

The book cover features a close-up portrait of a young woman with dark, wavy hair, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a dark, narrow alleyway at night, illuminated by a street lamp that creates a bright starburst effect. The overall mood is mysterious and suspenseful.

Her dad's a
villain. She's his
princess.
And their world is
about to crash.

Billie Jo

**Kimberley
CHAMBERS**

NO.1 SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

Kimberley Chambers

Billie Jo

«HarperCollins»

Chambers K.

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For Terry, family is everything. But it's far from perfect... Billie Jo is the adored only child of wealthy villain, Terry, and Michelle, the drunken wife he hates. Knowing how much Billie Jo dreads her parents' fights, Terry imagines that she'll understand when he tells her he is going to leave Michelle to marry his pregnant secretary. But fate is about to deal a terrible hand and change everything in a way Terry has not planned for, leaving Billie Jo's protected world in tatters. Set in a world of villains and chancers, Kimberley Chambers' brilliant first novel is a rollercoaster read you will not want to put down.

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Kimberley CHAMBERS

Billie Jo

HARPER

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Dedication

*In loving memory of my wonderful parents, Val and Tom.
So sad that you never lived to see me make something of myself, but I hope I've done you both
proud.*

Epigraph

Her father's adoration
was clear for all to see
His job was to protect her
wherever he may be
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ONE *October 1999*

MICHELLE KEANE TOOK a large gulp of wine and for what seemed like the hundredth time, glanced at the clock on the living-room wall. Two a.m. and the no-good fucker still wasn't home. She wouldn't have minded if he'd have rung her with one of his cock and bull excuses, but tonight he hadn't even had the audacity to do that. She knew he was at it, she'd known for a while. He was a clever bastard, though, and proving it wasn't going to be easy.

As she lay in bed unable to sleep, Billie Jo wondered where her dad was. He wasn't home yet and she worried about him when he was late. Starving hungry, she toyed with the idea of going downstairs to make a sandwich. Remembering her mum was pissed and on the warpath, she decided she'd rather starve.

Whenever her dad was late home, Billie avoided her mother like the plague. It was the same old story every time. Firstly, her mum would sit clock watching and drinking wine by the gallon. The Patsy Cline CD was the next part of the ritual. 'Crazy' was her mum's favourite song. Problem was, she had an awful voice and to say she murdered it was being polite. At the end of the song, her mum would burst into tears and blame Billie Jo for everything bad that had ever happened in her life.

'If it hadn't been for you, I'd still have my nice figure. Size ten I was when I met your dad. He's only out whoring now 'cause I've put on weight and he doesn't fancy me any more. It's all your fault, Billie. I wish you'd never been born. Me and your dad used to get on just fine until you came along. If I could have my life all over again, I'd never have a kid. I must have been bloody mad, I should have had an abortion.'

Billie took no notice of her mother's nasty comments. She'd had years of it, fifteen in fact. Mature for her age, she'd learned to deal with her psycho mum by the age of ten. Before that she used to cry a lot. She could never work out what she'd done wrong or why her mother was so angry with her all the time. When her dad was around she pretended to be nice, but as soon as he left the house, Billie would get the brunt of her mother's resentment.

Billie's relationship with her dad was completely the opposite. He was her life, her rock, and would do anything for her. She knew he was a dodgy bastard, she wasn't silly. That's why she worried when he was unexpectedly late. If he got nicked and put away, her life wouldn't be worth living. Pulling the covers over her head, Billie tried to get some sleep. It didn't come. Sighing, she prepared herself for the row that was bound to erupt on her father's return.

Terry Keane opened one eye, heard the sound of the birds singing and quickly opened the other. Cursing himself for dozing back off to sleep, he leapt out of bed and hurriedly got dressed.

'Bollocks,' he muttered, as he searched high and low for his keys.

Hearing the racket he was making, Jade stirred, switched on the bedside lamp and propped herself up on her pillow. 'You all right, Tel, what's the matter?'

'I can't find me ... oh there they are.'

Jade smiled as she realised he'd been hunting for his keys. Screws carried smaller bunches. They were impossible to mislay, yet he was always losing them.

'What's the time?'

Bending over the bed, Terry gave her a short but passionate kiss. 'Put it this way, if the wildebeest is awake my life won't be worth living. It's nearly six.'

'Christ, is it?' Jade was genuinely shocked. 'I don't suppose you'll be able to escape again later, will you?'

Terry flashed his sexy smile and winked at her. 'You never know your luck, babe. No seriously, I've promised to take Billie Jo out for the day, just me and her, and I've got a bit of business to sort out tonight. I'll bell you later and let you know one way or another.'

'OK, have a nice day with Billie. Love you.'

'Love you too, babe.'

Smiling at his words, Jade put the quilt over her head and lay dreamily thinking about him. At twenty-five years old, Jade Jenkins had crammed a lot into her young life. Having been brought up by her parents Mary and Lenny, along with her younger brother Simon, she'd spent her childhood living in a cottage in a remote village on the outskirts of Somerset. By the age of ten, Jade was bored with her life, by the age of thirteen she was totally disillusioned. At fifteen, the tomboy in Jade disappeared overnight and she turned into a ravishing beauty. Long blonde hair, big green eyes, pert breasts and a size-eight figure, she was the talk of the local lads and the subject of many a wank. At seventeen she started to date the village heart-throb.

Tommy Jones had many a female admirer, was good-looking and knew it. Six foot tall, muscular, with sun-kissed skin and long blond hair, he resembled an Australian surfer. His downfall was, he had the personality of a wet fish.

The son of a farmer, Tommy seemed more at ease dealing with animals than humans. Jade had never seen him as happy as when he was performing his midwife duties, delivering one creature or another. In fact he seemed happier with his hands around their private parts than he ever did with hers. Unbelievably, he proposed to her on her eighteenth birthday. Her parents were delighted, Jade was anything but.

'Let me sleep on it. I'll give you my answer tomorrow.'

Jade was unable to sleep at all that night, as she pondered her future. The following day she took all her savings out of her building society, went to the nearest travel agents and booked a one-way ticket to Spain.

After a lonely first week, Jade met Kirsty Clark, a bubbly 21-year-old from Romford in Essex. Stuck in a foreign country on their lonesome, they soon became kindred spirits and within a week had got jobs working together in a bar. Inseparable, they went on to enjoy the summer of their lives.

When October arrived, Jade couldn't think of anything worse than heading back to Somerset and facing the wrath of Tommy and her parents, so she ended up going with Kirsty back to Romford, where they shared a house with two of Kirsty's cousins.

Four weeks after arriving back, with their small amount of savings rapidly disappearing, Kirsty decided to take up a job offer working in a small recruitment office in the centre of Ilford. Within a week she had found Jade a job. There was a secretarial position available at a car lot in Seven Kings. Jade had done a year after leaving school at a secretarial college back in Somerset, so had a rough idea of what the job would entail. After sailing through the interview, she started there on the following Monday and found it an absolute doddle.

Terry Keane was the proprietor of the car lot and had soon taken Jade under his wing. Married with a child, Terry felt sorry for her being miles away from home. Within a month they had struck up a great friendship. Terry treated her like the little sister he'd never had. She was unflappable, extremely efficient and trustworthy and Terry liked that.

Their relationship changed as the years ticked by and Terry's marriage to Michelle disintegrated. First, Jade had been a shoulder to cry on, a good listener, but as time passed they had become soulmates. Now, seven years on, they were deeply in love and planning their future together.

Jade had fought hard to stop herself falling in love with Terry. She would never have dreamt that one day she would be involved with a married man. She was a decent girl with good morals and it was against all her beliefs. Working with him every day she couldn't help her feelings. She'd even contemplated giving up her job at one point, but he'd talked her out of it. She knew he wasn't lying when he said his marriage was a sham.

She had met his wife Michelle quite a few times over the years, usually when she'd come storming into the car lot for one thing or another. A couple of times she'd come in demanding money. Once she was drunk and fell over and the other few times she'd turned up shouting and screaming. Terry had nicknamed her the wildebeest and Jade used to tell him off for being so nasty. But after a few altercations with Michelle, she understood why and thought it was a perfect name for her.

Their actual affair had started three years ago. A drunken kiss on a bitterly cold Christmas Eve had led them to where they were now. In all truthfulness, the pair of them had been in love with one another well over a year before it started. Frightened of their feelings, neither of them had the guts to admit or do anything about it. Terry had been honest with Jade from the word go.

'As soon as Billie Jo turns sixteen, me and you can be together properly,' he told her. 'Until then we'll have to keep it quiet. I know what Chelle's like. She'll use the kid as blackmail and I don't want my little girl being dragged through the courts. Also if I fuck off now, she'd collar a load of dough off me. If I plan things properly, she'll get nigh on sod all.'

Jade had agreed with Terry and had waited patiently for him. Billie Jo would be sixteen next year, so hopefully the wait would soon be over. She loved him so much that if he'd asked her nicely, she'd have waited for him for ever.

Terry started up his black Range Rover, put on his Kenny Rogers CD and headed towards Hornchurch where he'd lived for the past three years. Before that he and Michelle had lived in a three-bedroom semi in Rainham. Over the last five years Terry's business had boomed and he was now the proud owner of a four-bedroom mock-Tudor house in Emerson Park. He had an ex-bank robber living one side of him and a footballer on the other, so he knew he must be doing well. The only downside he could think of was the fact he hated the fat bitch who lived in it with him.

Terry opened the glove box and took out the mobile phone that he had purposely left there earlier. They might have been one of man's greatest inventions but they could get you hung, drawn and quartered in a minute. Eighteen missed calls and ten answerphone messages. Smiling to himself, he thought how much Orange must love him. With the bills he ran up and the calls he received, he reckoned he must keep the bastards in wages for a month. After dialling 123, he soon found out that all the messages, bar one, were from Michelle.

Number one said, 'All right, Tel, where are you, babe?' Number three, 'I've been trying to get hold of you. Where are you? You bastard.' Number six, 'I hate you, you lying cheating no-good fucking shit cunt.' He couldn't understand seven, eight, nine or ten, as Michelle must have been so pissed by this time that the messages were totally incoherent. The last message had been left at 2.55 a.m., which pleased Terry because that meant the fat bitch had probably passed out around that time. All he needed to do was sneak in quietly. Later, he would swear blind that he had got in at half three.

"'You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille, with four hungry children and a crop in the field.'" Singing in perfect harmony along with Kenny Rogers, Terry decided to cover his tracks just to be on the safe side. He'd never stayed out all night before. Normally he was home by two or three at the latest. He didn't want to give the wildebeest any more reason than necessary to be suspicious.

Pulling the Range Rover into a lay-by along the Hornchurch Road, he called his best pal Davey Mullins. Terry knew all his pals' and business associates' phone numbers off by heart. His motto was, 'If you don't leave Jack Shit lying around, no nosy bastard can find it.' Same with the files and documents in his car lot. All he left in there was the simple stuff, anything important was stored in his brain. If the Old Bill ever shone the light on any of his illegal activities and decided to pay him a visit, he was confident that they would have had a wasted journey. As his mum used to say as she bathed him as a kid, 'You've got the memory of an elephant, son, and a penis the size of its trunk.'

Finally the phone was answered. 'Hello, who is it? What's the time?'

'It's me, you tosser, who do you think it is?'

By the sound of his voice, Dave had probably been up all night getting on it, so Terry spoke slowly but surely.

‘Listen, I need a favour. I overslept round Jade’s last night and I’m only just on me way home now. If her indoors is awake, I’m gonna tell her we’ve had trouble with some motors. I’ll say we had a bit of grief with some geezers over in Swanley. If she don’t believe me, I’ll get her to ring you.’

‘All right, no problem,’ came the croaky reply. ‘Later, yeah.’

Terry knew his best pal would never let him down. They had been in many sticky situations and tight corners over the twenty years that they had known one another and had stuck together through thick and thin. The only thing which worried Terry was that just lately Davey Boy’s cocaine habit had started spiralling out of control. Instead of having a few lines or a gram here and there like he used to, Dave had started shoving it up his hooter, morning, noon and night. Then of course the paranoia and rucks would follow, including one about a month ago with a gang of dudes on the Isle of Dogs. Terry had ended up with four stitches in the side of his head, trying to sort out Davey’s mess.

Terry liked the odd line here and there, but only used it sporadically. If something started to take hold on you, in his eyes, it was time to stop. He knew it wouldn’t be long before he had to sit Davey Boy down and have a serious chat with him. Terry sighed as he flicked the ignition back to life. Weaving his way out of the two cars that had parked either side of him, he headed back towards Emerson Park and the wildebeest.

Putting the front-door key into the lock, he quietly turned it anticlockwise. So far so good, he thought to himself, as he sneaked in. After disposing of his shoes on the mat, he practised his ballet dancing impression as he tiptoed down the hallway in his black socks. It was beginning to get light now, so luckily he could see where he was going without falling arse over tit.

Seeing the living-room door ajar, he made that his first port of call. He knew that since Michelle’s drink problem had escalated out of control, she rarely made it upstairs any more. He normally either found her flopped across the kitchen table, or lying comatose on their white leather sofa. He peeped through the crack of the door and like a fortune-teller predicting a tarot card reading, there she was, sprawled out like a beached whale recently washed ashore.

‘The state of that and the price of fish,’ he said quietly to himself. When they had first got it together, Michelle had been beautiful. Now, he found it hard to believe what had become of the girl he’d fallen in love with and married.

Michelle was out for the count. Lying flat on her back, the button and zip of her jeans were wide open, with mounds of fat bulging over the top. Terry inwardly chuckled. The thing that amused him most was the fact that apart from doing five gym classes a week, she was an honorary member of both Weight Watchers and Slimming World. It seemed the more she tried to diet and keep fit, the fatter she became. Hazarding a guess, he’d say she’d put on at least two stone in the last year alone. He’d often told her that she should go to the gym and her slimming classes and ask for her fucking money back. She must be the only woman in Britain whose before and after photos looked like they’d been switched the wrong way round.

Suddenly stirring, Michelle woke up and spotted him. Within seconds, she’d leapt up like a banshee.

‘You no-good fucking bastard. Who is she? Tell me who she is! I’ll fucking kill her.’

‘Calm down, it’s not what you think. I’ve had business to deal with.’

Terry grabbed hold of her wrists to stop her lashing out at him and tried to pacify her. Chelle was having none of it. She could tell when he was lying, always had been able to.

‘You lying cunt.’ Running into the kitchen like a woman possessed, she grabbed the biggest knife she could find.

Billie Jo had been sound asleep until the commotion downstairs started. Her parents had always rowed but just lately their arguments were becoming worse and more frequent.

‘Put the knife down, Chelle, don’t be so stupid,’ she heard her dad say.

‘Don’t call me stupid, Terry. If I find out you’ve been cheating on me, I’ll cut your fucking bollocks off. I swear on my life, I’ll do a Mrs Bobbitt on you.’

Billie ran down the stairs at the mention of the word knife and was horrified to see her mum pointing a big one at her dad. ‘Mum, no please, don’t hurt Daddy,’ she screamed.

Momentarily, her daughter’s presence was enough to throw Michelle off balance. Grabbing the knife, Terry shoved her against the wall. He rang Davey Mullins and handed Michelle the phone. ‘Ask him where we was. Go on, you fucking nutter, ask him.’

Comforting his hysterical daughter in his strong arms, Terry gently led her up the stairs. ‘Ssh, stop crying now, Billie. It’s all over now, babe. It was only a silly misunderstanding. Now come on, sweetheart, we’re going out later, me and you. You don’t wanna be all red-eyed now, do you?’

Once she had spoken to Davey Mullins, Chelle regained her senses. If Billie hadn’t come downstairs, she wasn’t sure what would’ve happened. The way she’d lost it, she’d probably have plunged the knife straight through Terry. She’d certainly felt capable of it. Unsteadily, she made her way back into the living room. The thought of him leaving her was too distressing to even contemplate. She still loved him deep down, always had and always would, and the thought of him being with another woman made her turn into someone she didn’t recognise. The jealousy she had felt earlier was indescribable. She’d felt a sense of panic, as if her heart was being pulled out of her chest. She wasn’t totally stupid. She knew he didn’t love her any more. She also knew that if it wasn’t for Billie Jo, he’d have fucked off long ago. That’s why she drank so much, to blot out the truth.

It had been oh-so-different in the beginning. An only child, Chelle had been spoilt rotten and used to getting everything she wanted from a very early age. She was twenty years old when she’d met Terry in a local pub and she’d known instantly that he was the man for her. Handsome, wealthy and definitely a face, she’d made a play for him and got him. It hadn’t been difficult back then. She’d possessed the looks, charm and acting ability to snare whoever she wished.

Within a year, Chelle’s façade had started to slip. Desperate not to lose Terry, she’d purposely fallen pregnant. Billie Jo being born was her trump card. The child’s birth enabled her to hang on to the man she loved and the lifestyle she craved. If he’d left her then or now, she would be nothing, a no-mark. She couldn’t and wouldn’t let that happen. She’d kill him before she allowed him to walk out that front door.

Deciding a change of tactic was needed, she pondered over what to do next. She’d been playing Mrs Nice Wife recently and it had been getting her nowhere. A different game-plan had to be put into play.

Still too drunk to think straight, she guzzled the remainder of the wine, before sobbing in a crumpled heap on the sofa. If he was going to get rid of her, trade her in for some newer model, she was determined to go out with the biggest bang possible.

Terry made sure Billie was OK and then got into bed in one of the spare rooms. He could hear Michelle crying downstairs. She’d played the drama queen act for so long during their marriage that she was now an expert at it.

How the fuck has my life ended up like this? he thought silently, as he drifted back to his past. His childhood had been awful. The eldest of three boys, he’d been born into poverty. His father was a drunken brute, who had resented him from the day he was born. His mother was a typical downtrodden Irishwoman who did her best to avoid her husband’s violent temper.

Terry’s salvation had been starting work. At thirteen, he had got a part-time job at a car lot in Romford for a guy named Benny Bones. Being a streetwise kid, Terry was a fast learner and within months had mastered the trade off by heart. Benny was a cockney through and through. He knew every song, saying and villain that had ever come out of the East End of London. Terry loved his accent, stories and slang. He’d never felt Irish and having never really lived there, he classed himself as an Englishman. Irishmen reminded him too much of his drunken father.

Within a year of working for him, Terry had Benny’s repertoire off to a tee, so much so that customers used to think they were father and son. In Terry’s mind they were. Benny was the father he’d never really had.

It was around this time that Terry arrived home one night to see his mother lying on the floor, covered in blood, with her eyeball hanging out of its socket. Dragging his father out of the armchair, Terry proceeded to knock seven colours of shit out of him. All the years of pent-up frustration of being bullied by the bastard were finally released. Ex-boxer or no ex-boxer, a drunken ageing Paddy was no match for the up and coming Terry, whose parting sentence was to tell his father that if he ever touched his mother again, he would come back and finish him off. Terry walked out of the house that night and never went back.

Terry moved in with his boss Benny and over the next year or two used his knowledge to take the car trade by storm. Having saved enough money for a deposit, he then bought himself a little flat situated just off Seven Kings High Road. Enjoying his first taste of independence and throwing himself into his work, he had little or no time to bother with women. Witnessing his parents' fucked-up relationship had put him off for life, and apart from a few one-night stands, he couldn't be bothered.

He was thirty years old when he had the misfortune of meeting Chelle. His mother had warned him about girls like her, but he'd still been silly enough to let her dig her claws in and then trap him. The unplanned pregnancy had been a shock to him. Determined to do the right thing, he'd married her. Within months, he realised he'd dropped a clanger. A terrible wife equalled an awful mother, but determined his daughter would have a stable childhood, he battled on.

Now he was at the point of no return. Gone was the sweet, pretty brunette he'd first met. In its place was a money-orientated, nasty fat bitch with a mouth like a sewer.

'What a poxy night,' he muttered to himself, as he snuggled up under the quilt. He was wrecked now, worn out by it all, and couldn't wait to get some shut-eye.

Part of him felt guilty. If he hadn't come home so late, the row would never have happened. He wasn't bothered about Chelle, she could go and fuck herself. Billie was his only concern and he could tell his daughter had been shaken up by the scene that she'd witnessed earlier. Deciding to make it up to her by spoiling her rotten, he nodded off into a deep, welcome sleep.

Hearing her dad snoring in the next room, Billie wept quietly. The rows between her parents she'd learned to live with, she'd had to, but the events of earlier had nigh on scared her to death. The thought of what might have happened if she hadn't heard the commotion and come down the stairs was too traumatic for her to even think about. Her home life was bad enough, surely it couldn't get any worse. Consoling herself with the thought that it was probably just a one-off, she willed herself to sleep. She had a busy day ahead and didn't want it spoilt by being overtired.

As Billie nodded off to sleep, she was totally unaware of the run of bad luck that was catapulting towards her.

This morning's episode had been the start of it, a taster.

Unfortunately for Billie, the worst was yet to come.

TWO

MICHELLE WOKE UP on the sofa to be greeted by the hang-over from hell. As the events of earlier that day came flooding back, she cursed herself for letting fly at Terry. She was now a hundred per cent sure that he was having an affair. She was his wife for God's sake and women just know these things.

The smell of perfume on his shirts. The fact he left his mobile locked safely in his glove box. She'd even gone as far as sifting through his dirty underwear, checking for stains and that unmistakable smell of sex. She might be a lot of things but silly wasn't one of them. Give him enough rope and he'll hang himself, that had always been her motto, and now she'd gone and blown it. After the earlier show-down he'd be more careful than ever at covering his tracks. *Jackanory* would have been proud of Davey Mullins' version of events. There were more holes in his story than a pair of fishnet stockings. Swanley my arse, she thought as she gingerly lifted herself off the sofa. Her head was pounding and was making her feel sick. Deciding that the only thing to perk her up would be the good old-fashioned hair of the dog, she headed towards the kitchen. An Alka Seltzer and two vinos later, she started to feel like her old self. Her headache had gone, her hands had stopped shaking and she felt ready to face another day. Hearing footsteps, she froze for a second, thinking it was him. Once she realised it was only Billie, she breathed a sigh of relief.

'Oh it's you. I thought it was your dad.'

Plonking herself down at the kitchen table, Billie came straight to the point. 'Is it all right if I stay at Tiffany's tonight? It's her dad's birthday and they've invited me to go for a meal with them.'

Billie knew the answer would be yes before she'd even finished the question. Her mum didn't give a shit where she went, what she did or who she was with. If she said she was going out with Fred and Rosemary West for a meal, her mother would have OK'd it. Her dad was a different kettle of fish. He wanted to know where she was going, who she was with, spoke personally to all of her friends' parents to check arrangements, and made sure she had a lift to and fro.

'Of course you can stay at Tiff's.' Michelle breathed a sigh of relief. It was her best friend Hazel's birthday and she'd arranged to go out later with her and the rest of the girls from the gym. The fact she now didn't have to rush back suited her down to the ground, let Sleeping Beauty upstairs have a taste of his own medicine. See if he liked it, if she stayed out all night. Surreptitiously retrieving the wine glass that she'd shoved behind the microwave when Billie had first entered the kitchen, Chelle turned to face her daughter.

'I'm going upstairs to get ready now, Bill. You have a nice time tonight.'

'Thanks,' Billie said, watching her mother swan out of the kitchen.

Trying on outfits galore, then chucking them on the floor in a temper as she realised they no longer fitted, Michelle felt like screaming. Making as much noise as she could to try and wake the no-good bastard sleeping in the next room, she opted for her old faithful black pinstriped suit. Looking in the mirror did nothing to enchant her mood. She instantly decided she was rejoining Weight Watchers first thing Monday morning.

Once he heard the front door slam and his wife's Mercedes pull off the drive, Terry jumped out of bed. He'd been pretending to be asleep for the last hour, even acting out a couple of snores. Hearing his old woman getting ready, he'd guessed she was off out somewhere and rather than facing a Spanish Inquisition, he'd decided to stay put until she'd left. Casually he wandered downstairs.

'Morning, Princess.' Putting his big arms around his daughter, he pulled her close and held her tightly. Billie hugged him back and looked up at him.

'Where was you last night, Dad? Why did you stay out all night? You might have known Mum would kick off.'

‘Oh, don’t you start on me as well.’ Terry felt guilty as he looked at his daughter’s worried face. Deciding to bluff it, he carried on. ‘I’m a businessman, Bill. I had some shit to sort out. Now forget last night, eh, what do you wanna do this afternoon?’

Billie didn’t really feel like doing anything. She’d had very little sleep and was yet to recover from the shock of her mum trying to stab her dad. Seeing her dad’s hurt expression at her lack of enthusiasm, she put on her best false smile. ‘I wouldn’t mind going to Lakeside to get a new outfit for tonight.’

Returning her smile with a false one of his own, Terry told her to get her arse in gear and be ready to go in ten minutes. ‘Bollocks,’ he muttered, as soon as she was out of earshot. He’d rather go to the dentist and have his teeth pulled out than spend a Saturday afternoon being dragged around Lakey. Four hours later and four hundred quid lighter, Terry loaded Billie’s bags onto the back seat and started up the engine. His little princess hadn’t been her usual bubbly self today and he was a bit worried about her.

‘You all right, babe?’

‘Yes fine, Dad,’ she lied.

Terry decided she must still have the hump over the silly row they’d had earlier. Standing by the doorway of Top Shop while Billie mooched inside, he’d noticed two boyband lookalikes, mid-twenties, clocking his daughter’s arse and making suggestive comments about her. Just as he was about to go over to the bench where they were sitting, drag them up by their scrawny little necks and teach them a lesson, Billie had seen what was going on. Screaming at him, she’d given him what for.

‘If you show me up in the middle of Lakeside, I swear I’ll never talk to you again. I’m not a kid any more, Dad. I’m a young woman and boys are bound to look at me from time to time. I’d have to be a minger if they didn’t. You’re so overprotective with me, Dad, you make me sick at times.’

Agreeing with her just to keep the peace, Terry had casually slung his arm round her shoulder, giving the two lads in question his most evil look as he passed them. He had what he called a hidden camera lodged inside his brain. Not one to ever forget a face, he debated whether to return to Lakeside alone, hunt down the two little fuckers responsible for the argument and show them exactly whose daughter they were dealing with. Calming himself down, he decided against it. They were only kids after all.

‘Oi, waiter, bring us another bottle of champagne over here pronto, will ya?’ Proudly perched on her chair in the Chigwell restaurant, Michelle was now enjoying herself immensely. With her voice increasing in volume by the second, she was the life and soul of the party.

Rushing over to the table from hell, Antonio shakily topped up the glasses and quickly made an exit. Four years he’d been working as a waiter in this restaurant and he absolutely hated the sight of this particular group of women. They normally came in on the first Saturday of every month and he’d had such a gutful of them over the years that he’d managed to wangle that particular Saturday as his day off. Now here they were, as bold as brass, on the second Saturday of the month. That was just his bloody luck.

Unable to cope with their drunken, abusive behaviour, Antonio feigned a migraine and swiftly left the restaurant.

‘Bye, Princess, have a nice time tonight.’ Terry smiled as he watched his daughter walk up her best friend’s driveway. Once he made sure that the door was opened and she was safely inside, he sped off to pick up Davey Mullins.

After drinking the restaurant dry of champagne, Michelle was in her observant mood. Sitting quietly, she surveyed her group of friends. They’d all met working out together at their local gym, and over the years had disclosed their innermost secrets to one another. They’d joked that one day, when they were older, they would sit down and write a book about their unusual lives.

Hazel Short was the first not-right that Michelle had palled up with. Forty-three years old with long blonde hair and a body to die for, Hazel had seemed quite normal at first. She was a typical

Essex bird with a bubbly personality to match, but they say you should never judge a book by its cover and this turned out to be true, as Hazel turned out to be anything but normal. After marrying young to an ageing ex-bank robber called Stan and producing three children in quick succession, Hazel was very happy with the cards she'd been dealt. With plenty of money shoved into offshore accounts for a rainy day, Hazel was the brains behind Stan's thieving. Stan would nick it and Hazel would stash it and together they made a very good team.

As time went on Stan moved into the pub protection game. Within a year, things went tits up and he got a ten stretch for torturing some poor bastard in the back room of a boozier along the Barking Road. Six months into his sentence, Stan keeled over with a heart attack and promptly snuffed it. Overnight Hazel became a very rich lady indeed.

Julie Beale was the next not-right to become Chelle's friend. At forty-six years old, with the voice of a man and the body of a Russian shot putter, at first glance she could seem quite scary. An ex-prostitute, Julie had spent the latter part of her working life employed as a madam at a massage parlour in Ilford. A substantial inheritance left by one of her regular clients had led to her taking an early retirement.

The final member of the Fab Four went by the name of Suzie Robinson. At thirty-five years old, she was the baby of the gang. Happily married to Richie who owned a scrapyard in Rainham, Suzie had seemed quite square compared to the rest of them. It wasn't until one evening when they'd been caning the wine all day, that her story bubbled to the surface. She had done a year in Holloway for an offence to do with her first husband, Trevor. Once released, Suzie left him and ran off up north with the eighteen-year-old brother of one of her former inmates. Sick of feeling like his mother, Suzie had had enough within a year and headed back down south. A year later, she married her current husband, Richie.

Michelle's thoughts were interrupted by Georgie the owner telling them that their cab was outside.

Sitting in a backstreet boozier in Stepney Green, Terry began to get agitated. Giving Davey Mullins the nod to go up to the bar, Terry moved towards the lying little bastard sitting opposite him.

'Look, don't fuck with me, kid. I know for a fact your story don't ring true, 'cause I've checked it with the other lads. No one else could have had that money away, bar you. Don't take me as some kind of a cunt, believe me that'll be the worst mistake you'll ever make. Now, you've got until next Saturday lunchtime to get the money you've chored back to me. Think yourself lucky, Paul, that I'm good pals with your uncle, 'cause believe me, you wouldn't have such an easy ride if me and Archie weren't muckers. Now, I know where you live and I'm sending Davey Boy to pick up the dough. Once you've paid, I want you to get out the area. If I ever see your ugly mug again, Paul, I swear as God's my judge, I'll gut you like a fucking fish.'

Paul Cox could feel his bowel loosening as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Terry Keane frightened the life out of him and in all his twenty-seven years, he'd never met anyone with such evil eyes, piercing blue and pure fucking evil.

He could visualise himself being chopped up into little pieces and ending up in concrete, propping up one of the flyovers along the A13. He knew in that instant that he wasn't cut out for this kind of work, dealing with these kind of people. He'd only got involved as a favour to his Uncle Archie, who was currently in the Scrubs taking a holiday at Her Majesty's pleasure. Archie had needed someone he could trust for a while to take over the reins and Paul had offered to lend a helping hand. Realising he'd made a big mistake by being light-fingered, Paul downed his bottle of Becks and rose unsteadily from his seat.

'Look, I'm really sorry, Tel. I'll have your money back by Saturday, I promise.' On exiting the run-down pub, Paul found the nearest kerb and retched.

Michelle looked at the minicab driver and snarled, 'You're taking the piss. You ain't getting thirty-five, you robbing bastard. I'll give you a score.' Ali hated being a minicab driver. He made his

own fares up as he went along. The worse the customer, the more he charged. Snatching the money, he breathed a sigh of relief as the abusive, drunken women got out of his car. Furious, he opened his window. 'I know where you live, you English bitches. I will be back.' Pulling her trousers down, Michelle gave him a flash of her fat arse. Hazel, Julie and Suzie opted for wanker signs.

In stitches, the girls spilled into Hazel's kitchen. 'I'll be back,' Hazel said, mimicking an Indian accent.

'Fucking Delhi's answer to Arnie Schwarzenegger,' Chelle screamed. Crying with laughter, the girls fell onto Hazel's kitchen floor.

Over in Stepney, Terry's face was like thunder. He'd had a proper little deal going for years now, with an old boy from Bethnal Green who answered to the name of Archie Cox. Archie and Terry had originally been introduced by Terry's old boss, Benny Bones, and over the years they had built up an honest and trustworthy friendship. The little scam they had going had brought in bundles over the years and until recently was infallible. Buying up write-offs from salvage yards that were badly damaged but not mangled beyond recognition, the motors were loaded onto recovery trucks and driven out to the remote outskirts of Cambridgeshire, where they owned a couple of yards in the middle of nowhere. They would then call on the services of the top-class young car thieves who were on their payroll, to go out and steal the exact same model. The stolen vehicles would immediately have the number plate removed and swapped for the write-offs. They would then be driven out to Cambridgeshire in the middle of the night where three trustworthy mechanics would swap all the parts over, change the chassis number and make them reasonably untraceable. In reality, the original vehicles were stripped down and ceased to exist. The newly built motors were then shipped abroad to start a new life.

Terry and Archie didn't bother with any middle of the range motors, all the vehicles involved were top jolly, including Mercs, BMWs, Jags and Range Rovers to name but a few.

They had over a dozen salvage yards dotted across the south-east that notified them of any suitable vehicle and readily accepted a large backhander for their trouble. It was an easy little scam, and very profitable, but just lately things had started to get a bit on top of them.

Archie Cox, who organised all the shipping and was also the man that had all the contacts, had started to become greedy. At fifty-eight and already as rich as any fucker would ever need to be, Archie had decided to retire at sixty and head off to live in his villa in sunny Marbella.

Being a gluttonous bastard and also becoming a bit careless in his latter years, Archie decided that he could improve on his income and he recruited a few extra lads to do some motors up locally. He was hoping his new venture would pull in at least another fifty grand a month.

Terry had adamantly wanted nothing to do with Archie's new idea. He'd told him he must be bonkers to change a system that had worked so well for years and he'd insisted he was playing with fire. Archie should have listened to the advice he was being given, as six months later the Old Bill raided a yard just off the Bow Road and found three of the ringers. Archie was jailed for four years.

Terry wasn't surprised when he heard about the arrest. Archie had played too close to home. He had no worries about the old boy opening his mouth. He was one of the old school and would rather have his bollocks cut off than grass up a mate. Terry felt so sorry for the poor old sod. He couldn't understand why a man who had the credentials of Baron Rockefeller would choose to be so greedy in his last couple of working years. Nothing like that would ever happen to him while he had a hole in his arse; he was far too clued up to go down that road.

Years ago, Terry could easily have taken over Archie's contacts and run the show himself, but he'd chosen not to. He'd rather pay the old boy a percentage, which is what he'd done for the last fifteen years. Archie took sixty per cent of the profits and Terry took forty. What's ten per cent if it keeps your name out of the equation?

Not once had Terry ever been hauled in by the Old Bill. He was sure the filth was aware of him as he had his finger stuck in many pies, but he was a background man and that's the way he liked

it. He made sure that he kept well away from the dodgy motors, the thieves and the yards. He had a lackey boy to do all his shit jobs for him and this was probably the reason why he'd kept his nose clean for so many years. In Terry's world you had to trust your instincts, and at this present moment he had a real bad feeling about Archie's quivering wreck of a nephew. If Paul got his collar felt, he'd sing like a songbird, his type always did.

Terry decided to get Dave or one of the other lads to pay Archie a visit in the Scrubs. Someone had to inform the poor old sod that his nephew had turned out to be a wrong'un. Terry wouldn't go personally; the less he was linked with Archie the better.

Noticing his pal had something on his mind, Davey Boy aimed a playful punch at him. 'What's up, Tel? You don't seem yourself tonight, mate, you're knocking 'em back like they're going out of style. What's the matter?'

'I'm all right, mate. I'm just stressed. That cunt Cox has put me in a bad mood. If he weren't Archie's nephew, I swear I'd fucking kill him. You know what I'm like, Dave, I hate being had over.'

'Don't worry about him, Tel, the geezer's a cock.'

Terry gulped at his drink. He felt weighed down with worry.

'That's what worries me. Now Cox has been working with us, he probably knows too much. Archie's a fucking nuisance bringing him into the fold.'

Dave shrugged. Terry rarely went on a downer, but when he did, he was hard to snap out of it. Dave decided to change the subject. 'We've got old Albie's wedding next week, ain't we?'

Terry sighed. He was dreading the occasion. 'Wonderful, I'm taking Chelle with me. All her gym cronies are going. There's bound to be some fucking fiasco, you mark my words.'

Taking a sip of his Budweiser, Dave smiled at his pal. The poor bastard looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. 'I'll get my Lisa to sit with Chelle and keep an eye on her. She'll be fine, you'll see.'

Terry wished he could share his friend's optimism. Michelle behave? That was a joke. It was odds-on that the fat cow would show him up in some way, shape or form. He hated weddings, he really did. Every time he attended one it reminded him of the biggest mistake that he'd ever made. Still, he wouldn't have to suffer it much longer. This time next year, he and the wildebeest would be separated and awaiting their divorce.

Unknown to Michelle, Terry had been preparing for the occasion by offloading many of his assets. Chelle knew nothing about what he owned and what he didn't. All she knew was that he had two houses, which he rented out to students, the car lot and their own house.

What Chelle didn't know was that, over the years, he'd purchased four other properties, which he'd rented out. Most of the tenants had been Albanian or Bosnian and the DSS had eagerly paid whatever rent Terry had demanded.

When Archie got arrested, Terry wondered if it was wise to have so many properties in his name, just in case someone came sniffing around. It was that thought, and the fact that he didn't want Chelle to get her grubby paws on them, that had made him decide to get rid of them. He'd sold all four of them on the cheap in cash-only deals to fellow business associates of his with the tenants still intact.

Davey Mullins was looking after half of his cash for him. The other half Terry had hidden in the safe at the car lot. He'd told no one it was there, not even Dave. He trusted Dave more than life itself, but in this day and age you could never be too careful. Money did strange things to people.

The minute he walked out the door, Chelle would find herself the best brief money could buy. She would then try and cane him for every penny he had. Terry was as sure of this as he was sure the Pope prayed. He knew he'd have to cough up a large pay-off settlement for her, but considering the fat lazy bitch had never done a day's work in her life, there was no way he was letting her get her mitts on anything she didn't know about. Terry couldn't wait until his life consisted of just him, Billie and Jade. In his eyes, that day couldn't come quick enough.

THREE

‘WELL, DAD, HOW do I look?’

Terry turned around to face his daughter and sighed inwardly. For the first time in his life, he saw his daughter as a young woman, instead of a child. She looked absolutely stunning, but instead of being pleased Terry felt a wave of dread wash over him as he realised his little baby, who he thought would look like a little girl for ever, had shot up a few inches overnight, sprouted breasts and had turned into a right little cracker.

If Terry could have had his way, he’d have kept her in bunches and ankle socks until she was at least twenty-one. He knew deep down that he had to let Billie grow up, but the thing that worried him was the thought of grown men lusting after her. She looked so much older than her tender fifteen years, and he’d personally mutilate anyone over the age of twenty-one who even dared to look at her in a sexual way.

Swallowing his thoughts, he smiled at her. ‘You look lovely, Bill, really lovely.’

Billie walked up to him and gave him a big hug. She knew her dad hated her growing up and had been expecting him to throw a fit over the adult-looking outfit she was wearing. A fitted dress, high-heeled shoes, lipstick and mascara would normally send her dad into a frenzy. Thankfully, today he seemed quite calm.

‘Right, I’m ready, do I look all right?’ Michelle sauntered into the room in a black trouser suit, matched with leopardskin bag, shoes and hat.

‘You look really nice, Mum, doesn’t she, Dad?’

Terry glanced at his daughter and admired the fact that she was such a good liar. Looking his wife up and down, he chose to be polite. ‘You look nice, Chelle.’

In fact, in all honesty, he’d seen her look a damn sight worse. Due to her weight gain, Chelle normally looked like a bundle of shit tied up ugly. This outfit, which had set him back three hundred quid from a boutique in Loughton, kind of flattered her.

Terry smiled at his wife and daughter. ‘Ready to make tracks then?’

‘Yep,’ they both replied in unison.

Angie Smith became Mrs Bones at two o’clock that afternoon at Langtons Register Office in Hornchurch. The evening reception was being held in a function room in Upminster and another hundred guests were expected to join in the celebrations. Albie Bones was Benny’s younger brother. Angie would be wife number four.

Terry stood at the bar with Davey Mullins, chatting to a couple of blokes who owned a car site in Brentwood. Auctions were the topic of conversation and Terry was bored shitless by the two Larry Largenuts he and Dave were lumbered with. Excusing themselves, Terry and Dave headed to the toilets. Avoiding the bar like the plague on the way back, they decided to join the girls.

‘All right, ladies? Enjoying yourselves are you?’

Before anyone had a chance to acknowledge them, Chelle piped up. ‘You all know my husband, don’t you, girls? The one and only Charlie Bigbananas. Two hours I’ve been sitting here and he’s only just bothered to come and talk to me and see if I’m all right.’

Terry gave his wife a pitying look. ‘Don’t start, Chelle, not tonight. I’m tired, Billie’s here and I’m really not in the mood for your fucking antics. Your eyes are rolling, how much you had to drink?’

‘I’ve only had a few. Keeping tabs on me are you?’ Chelle replied cockily. Michelle rarely gave it the big-’un indoors. She was far too scared that Terry would walk out the door and not come back. Things changed, though, as soon as she met up with her gym pals. As soon as Chelle was in their company, her personality changed completely. She liked to give it the big-’un, make out she wore the trousers and ruled the roost. Instead of looking cool, she made herself look incredibly stupid. A complete prat in fact.

Terry sat quietly, sipping his JD and Coke, surveying the situation. The karaoke had now started and Benny had been the first one to get up singing with his rendition of 'Mack the Knife'. Terry smiled to himself whilst weighing up the women around him.

Lisa was a typical Dave-type of bird. Blonde, young, tarty, she was as common and as thick as two short planks. He'd only just moved his last bird out a few weeks before he'd met Lisa, then within a month he'd moved her in. Davey Boy was one of these blokes who hated living on his own and Terry had lost count of the amount of birds he'd had living with him over the years. The one thing they all had in common was that they were all in their twenties, brainless and dressed like whores. Terry glanced around at the rest of the table.

Hazel Short, Terry had quite a lot of time for. He'd known her old man Stan quite well and knew that Hazel had been the brains behind Stan's bollocks. She was well clued up, was Hazel, and definitely no man's fool. Stan had been dead for years now and Hazel's fortune just went on growing and growing.

Suzie Robinson, Terry wasn't quite so sure about. She came across as pleasant enough but he'd always hated her current old man Richie, so he had his reservations about her.

Julie Beale frightened Terry more than any woman he'd ever met in his lifetime. He'd always imagined that she'd been born a boy, had her bollocks chopped off, took hormone tablets, grown tits and overnight had renamed herself Julie. He knew that for years she'd plied her trade at the local wash-and-wank shop, and he couldn't believe that any man could be that desperate to want to fuck someone that looked like Giant Haystacks with tits.

'Right, can I have Michelle and the gang up on stage please.'

'Come on, girls, that's us,' Chelle said excitedly, galloping towards the karaoke.

'You all right, Dad?' Billie noticed her father sitting alone at the table and decided to join him. She had been standing with a couple of girls and a crowd of lads near the stage, but as soon as she'd seen her mother and her friends leap up there, she'd decided to make a quick exit. Scott, whom she'd been talking to, was a nice lad and she didn't want to have to explain that the fat drunken woman on stage was her mother.

'I'm all right, Bill. You having a good time, girl? Who are them lads you were standing with?'

'I know one of them from school, Dad, but the one with the short blond hair that I've been chatting to is Scott. He's a really nice boy. He's seventeen and has a really good job up town. He's asked me to go to the pictures next week, do you mind if I go, Dad?'

'I want to have a look at him first, Princess. Bring him over, so I can vet him and if I like the look of him, you can go. Deal?'

'Yes, deal. I know you'll like him, Dad, he's really nice.'

After absolutely murdering Diana Ross's 'Baby Love', Chelle and her pals went on to crucify 'Young Hearts Run Free', followed by 'Leader of the Pack'. Karaoke Kevin, who was a student by day and did his night-time job to pay for his education, had now had a gutful of the four women standing on the stage who refused to leave.

'Now come on, girls, you must get off the stage. Other people are waiting to have a turn.'

'Shut up, you mug, and give us the mike back,' Kevin heard one of the girls say. He really didn't need this shit. All of the lads he roomed with from uni had jobs working in Tesco or Sainsbury's to earn a bit of pocket money. Kevin decided there and then that he was selling the karaoke equipment his parents had bought for him and would join his friends on the checkouts as quickly as possible.

Chelle stood on the stage, glaring at Kevin. 'Look, I promise,' she slurred. 'Let me sing one more and that's it.'

Kevin didn't really have any choice in the matter. 'OK, just one more song.'

Michelle looked at her friends. 'Now sod off, girls, and let me sing this one on my own. I want to dedicate it to my wonderful fucking husband.'

Hazel, Suzie and Julie could feel trouble brewing and left the stage without argument. None of them wanted to get on the wrong side of Terry.

'Right, ladies and gentlemen,' Kevin announced, 'I have a lady here who wants to dedicate a song to her husband.'

Michelle stood at the front of the stage with the mike in her hand. She was drunk now, really drunk, and was swaying from side to side. She didn't care, she felt really important, the hall was silent and she had everybody's attention. 'This song is going out especially for my other half. Everyone knows who he is, 'cause he is the ultimate Charlie Bigbananas.'

At this point the hall was so quiet, you could have heard a pin drop. 'Well, I want all you people to know, he thinks I'm stupid and I'm anything but. I know he's having an affair and all I can say is lucky her, whoever she is. Tel, this song's for you, babe.' Chelle then proceeded to sing Chas and Dave's 'Ain't No Pleasing You'.

Terry and Billie sat at the table feeling absolutely mortified.

'Dad, I'm so embarrassed, what are we gonna do? What will Scott and my friends think of me?'

Terry looked at his daughter's flushed cheeks and could have cried for her. 'Don't worry, Bill, it's your mother that's showed herself up, not you. Your friends won't think any less of you, darling, and I'll tell you what me and you will do. The day you turn sixteen, we're leaving your mother for good. We'll get a nice place of our own, just the two of us.'

'Really? Oh, Dad, I'd love that. Do you really mean it?'

'I'm not joking, Princess. I'm deadly serious. Between me and you, it's something I've had planned for ages. I've never said anything to you before, the time just wasn't right.'

'Oh Dad, I can't wait. It'll be great me and you sharing a house together.' Billie forgot about her embarrassment briefly. She couldn't think of anything better than getting away from her mother. Over the years, Billie had tried so hard to build a relationship with her, she really had, but all her efforts had amounted to nothing. Her mother had no time for her and that was that. Billie had just had to learn to live with it.

'Oh darling, I'm a-a leaving, that's what I'm gonna do-oo-oo-oo.'

Kevin snatched the mike back quickly. 'A round of applause for Michelle, everybody.' Nobody clapped. Trotting down the stairs that adjoined the stage, Michelle promptly stacked it and fell flat on her face.

'Dad, quick, do something, she's fell over.' Billie could feel her little heart beating nineteen to the dozen. In fact she wished the ground would just open up and swallow her.

'Move out the way,' Terry snarled, as he barged his way across the dance floor and into the crowd that surrounded his wife. Michelle was lying on the floor, like a rhino. The crotch of her trousers had split as she fell, and because she rarely wore knickers, her Jack and Danny was hanging out for all to see. Davey Boy and Terry each took one arm and dragged her towards a table near the door.

'Are you OK, son?' Benny Bones asked Terry sympathetically.

'What do you think?' Terry replied, shooting him a look.

'I'm not drunk you know,' Chelle slurred. 'It's these new shoes. I slipped.'

Propping her on the nearest chair, Terry fished around in her handbag for his car keys. Ordering Dave to stand guard over her, he gestured for Billie to follow him outside.

'I'm never going out with her again, Dad,' Billie said, sobbing.

Terry looked at his daughter and felt so sorry for her. She was a wonderful kid and really didn't deserve to have that thing as a mother. Still, it was his fault really. He'd married the fucking monster and provided her with his sperm in the first place.

'Did you really mean it, Dad, when you said that we could move away soon?'

Terry unlocked the Range Rover, sat Billie in the front seat and clicked her seat belt shut. Smiling, he spoke clearly. 'Listen, Bill, you're not a kid any more and I've had this planned a while. I know I can trust you and there's some other stuff I need to tell you as well. Some of it you might not

like. Let's just concentrate on getting your mother home tonight and then tomorrow I'll take you out for lunch. We'll go somewhere quiet and I promise I'll tell you everything.'

'OK, Dad, but you must tell me the truth. I'm not a child any more.'

'You'll get the truth, Princess, I swear.'

Terry had never felt more humiliated in his whole life as when he and Dave carried Chelle out from the reception. He was used to her getting pissed and stacking it. That was her usual party piece, but to get up on the stage and make a show of him over the mike. She'd gone too far this time and he would make sure that she damn well paid for it.

To behave like that in front of Billie was unforgivable. Michelle's days were well and truly numbered.

Nobody made Terry Keane look a cunt and got away with it. Nobody!

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