foot under his nose.

Jason stood up and smiled. 'Your wish is my command. You're welcome to try on anything you want. Just gonna serve those other customers and I'll be back. What size are you, darlin'?'

'Five.'

'Give me a minute, then I'll sort out a selection that I think will suit a pretty girl like yourself.'

Melissa blushed. She wasn't by any means ugly, but rarely got called pretty, especially when she was out with Tracey. Unlike her skinny blonde friend, she had shoulder-length brown hair, a size-twelve figure and lacked a decent wardrobe since Donte had been born. Tracey knocked spots off her.

'Pick some shoes out then,' Tracey smirked. She wasn't one bit bothered about Jason calling Melissa pretty. It was obvious he was only being kind.

'I haven't got much money on me,' Melissa hissed in her pal's ear. 'Can't you try some on and buy a pair? He'll get the hump with us otherwise, think we're messers,' she warned.

'OK. But find out where he lives and drinks.'

'Why me? You're the one who fancies him – you ask him. He's gonna think I'm after him otherwise,' Melissa complained.

'No, he won't. Not being funny, Mel, but he's a bit out of your league.'

Carol Brooks had tried to keep herself busy since finding out her fate. A year the doctor had given her, top whack, and instead of wallowing in self-pity, Carol was determined to cherish every moment.

'I'm home, love. You upstairs?' Johnny shouted out.

'Yes. I'll be down in a minute. I'm just sorting through some old photos,' Carol replied, flicking through their wedding album. She was forty-six now, plump with short auburn hair. She'd looked so different on her wedding day; back then, twenty-seven years ago, she'd been blonde and slim. She'd never forget Johnny's words as her father walked her down the aisle: 'Jesus Christ, Carol. You've taken my breath away. What you doing marrying an ugly bugger like me? You look like Lulu, my girl.'

About to remind Johnny of his words, a piercing pain shot through the side of Carol's head and she screamed out in agony.

'Carol! What's a matter?' Johnny yelled, racing up the stairs.

When there was no answer, Johnny pushed open the bedroom door and had never felt so guilty in his life. His beloved wife was lying on the floor, convulsing. Next to her was their wedding album.

Tracey giggled like a silly schoolgirl every time Jason said anything remotely funny. 'You're hilarious,' she gushed, touching the arm of his tan leather jacket.

'Mummy – doggy, doggy,' Donte said loudly, pointing at the toy stall opposite. The stallholder was showing some customers a toy dog that walked and barked.

Jason crouched in front of the pushchair. 'OK to get him out?' he asked Melissa. She'd tried on shoe after shoe and Jason was no fool. He knew her mate was after him and had roped Melissa in to help her out.

'Yeah, sure,' Melissa replied. Watching Jason wander over to the toy stall with Donte in his arms, she turned to Tracey. 'Time you tried some shoes on – I'm not trying on any more, specially since I can't afford to buy a pair. Did you find out where he lives?'

'No. But he's only twenty and drinks at some pub called the Brewery Tap in Barking on Friday nights. He said they have live music in there. We should go down there next week. Can you ask your mum to babysit?'

Jason returned with Donte holding the toy dog before Melissa had a chance to reply. 'Put that back, Donte. It doesn't belong to you,' Melissa ordered.

'It does now. My treat.' Jason winked.

'Oh no. I can't let you pay for that. Here, I'll give you the money,' Melissa replied, fishing frantically through her handbag for her purse. She hoped she had enough cash on her to cover the cost.

‘No, you won’t. Listen, Trev on the toy stall owes me plenty of favours, trust me,’ Jason insisted.

‘Erm, can I try on these black boots in a size four, please?’ Tracey asked, pointing to a high-heeled suede ankle boot. She couldn’t understand Jason’s obsession with Donte. It was odd, to say the least. ‘Don’t move, Mel. I need to hold on to you,’ Tracey ordered, lifting up her left leg to undo the strap on her sandal.

Aware of Jason’s blue eyes staring at her, Melissa blushed again.

‘I’ve got a little ’un myself. A four-year-old daughter,’ Jason blurted out.

To say Tracey was shocked by this piece of news was an understatement. She promptly lost her balance, toppling over sideways.

‘You all right, mate?’ Melissa asked, voice full of concern. Part of her wanted to laugh, but she knew how mortified Tracey must be, so held her emotions in check.

Feeling a complete idiot, Tracey quickly put her sandal back on and grabbed Mel’s arm. ‘Come on. Let’s go.’

‘Don’t you wanna try the boots on now?’ Jason smirked. Trev on the toy stall was pissing himself laughing and he was desperately trying not to do the same himself.

‘No. I’ll try them another time,’ Tracey snapped, hobbling off. She’d felt her ankle twist as she’d fallen and it was already throbbing.

‘Thanks again for the toy,’ Melissa said, walking away.

‘Come on, Mel,’ Tracey urged, red-faced. The quicker she got away from this market, the better.

‘Mel, you forgot something,’ Jason shouted after them.

Leaving Donte’s pushchair with Tracey, Melissa ran back to the stall. Jason handed her a piece of paper. ‘That’s my phone number. If you fancy a drink sometime, give us a bell.’

Melissa opened her mouth, but couldn’t speak. No words would come out.

‘Mel, come on,’ Tracey shouted angrily.

Melissa took one last look at Jason, then ran to catch up with her pal.

‘What did he want?’ Tracey demanded.

‘Nothing.’

‘Don’t lie to me. I saw him hand you something. Did he give you his number for me?’

‘No, Trace. Look, I’m sorry, but he gave me his number for me.’

Tracey stared at her friend as though she had gone stark raving mad. This wasn’t going to plan at all. ‘What did he actually say when he gave it to you? You sure he never meant it for me?’

Melissa felt flushed. ‘He said if I fancied going for a drink, I was to call him.’

Tracey was in shock. ‘You’re not going, are you?’

Mel shook her head. ‘Course not. You like him.’

The short journey back to South Hornchurch was awkward, to say the least. Tracey was in no mood for small talk. She was fucking fuming.

CHAPTER TWO

The lifts stank of urine, were covered in graffiti and, as usual, there was a sign on the door saying they were out of order.

‘Bollocks,’ Jason mumbled. He lived on the tenth floor and had boxes to carry.

The stairs too were daubed in graffiti and reeked of urine, but nevertheless Jason whistled chirpily as he lugged the boxes of knocked-off perfume up ten flights. No way could he leave any downstairs. They’d be thieved within seconds. The type of tower block he lived in, even the door knockers weren’t safe.

Jason let himself into the flat that he shared with his mother, brothers, sister and four-year-old daughter. As expected, the kids were fending for themselves.

‘Daddy,’ four-year-old Shay cried out, holding out her arms for a cuddle. She was filthy, had dirt all over her hands and face, and was still wearing the pyjamas he’d put on her last night.

‘Where’s Mum?’ Jason asked twelve-year-old Barbara. Like himself, Babs, as he fondly called her, had no idea who her father was; the pair of them had been the result of drunken one-night stands. Babs was mixed-race. She was also extremely overweight, thanks to the shit food she ate. It was Babs who looked after their two younger brothers Elton, eight, and Kyle who’d just turned six. A drunken waste of space, his mother was, which was why Jason wanted to find a better home for his daughter. This was no environment for her to be raised in.

‘Mum went to get fags, but she never came back. The kids are starving. There’s only Weetabix and baked beans in the cupboard, and there’s no milk. Can you get us some food, Jason?’ Babs asked hopefully. Trapped in the flat looking after three kids, food was the only enjoyment she got in life and she was currently yearning for a Big Mac or a large portion of greasy chips smothered in salt and vinegar. Her stomach felt as if her throat had been cut.

Jason put his daughter down and urged Barbara to make the kids look presentable.

‘Why I gotta wash? Where we going?’ asked young Kyle.

‘McDonald’s – I’m treating us. So it’s bathtime for all three of ya,’ Jason grinned, ruffling Elton’s frizzy Afro hair. He and Kyle had the same father. He was no role model though. Known to the locals as ‘Rasta Dave’, he’d flooded the estate with heroin before getting a ten-stretch. Jason had been dragged to court by his mother, who’d sobbed like a baby as Dave was sentenced. He hadn’t acknowledged them, the same way he’d refused to acknowledge that Elton and Kyle were his sons. He wouldn’t even put his name on their birth certificates, the loser.

Hearing the kids splash happily about in the bath, Jason’s thoughts turned to the girl he’d met on the market today. He’d known her mate had fancied him when she’d come to the stall last week with her mother. And he’d known she’d be back; ditzy airheads like her always were predictable.

Jason lit up a cigarette and took a deep drag. He wasn’t looking for a bird to shag senseless. He had plenty of those on the go, including Darlene, the thirty-eight-year-old mother of his old school pal Andy Michaels. What Jason was currently looking for was someone half sensible. A single mum with a council flat or, better still, her own gaff would be ideal.

Hearing a commotion, Jason walked over to the window and stared at the gloomy sight outside. A full-blown punch-up was in progress – par for the course on the Mardyke Estate. Jason loved and loathed the estate in equal measure. It was all he had ever known, and some of the people who lived there were proper. However, lots were not; when you flipped the coin, it was a shithole situated off the busy A13 in Rainham.

Jason’s mother wasn’t one for adding homely touches. The only thing hanging on the wall in their depressing, threadbare flat was a long mirror in the hallway that Debbie Rampling would preen her fat self in before leaving the premises. Once she was out of the way, the kids would spend hours dancing in front of the mirror while music – reggae and lovers rock, for the most part – blared out

the stereo system. None of the kids had many toys, and the ones he brought home always seemed to go missing. Knowing his mother, she was probably flogging them around the estate.

Jason strolled into the hallway and studied himself. Though he had no idea who his father was, he owed the man for his good looks; he certainly hadn't inherited them from his mother. He was handsome and he knew it. He'd also been aware of the power he had over the opposite sex from a very early age and had honed his skills over the years. That was going to be his way out. Living a deprived life was not for Jason Rampling. He was a go-getter and wanted far better. Not only for him, but for Shay too.

'I'm fine, Johnny. For goodness' sake, stop fussing,' Carol said.

Johnny Brooks felt awful. Was God paying him back for his affair? he wondered. Because if so, he wished the big man above would take it out on him instead. Carol didn't deserve to suffer. It was him who was the bastard.

Carol had snapped out of her fit by the time the ambulance had arrived, but he'd forced her to go to hospital regardless. She was petrified of anything to do with the medical profession; even a trip to the GP's brought her out in a cold sweat. Johnny knew she would discharge herself first chance she got.

'You're not going to be able to hide this for ever, you know. We need to think about telling the family, at least. And you should have stayed in overnight, just to be on the safe side. Say you have another fit?'

'Shut up. Melissa must be out of her mind with worry. I can't believe you didn't leave a note. That's the first thing I'd have done. Now call us a cab. Smell of these places reminds me of death. And ring Melissa. Do not say we've been up Oldchurch, 'cause she'll worry. Say we went for dinner round Dick and Yvonne's at short notice. OK?'

Johnny Brooks nodded. Once Carol had made her mind up about something, there was no changing it.

Leaving the kids happily stuffing their faces, Jason wandered outside McDonald's to get better reception. He leaned against his pride and joy: a black XR2 with full body kit and shiny alloy wheels. He'd recently treated himself to a Blaupunkt car stereo and 200-watt speakers out of his illegal earnings. He never left them inside an empty car though. Car stereo and speaker theft was rife these days. His motor stood out like a sore thumb on the Mardyke and was like a beacon for the Old Bill; he was forever getting tugged in it. That's why he drove his old white Escort van if he was carrying anything dodgy. Because he owned a mobile phone and decent motor, the police seemed to be under the misapprehension he must be a drug dealer. Nothing could be further from the truth. Having seen so many people on the estate overdose or balls their lives up through drugs, Jason had never touched the stuff in his life. Which was more than could be said for his mother. She smoked weed on a regular basis. Seeing her stoned was enough to put anyone with half a brain off.

Jason liked to think of himself as a younger, better-looking Arthur Daley. *Minder* had been his favourite TV programme growing up and he'd naturally picked up the art of spotting an opportunity and grabbing it with both hands. The one day he worked on the market was the only regular income he had, apart from his fortnightly dole cheque. The rest of his dosh came from selling whatever he could get his hands on, including hardcore porn films. His pal got hold of them from Holland. He'd copy them and Jason would sell the pirate versions, earning two quid per film himself. On a bad week he could sell fifty films, on a good two hundred and fifty. It never failed to amaze Jason how many people watched porn. He even sold loads over the Mardyke, and virtually everybody who lived there professed to be skint.

Knowing his mother's usual habits, Jason rang up the Millhouse Social Club and spoke to the barmaid. She was there, just as he'd known she would be. When she had the cheek to slur, 'What's up?' down the phone, Jason calmly told her he would pick her up in half an hour and she needed to

stay at home this evening as he had to go out. There was no point kicking off with her, especially when she was wasted.

His mother reluctantly agreeing, Jason ended the call and thought again about the girl he'd met on the market. Melissa was plain rather than pretty, but if she had her own gaff, she'd do for the time being.

'Where have you been? I've been worried sick,' Melissa Brooks exclaimed. Her parents never went anywhere without leaving a note or telling her beforehand, so their absence today was totally out of character.

'Sorry, love. I asked your dad to leave a note, but you know what he's like – brain like a sieve,' Carol bluffed. 'We went for dinner round Yvonne and Dick's. Last-minute invite,' she added.

Melissa looked suspiciously at her father. 'What you done to your face?'

Carol was quick off the mark. 'Silly old sod walked into the door. I couldn't stop laughing,' she lied. Johnny had told her that Craig Thurston had turned up at the club, kicking off over money.

'You're lying,' Melissa squared up to them.

'Don't start, Mel. Why would we lie?' Johnny spat. Guilt was eating away at him and he'd decided to spend every moment of every day with Carol from now on.

Donte broke the ice. 'Look, Nana. Doggy,' he said, pressing the switch to make the toy walk and bark.

Carol crouched and scooped her grandson into her arms. Johnny's right-wing views had rubbed off on her over the years and she'd been horrified when Melissa had announced Donte's father was black. But a grandmother's instinct had taken over the second the child was born. He'd clung to her little finger at one point and Carol's heart had melted; he was one of the most beautiful babies she had ever seen. 'Who bought you that? Mummy? What's the doggy's name?' she asked.

'A man.'

Confused, Carol said, 'Eamonn?'

'A man, Mum. One of the stallholders bought it for him,' Melissa explained.

'Aww, that was nice. Do you know him?' Carol asked.

'No. And now Tracey has the right hump because she fancied him and he asked me out.'

'Put the kettle on, Johnny, while I have a chat with Mel,' Carol urged. Apart from being a bit tired, she felt fine now.

Carol was a doting mum, always had been, and she missed her son who'd moved up north. Melissa was her world though. They'd had a strong mother–daughter bond from the moment Mel was born. 'Tell me what happened,' Carol said gently. She knew Tracey could be a stroppy, dictatorial mare at times and wished Mel could meet a nicer best friend to hang out with.

Melissa told her the story, concluding: 'She virtually accused me of showing out to him! But I never, I swear. I was dressed like this with my Timberlands on, for Christ's sake, while she was all done up to the nines. It's not my fault he never fancied her, is it?'

'No, it isn't. Tracey's just jealous, love. She'll snap out of it. So what's his name, this lad?'

'Jason.'

'And is he handsome?'

'Very. He's got the bluest eyes I've ever seen and lovely blond hair. And he was so good with Donte. I couldn't believe it when he asked me out. I was in shock. But I can't go. Tracey will never speak to me again if I do.'

'Tracey is boy mad, as you well know. Fancies a different one every week. You go out with Jason if you like him. But don't lie to Tracey; stand up to her for once. She might be angry, but I'd put money on it she'll forget all about Jason in a week or two and move on to her next sodding victim. You mustn't let her rule you – I've told you that before.'

'He gave me his number. It's a mobile. Perhaps it's dodgy and he was taking the mickey out of me?' Melissa suggested.

Carol held her daughter's beautiful face in her hands. She'd never met Donte's father, but the bastard had knocked the stuffing out of Melissa. She'd once been a confident girl, full of life. Now she was insecure and Carol hated seeing her like that. 'Ring him,' she urged. 'Sod Tracey. Remember that time you fancied David Ward? She didn't care when you caught her snogging him behind the bloody bike sheds, did she? Go with your instincts for once.'

'He must be nice to buy Donte that dog,' Melissa said, lost in thought.

'You gotta go for it then, love. My mate Sylvie fancied your father before I snapped him up. Sometimes I wish I'd have let her have him,' Carol laughed. 'Sylv never spoke to me for a month when we started courting, but she soon got over it. True friends are hard to find and not many girls will put up with that madam Tracey Thompson like you do. Trust me on that one.'

Melissa smiled. 'Perhaps I'll ring him. What if it's a dodgy number though?'

'If that's the case, I'll be marching straight down to Dagenham Market next Sunday and whacking him around the head with my handbag,' Carol stated, meaning every word. She was very protective when it came to her children, had once nearly stuck a pair of secateurs into a woman's arm over Melissa while pruning her roses.

Melissa laughed. 'I don't want to seem too keen. But if I do decide to contact him, how long do you reckon I should leave it?'

Carol squeezed her daughter's hands. 'No ifs or buts, ring him on Tuesday. Mummy knows best. She always has.'

'That you, Jason?' shouted sixty-year-old Peggy Rampling. She knew it would be her grandson; he was the only other person with a key to her house.

'All right, Nan,' Jason answered, handing her a box of goodies.

'What ya got for me then?' Peggy asked, delving into the box then looking up at him, disappointed. 'No Guinness?'

'Nah. I couldn't park outside the offie and couldn't be arsed taking the stereo and speakers out the car again. There's perfume in there, some toiletries, a Connie Francis CD and a few packets of them biscuits you like.'

Peggy took the Rive Gauche perfume out of the box and began coughing and spluttering as she sprayed it. 'That ain't the real McCoy. Smells like cat's piss,' she complained.

'It is the real deal, Nan. I bought it off a pal and he wouldn't have me over.'

'Well, he has. Get your money back and buy me some Guinness instead,' Peggy said, lobbing the perfume back at Jason.

'What you been up to? Did you go to bingo last night?'

'Yep! And Friday. Rigged, that bingo hall is. Same faces win every night. Won the regional, that old cow Doris Shipton did. That's the second time she's won it this year and it's only bastard April. Nobody's that lucky. I hope she gets her purse snatched.'

'Some people are just born lucky, Nan. You going again tonight?'

'Nah. I'd like to, of course – gets lonely, sitting in here on me jacks – but I can't afford it.'

Knowing full well his grandmother had money stashed in pots, pans, jars and tins all over the gaff, Jason put his hand in his pocket and handed her a score.

'Thank you, sweetheart. Good boy to your old nan, you are. Don't know how you come out of her, I honestly don't. How is she? As rancid as ever?'

'Same old, same old,' Jason replied truthfully. His nan and mum hadn't spoken since he was eight years old. At five, his mother had decided she didn't want him any more and had palmed him off to live with his nan. Those were the happiest childhood memories Jason had. His nan wasn't perfect – she was a prolific pilferer who'd shoplift anything that wasn't nailed down – but she'd given him love and attention, the two things he never got at home. When Babs was born, his mother insisted he had to live with her again, and his nan hadn't spoken to her since.

'Got yourself a nice girlfriend yet?' Peggy grinned.

‘I’m still seeing that one from Harold Hill I told you about, but I think I’m gonna have to knock her on the head. She’s only seventeen. Too young and immature.’ Jason told his grandmother most things, but had never mentioned his affair with Darlene. His nan had once lived on the Mardyke and hated her. ‘Look at that old slapper. All fur coat and no knickers, that one,’ she’d say whenever they crossed paths. The last thing Jason wanted was his gran turning up on Dar’s doorstep creating havoc. And he was sure she would if she learned the truth. She was that type of woman.

‘You need a mother for Shay, ASAP. Horrible child! Don’t bring her round ’ere no more, will ya? Trampled on all me geraniums on purpose last time she visited, and I’d only just planted the bastard things. You need to get her away from that stinking fat excuse of a mother of yours. Because if you don’t, she’ll only get worse,’ Peggy warned.

Jason sighed. His nan wasn’t one to mince her words and was usually right. ‘I know. Leave it with me. I’m working on it.’

CHAPTER THREE

Melissa Brooks lay on her bed wallowing in self-pity. It hadn't stopped raining all day, so she hadn't been able to take Donte out as she usually did. And her son had a cold, had been whingeing since the moment he'd opened his eyes this morning. Days such as these were the ones she wished for her old life back.

Melissa looked at the time again. Tracey worked on her mother's burger van on an industrial estate and would be home soon. They hadn't spoken since Sunday. When Mel had rung Tracey Sunday evening and last night, her mum had said she'd gone to the pub.

Sighing, Melissa sat up. She'd had lots of friends before she'd had Donte, but had lost touch with most of them now. The girls from work rang her occasionally, but her life seemed so different to theirs it depressed Melissa talking to them. It had only been an office job at the council, but she'd been happy there. She'd left when she was six months pregnant; they'd offered her maternity leave, but instead she took a small redundancy payment. Her father had made it perfectly clear that raising the baby would be her responsibility, so she'd had little choice.

Carol peeked around the bedroom door. 'You hungry yet, love? I finally got Donte off to sleep. Really not himself today, is he?'

When her daughter's eyes welled up, Carol sat next to her on the bed and put an arm round her.

'Tracey's avoiding me, so now I have nobody to go out with. Sometimes I wish I'd taken Dad's advice. It's no fun being a single mum at my age. I miss my old life.'

Realizing a stern talking to was needed, Carol cleared her throat. 'It's too late for regrets, Mel. Donte is part of your life now and always will be. Sod Tracey. She's never been a good friend to you anyway. Ring Jason. Go on. What have you got to lose?'

Melissa fished through her purse and pulled out the number. 'You go out the room then. I need to plan what I'm going to say before I speak to him.'

Carol smiled. 'Just be yourself, love. That's why he liked you in the first place.'

'Elton, stop banging that fucking drum! Doing my head in, you are,' Debbie Rampling bellowed.

Giggling, Elton sang along to Bob Marley's 'Three Little Birds' and banged his drum even harder. He only stopped when his mother yanked him off the carpet by his arm and walloped him repeatedly across the backside.

'Mum, I'm starving,' complained Kyle, tugging at her arm.

'Babs, come and sort these bastard kids out before I strangle 'em,' Debbie ordered.

Jason was having a lie-down in the smallest of the flat's three bedrooms, which he shared with Shay. His mother had the largest and Barbara shared the other with Elton and Kyle.

When his mother decided she couldn't be bothered cooking again and ordered Babs to take the kids round the chippie to give her a break, Jason waited until his sister had left the flat before marching into the lounge. 'I think you and I should have a little chat.'

Lying on the sofa, fag in hand, watching the latest episode of the highly addictive *Jeremy Kyle* show, Debbie asked, 'What about?' in a totally disinterested tone.

Jason picked up the remote and pressed pause. 'About everything. You going out all the time. Babs skipping school at your insistence every time you have a hangover. You refusing to cook for the kids. The list is endless. You gotta sort yourself out, ya know. I'm old enough to fend for myself, but your other three aren't.'

Debbie took a gulp from her plastic bottle of cider, then sneered. 'If you're old enough to fend for yourself, why are you and your daughter living under my roof?' Part of Debbie wanted to tell her son to pack his and Shay's belongings and sling his hook, but Jason was too much of an asset to her financially. He gave her fifty quid a week, helped with the kids and paid for most of the grub they ate.

‘Oh, I’m looking for a way out, don’t you worry about that. But I’m worried about the kids, especially Babs. You treat that girl like a slave, and it ain’t on. You need to start cooking her some healthy food. Poor little mare is becoming obese. You got to be a better parent. I know you’re upset Rasta got bird, but it’s not as if he ever lived here or helped out with the kids. You weren’t exactly mother of the year before he got banged up, and if you don’t wake up and smell the coffee, you’ll have Social Services on your case. Then you’ll have no kids.’

Debbie was well aware that she wasn’t ‘Mother of the Year’ material, but she loved Elton and Kyle. Rasta Dave had been the love of her life and they were his flesh and blood. ‘How dare you speak to me like that? Who do you think you are, you jumped-up little shit! You’re hardly Richard Branson your fucking self, are you? Think you’re a big-shot ’cause you sell sicko films to nonces round the estate. Well let me tell you something: you’re nothing, Jason Rampling. Just a nobody who lives on the Mardyke, same as me. Get that into your thick skull.’

Jason was livid. He hated being spoken down to. ‘I’m nothing like you. I’m gonna make it in life whatever it takes. You just fucking watch me.’

Practising her words, Melissa Brooks finally took the plunge and picked up the phone. She’d had nothing to do with lads since Donte’s dad had dumped her, and her heart was beating rapidly. She couldn’t stop thinking about Jason. She’d even dreamed about him last night.

Silently praying he hadn’t given her a dodgy number, Melissa was relieved when the phone was answered on the third ring. He had a distinct voice, gruff and cheeky. ‘Erm, hi, Jason. It’s Melissa – the girl with the son that—’

‘I know exactly who you are. Never forget a pretty face, me,’ Jason interrupted. ‘How’s my little mate, Donte?’

Melissa smiled. Jason seemed so thoughtful compared to lads she’d met in the past. ‘Miserable. He’s got a cold. How’s your daughter? What’s her name?’

‘Shay. Yeah, she’s good. What you doing tonight? Let me take you out for a drink so we can chat properly. Been thinking about you a lot since Sunday, I have.’

Melissa felt a warm glow inside. She was still stunned that a hunk like Jason could be interested in her, but he was obviously very keen. ‘OK. I’m sure my mum will look after Donte. I’ll ask her in a tick.’

When Mel gave him an address, Jason grinned. He knew that road and it wasn’t council, the gaffs were privately owned. Melissa’s call couldn’t have come at a better time . . .

Carol Brooks was brimming with excitement for her daughter. ‘Wow! You look gorgeous. Now go knock him dead. Be confident, Mel. Nothing more off-putting to a man than insecurity, is there, Johnny?’

Johnny looked up from his *Construction News*. ‘You do look nice, and your mother’s right. Don’t put the bloody bloke off. Opportunities like this don’t come along every day for someone in your position. I wonder if his kid’s half-chat too? Did you ask him?’

‘Shut up, Johnny. If you can’t be happy Mel’s got a date, then sod off upstairs,’ Carol ordered. Donte had started picking up on words they used lately and she didn’t want him hearing hateful things.

Johnny held his hands aloft. ‘All right, I’m sorry. So you gonna bring him in to meet us, this mystery man?’

‘No. Last thing I want is you spouting off. He’ll run a mile,’ Mel snapped. She’d wanted to meet Jason away from the house, but he’d insisted on picking her up from her address.

‘Your dad won’t say anything bad. Promise her, Johnny,’ Carol ordered.

‘I won’t open me mouth. Honest,’ Johnny replied, performing a zip movement across his lips.

‘I can hear an engine, love. Did Jason say what car he drives?’ Carol asked, peeping through the curtain.

‘No. And come away from the window, Mum. Please,’ Melissa begged. She was becoming more flustered by the second.

When the doorbell rang, Melissa felt sick with nerves. ‘Right, I’m off now. Do not follow me outside and embarrass me. I mean it.’

Carol turned the TV down and put her ear to the door. ‘Hiya, Mel. You look amazing! Where’s my little mate? I got him a get well present.’

‘Donte’s in bed,’ Melissa replied, shutting the front door as quickly as possible.

‘Did you hear that, Johnny? He brought Donte a get well present!’ Carol beamed.

Johnny Brooks leapt out of the armchair and peeked through the curtains. Whoever this Jason was, he sounded too good to be bloody true.

Melissa Brooks smiled as Jason handed her a third Bacardi and Coke. He’d brought her to the Spencer’s Arms pub in Ardleigh Green and, although nervous at first, Mel now felt more relaxed. Jason was easy to talk to and they had lots in common.

Jason took a photo out of his pocket and slid it across the table. ‘That’s my Shay, holding the doll. The other three are my brothers and sister. Taken last Christmas, that photo was. Most recent I have of Shay.’

‘Awww. She’s really cute, Jase. So, where is her mum? Does she see Shay? You don’t mind me asking, do you?’

‘Course not. Her mum left us. Walked out when Shay was a few months old and we’ve not seen her since. Bet you could never leave your Donte, eh, girl?’

‘No way. Oh, I’m so sorry, Jason. That’s awful. How did you manage? You must have only been young yourself.’

‘Case of having to manage. I moved back in with my mum, and my nan used to help out a bit. Shay’s too lively for her now though. What about your parents? They good with Donte?’ When Jason had found out Melissa didn’t have her own accommodation and lived with her mum and dad, he’d felt deflated. Until he’d seen the parents’ gaff, that was. They were definitely loaded. And he could tell Melissa was easy-pickings. Plus she was mother material, and that’s what Shay needed. His nan was right. Becoming hard to handle of late, his daughter was. Which was no surprise, seeing as his mother was out on the lash all the time and she was left to fend for herself along with Babs and his brothers.

Melissa thought carefully before answering. ‘My mum’s been great. She’s a strong woman who adores Donte. My dad is old school, though. He thinks a girl should be married before she has children. He wanted to kick me out when I fell pregnant, but my mum stood her ground. I take after my mother. I’m a strong woman too,’ Mel said, remembering her mum’s advice to come across as confident.

Leaning across the table, Jason squeezed Mel’s hand. ‘I can tell, and that’s why I like you. No disrespect to your pal Tracey, but women like her aren’t my cup of tea. Too fake. I like real people, like yourself.’

Melissa beamed. ‘Tracey isn’t talking to me, funnily enough. She copped the hump because you gave me your number.’

‘Don’t surprise me. Girls like Tracey are ten a penny. Get ’em coming up to me on the stall all the time, and I always give ’em a wide berth. Don’t get me wrong; when I was young, before Shay was born, I was partial to the airheads. But if I’m to bother these days, I’m looking for the real deal. A woman I can potentially settle down with.’

Melissa Brooks could not believe her luck. Jason made her heart melt. He also had the potential to be her very own knight in shining armour.

‘You on the waiting list for a council gaff?’ Jason enquired.

‘No. My parents wouldn’t want me to live on a council estate. They’re not snobs or anything like that, but they worry about me. My dad would rent me somewhere private, I think – if and when I move out.’

‘Don’t you want your own gaff?’

‘Yeah, one day. But not until I’m older,’ Melissa replied. She relied on her mother to help her out with Donte on a day-to-day basis, but wasn’t about to admit that to Jason.

‘Tell me about Donte’s father. Does he see the little ‘un?’

‘No. He dumped me as soon as he found out I was pregnant. He was horrible, wanted me to have an abortion. He’s better off out our lives.’

‘Is he local?’

‘No. We met at a rave. Joel lived over the other side of London, but he came down this way a few times with his pals. I’d meet him up Berwick Manor.’ No way was Melissa going to admit she’d chased Joel something rotten and all but laid it on a plate for him. That made her sound like a thick, desperate tart.

‘I used to go up the Berwick. Surprised we never met there. Want another drink?’ Jason asked.

Melissa took her purse out of her bag. ‘Let me get this round. It’s not fair, you buying all the drinks.’

Jason stood up. Melissa was pleasant enough, but wasn’t much use to him if she didn’t have plans to move into her own gaff. Shame, as she’d have been perfect to look after Shay. ‘You put your money away. Believe in chivalry, me. If a man asks a lady out, then he foots the bill.’

Melissa smiled when Jason sauntered up the bar. He dressed well. Black suit jacket, white T-shirt, faded jeans and smart leather shoes. She also liked the thick gold chain around his neck and the sovereign- and diamond-studded horseshoe rings he wore. The barmaid had certainly taken a shine to him too. Mel could sense she was flirting because she was acting like Tracey did when she fancied a bloke.

Discreetly making sure Jason was not flirting back, Mel pretended to be engrossed in searching for something in her handbag as her date returned to the table. ‘So what’s your mum like?’ she asked.

‘Not the best, to be honest. Men have messed with her head over the years, if you know what I mean. What about your parents? Do they work?’

‘Yes. My dad owns a builders’ merchants and my mum does all his accounts.’

‘A small family-run firm?’

‘No. It’s a big business. My dad has lots of men working for him. He’s got a massive yard just off the A13.’

Jason’s ears pricked up. ‘I got a pal in the building game. What’s your dad’s firm called?’

‘J J Brooks.’

Jason wanted to laugh out loud, but remained calm. Himself and his pals had stolen stuff from there before the security had been upped. Johnny Brooks was well known in Rainham and it was common knowledge he was loaded. Perhaps Melissa was worth a punt on after all ...

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