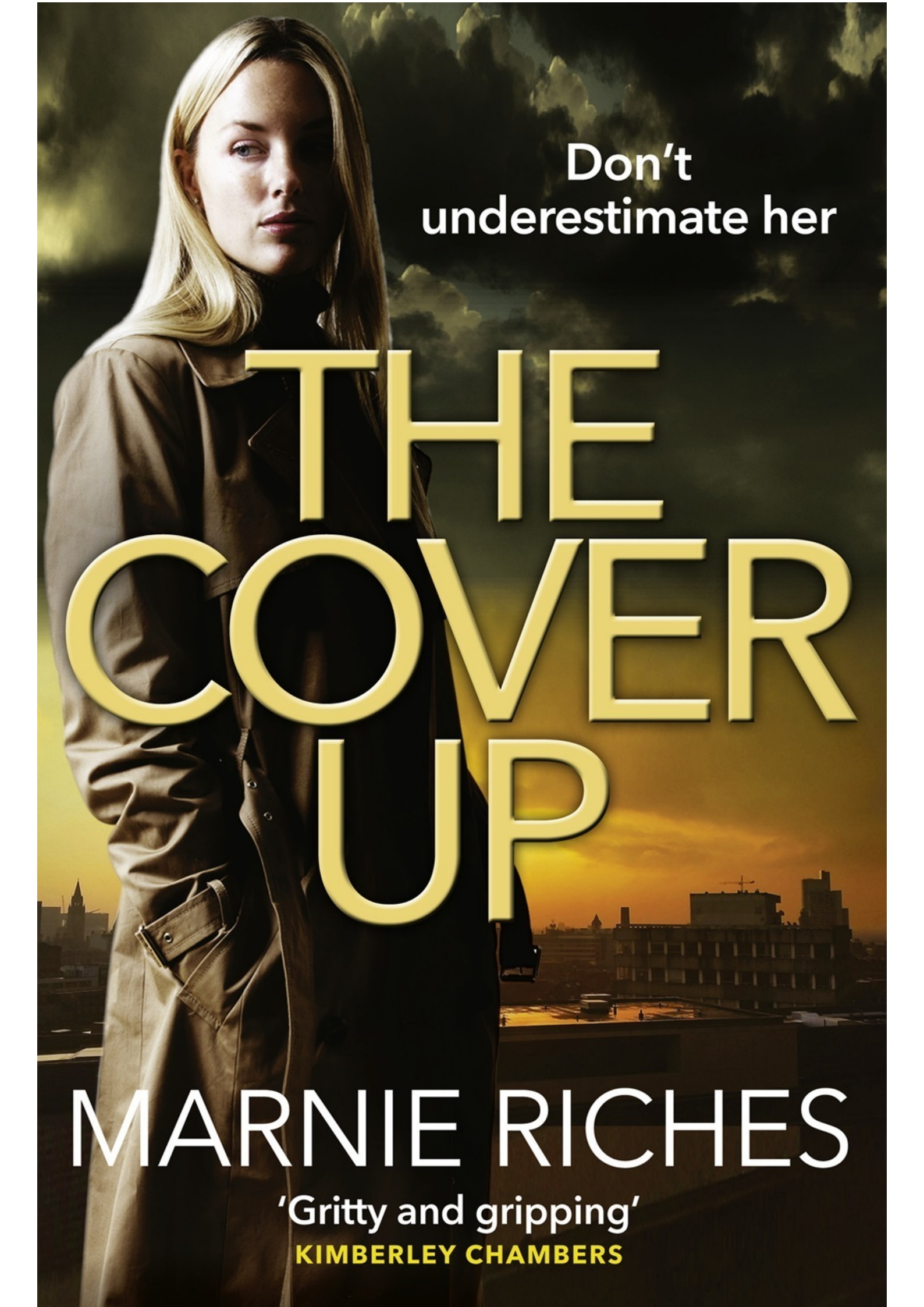


A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a brown trench coat, stands in the foreground. The background shows a city skyline at sunset or sunrise, with a dramatic, cloudy sky in shades of orange, yellow, and dark grey. The overall mood is serious and atmospheric.

Don't
underestimate her

THE COVER UP

MARNIE RICHES

'Gritty and gripping'

KIMBERLEY CHAMBERS

Marnie Riches

**The Cover Up: A gripping
crime thriller for 2018**

«HarperCollins»

Riches M.

The Cover Up: A gripping crime thriller for 2018 / M. Riches —
«HarperCollins»,

‘A leading light in the field of Mancunian noir’ The Guardian ‘Gritty and gripping’ Kimberley Chambers, no.1 bestseller Watch your back. Everyone else will be. How far would you go to protect your empire? Manchester’s criminal underworld is reeling from the loss of its leader, Paddy O’Brien. In the wake of her husband’s death, Sheila O’Brien takes charge of the city, and for once, she’s doing things her way. But she hasn’t reckoned with the fearsome Nigel Bancroft, a threat from Birmingham who is determined to conquer Manchester next. As a power tussle begins, Sheila is determined to keep control of the empire she has won – even if it means she has to die trying... A heart-stopping read with a gritty edge, perfect for fans of Martina Cole and Kimberley Chambers. **Can be read as a stand-alone book! **

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The Cover Up
MARNIE RICHES

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Copyright

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Praise for Marnie Riches:

‘Gritty and gripping’ **Kimberley Chambers**

‘A leading light in the field of Mancunian noir’ *Guardian*

‘Drags you down the mean streets of Manchester with verve and authenticity. You can almost smell the blood and rain’ **Simon Toyne**

‘Riches’ storytelling is blistering, vivid and super-pacy. It’s also very funny, even at its darkest’

Helen Cadbury

‘Fast-paced, enthralling and heartrending; I couldn’t put it down’ **C. L. Taylor**

‘A strong, edgy debut that deserves to do well’ **Clare Mackintosh**

‘Fast, furious, fantastic ... One killer thriller!’ **Mark Edwards**

What the reviewers said:

‘Absolutely brilliant, kept me on my toes from the start to the final page!’

‘A great gritty story. Plenty of drama with the Manchester underworld!’

‘Breathtakingly brilliant’

‘More please – and soon!’

‘Truly outstanding’

‘An intricate, fast-paced and utterly compelling thriller’

Dedication

For my grandparents,
Margaret, Ida and Harry:
three of Manchester's finest.

Though they're gone, I owe my fat knees and terrific boobies to Margaret – a beautiful woman and the kindest of souls, who knew how to rock a leopard-skin dress. I owe my love of a good rummage for a bargain to Ida, the inimitable Jumble Queen of Manchester whose carbon footprint in her long, long lifetime was lightly trodden. I owe my love of cars to Harry, who drove a black cab by night and a burgundy Wolseley by day – potless, maybe, but never less than stylish. They were all terrible cooks but I loved them for other reasons.

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Chapter 1

Sheila

Turns out, marking your territory wasn't the sole preserve of spraying tom cats with big balls. Sheila smiled at the thought as she prowled around the basement bar of M1 House in her Louboutins.

'I'd like you to rearrange the seating down here,' she told Frank, describing the space in the bowels of the super-club with a wave of her arm. Her Tiffany bangles jangled merrily, audible above the thub, thub, thub of the bass from upstairs, as the DJ and sound engineers performed the soundcheck ahead of an evening of revelry.

Frank was nodding like one of those toy dogs you got in the rear window of crappy cars. Jumpy, as usual. Her brother-in-law had never been anything but.

'Yeah. Yeah, Sheila, love. Mint. But what do you mean?'

'Get one of the staff to move the furniture, Frank. Set up single tables and two chairs.' Visualising how the space would ideally work in this debut foray into the world of speed-dating, Sheila stalked over to one of the tables in the subterranean bar, recently redubbed, 'Jack's bar'. On the wall hung a neon sign, styled from a lyric her nephew had apparently written on one of the toilet doors.

In the beginning, there was Jack.

She glanced momentarily at it. Reminded of how much Frank had lost. Grabbing the sleeve of Frank's baggy top – an old James long-sleeved T from the band's *Gold Mother* heyday – she changed tack. 'Are you eating?' Through the cotton fabric, worn soft and thin with use, she could feel that his forearms, always wiry at the best of times, were mere bone and sinew now, covered with skin.

Frank cocked his head to one side. Entirely grey-white, though he'd always boasted the best head of hair out of the two O'Brien brothers. Paddy had had only a ring of shorn fluff around a shining freckled pate, by the end. The fiery ginger of his youth had dulled in later years to a dirty strawberry blond. But Frank had inherited different genes entirely. And not just follically. 'Course,' he said. 'I had a lovely kebab on Tuesday. It had sauce and everything.'

'That's two days ago. Have you eaten since?' Sheila asked, pondering the shadows that the basement bar's mood-lighting cast along the gaunt furrows either side of his mouth.

He grinned at her. Narrowed his eyes. Wagging his finger, as if he'd just sussed some sister-in-lawly subterfuge. 'I see what you're doing. You're checking up on me, aren't you?' He pulled his sleeve gently out of reach, ramming his hands into the pockets of his jeans. 'It's nice of you but—'

'Come round for dinner with me and Conks tonight. I'll make a curry.' Sheila knew what an overgrown boy like Frank needed. Mothering. Perhaps she could find him a woman through her speed-dating venture.

'Aw, She. I'm busy actually. I've got this—'

'Now. Tables and chairs,' Sheila said, assuming that the dinner was a done deal and turning her attention to the layout of the bar area. 'Me and Gloria went to another speed-dating night, run as a franchise by some big company that covers the north. They had the same set-up. A number on each table. You ring the bell. The men move round after three minutes to sit with a new woman. So the seating's really important.'

Scratching at his ear, Frank frowned. 'Sheila, I hope you don't think I'm a cheeky sod, but you're the head of the O'Briens, now. You're the boss-lady. What the hell are you doing, messing around with lonely hearts crap?'

Sheila moved over to the bar where she had left her laptop in its bag. Beckoned Frank to follow her. She could barely contain her excitement as it effervesced like Cristal champagne inside her. Several months ago, Paddy would have popped those bubbles for her with a verbal put-down or a physical slap.

‘This is my latest entrepreneurial vision, Frank. And you’re helping me do it. Come and look.’

Opening the laptop on the bar, she brought up a brightly coloured website. Photo after photo of beaming, attractive, wholesome-looking couples holding hands, kissing, embracing ... ‘Online dating.’

Slack-jawed, Frank stared at the web page’s masthead. *True Love Dates*.

‘It’s a play on words,’ Sheila said. ‘True Love Dates instead of True Love Waits. Get it?’

Frank nodded, clearly not getting it at all.

‘It’s me and Gloria’s new venture. We’re gonna do speed-dating to draw people in, and I’ve just had this website designed. There’s millions of subscribers to some of the bigger online-dating sites. We get their credit card details and bam! You slap on an admin charge and you’re making a fortune from sod all. Algorithms do the work. And once I’ve got a stack of subscribers, I’m going to do a big phishing scam that can’t be traced. I’ve got this speccy computer geek from UMIST reckons he can cream millions off the top, straight into an offshore account.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘It’s the darknet, or some shit, Frank,’ she said, savouring the thrill of her racing pulse and the endorphins that momentarily almost snuffed out the stress of Ellis James and the tax and annoying CCTV cameras that saw everything. ‘This is the future. It’s so good, because it’s almost legal!’ She tapped her nail extensions on the gleaming reinforced glass bar for emphasis. ‘And sophisticated. The set-up costs are sod all. And me and Gloria get to spread a little love into the bargain. We’ve already got fifty sign-ups for tomorrow night’s speed-dating and a couple of thousand on this dating website.’

‘Doesn’t sound like much,’ Frank said, leaning over the bar to pour himself half a lager from the tap. His T-shirt riding up to reveal an emaciated, concave stomach.

Sheila looked away abruptly, stroking the web page that glowed lovingly out at her from the laptop’s screen. ‘Give it a couple of months and it will,’ she said, somewhat irritated that her enthusiasm wasn’t as contagious as she’d hoped. Remembering the way Paddy had ridiculed her idea to start up a cleaning agency all those years ago. Bastard. But now he was dead, and the cleaning agency, staffed by women they’d rescued from scumbag traffickers, had a turnover of a couple of million a year and was growing month on month. Income she could spend, however circuitously it made its way to her current account ... unlike Paddy’s dirty cash that sat in rubble sacks beneath the tiled floor of her guest en-suite. ‘I know what I’m doing, you know. Same as you knew what you were doing when you bought this place, Frank.’

‘I’ve had nothing but aggro since I bought this club,’ Frank said, opening an old-fashioned pill box and dropping a small tablet into his drink. ‘My son was murdered on my dance floor, and then, that twat, the Fish Man killed a load of kids. Our Jack’s dead. My reputation’s hanging by a thread. Some savvy businessman I am.’

‘But that was all down to Paddy,’ Sheila said, rubbing Frank’s bony shoulder as a gesture of solidarity, though he shrugged away from her touch. ‘And he’s gone. You’ve done well to get this place open again. Sod that bullying arsehole. He’s just a memory. To hell with the past, Frank. You own one of the country’s biggest super-clubs and you do it well. All the outrage in the papers from worried middle-class parents made kids who were desperate for a walk on the wild side wanna come back! M1 House is edgy and cool. *You’re cool!* Have faith in yourself, chuck.’

Sighing heavily, the crow’s feet around Frank’s eyes seemed to deepen. The shadows on his face seemed to lengthen. The Adam’s apple bobbed up and down, sticking out of his scrawny neck as though a malign spirit had taken up residence in his throat and was trying to punch its way out.

‘I’m not so sure,’ he said. ‘Just when I got the Boddingtons off my back, and I’m getting back on my feet with the club, there’s been a few new faces around. I’ve got a bad feeling about it.’

Sheila snapped the lid of the laptop shut. ‘New faces? How do you mean?’ She studied Frank’s face for signs of drug-fuelled paranoia and hippy bullshit.

‘You got new lads working for you? Dealing in here?’

‘A couple of temporary workers, doing a bit of this and that. We’re struggling to find the staff since Paddy got stabbed. A couple of the lads got caught in the crossfire when the Boddingtons did over the cannabis farm. Quite a few have just lost their nerve and said they were going straight. I can’t exactly stop them. Or blame them.’

‘Paddy would have had them killed before he’d let them go,’ Frank said, running a thin finger around and around the rim of his half-pint glass.

‘I’m not Paddy,’ Sheila said, pressing her lips together tightly. Stifling an outburst. ‘And that’s precisely why I’m trying to build up me and Gloria’s cleaning business and do these new start-ups. White-collar crime, Frank. It’s less risky. It’s more forward-thinking. It’s how the rich get richer. All that gun-toting bad-boy crap is Paddy’s legacy. I’ve got a functioning brain and a beating heart, Frank. I can’t fill my days, sitting on my backside, sewing a fine seam like some merry widow. My Amy and Dahlia have grown up and flown the nest. One at uni. One a lawyer in the City. I need something more than nail bars and chardonnay and I *don’t* want my daughters having their inheritance seized by the coppers and dying of shame if I go down. Now, who were these new faces? You got any security footage of them?’

Taking her laptop bag with her, Sheila followed Frank up the winding staircase to the echoing vastness of the main club. Here, the house music that the DJ played reverberated off the empty, gleaming dance floor – sanded down and refinished not once, but twice, to remove the life’s blood of those who had fallen at the hand of that slippery eel of a Fish Man, the Boddington gang enforcer, Asaf Smolensky. Glancing at the DJ booth, she expected to see her nephew standing there, all muscles and bronzed-Adonis-handsome, with his cans pressed to his ear. Young Jack, Manchester’s golden boy, waving at his Auntie Sheila. In his stead, there was just some young, trendy-looking black guy she didn’t recognise – up from London no doubt – and the chubby, middle-aged sound engineer, perched behind a mixing console on the other side of the club.

As Frank disappeared through to the backstage area, Sheila noticed the tanned man in overalls, marking a spot on the wall with a pencil. He wore a baseball cap at a ridiculous angle for a middle-aged man. Wielded a measuring tape with clean hands that looked out of place on a manual labourer. The thought that he was somewhat familiar drifted in and out of her head so rapidly that it left no trace whatsoever. Her brother-in-law was always having work done to a building that was now tantamount to a memorial to Jack.

‘Here we go,’ Frank said in his office, pulling several sheets of paper out of his desk drawer. ‘I had Otis, the security feller, come up with these. Pictures from the footage.’ He pushed them across the desk towards Sheila. Tapped on the heads of two men – one black with dreads, one white with a crew cut, both man-mountains – who, even given the poor quality of the CCTV stills, clearly stuck out as far older interlopers among the firm, lithe bodies of the partying youngsters.

Sheila noted a shiftiness to the men’s eyes – perhaps imagined, given how grainy the images were. But the tense way that they held their bodies gave them away as dealers, not dancers. And who the hell wore quilted bomber jackets on a sweaty dance floor?

‘They’re not any of my temps,’ she said, digging at the back of her molars with her tongue, feeling some kale left behind from the badly blended smoothie that Conky had made her. A for effort. C for execution. ‘Give them to me. I’ll see what Conks thinks. He knows everyone. If it’s a rival crew, he’ll be on it like flies on dog shit.’

Click-clacking her way across the dance floor, clutching her fur gilet close around her slender body against the cold air of the vast unheated super-club, Sheila pondered how she might offload the responsibility of the dirtier side to the business elsewhere. Heading into the triple-height vestibule, she contemplated the meeting she had yet to attend that day at the head office of a commercial airline. Ably assisted by Gloria, she would deliver a pitch to the airline’s board members for the contract to clean European-bound aircraft at several airports in the north. She imagined speaking authoritatively, dressed just on the business side of provocatively. She would use a breathy, sexy, irresistible voice. She

was sure that flashing a little titty, in addition to their competitive rates and immaculate reputation, would land the lucrative deal.

In fact, Sheila was so caught up in her fantasies of success and the residual enthusiasm over her speed-dating venture that she only barely registered the white van parked outside M1 House. Nor did she realise that the man in the overalls with the stupid baseball cap was following her onto the street. And when her phone rang out with the full-bodied Pop Queen warble of Adele, Sheila was so baffled by the Brummie accent of the unfamiliar caller at the other end, she failed to notice that the man in the overalls, who did in fact own the white van, was standing right behind her.

Chapter 2

Gloria

‘Is he looking?’ Gloria asked Winnie, who, as usual, was sitting to her right at the end of the pew. No response. She elbowed the old woman gently. Whispering loud enough so that a couple of the elderly men in front turned around and grimaced at her disapprovingly. ‘Is he looking?’

‘No, dear.’ Winnie shook her head, tickling Gloria’s ears with a flurry of petrol-coloured feathers. Waving a lace fan slowly up and down in the stuffy place.

It was a wonder she could see anything from under that hat. ‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m old, dear. Not blind. Hush! Pastor’s speaking.’

Irritated that her studied cool and feigned disinterest wasn’t working, Gloria faced forward again. Trying desperately to catch the pastor’s eye once more by pushing out her chest and batting her eyelashes.

No response.

The fine man standing in the pulpit, preaching to the swollen ranks of the congregation with vim, vigour and pleasantly developed triceps when he raised his hands to praise Jesus, had not cast so much as a glance her way since the start of the Sunday morning service. And there was Kitty Fried Chicken, still sitting at the front in the spousal hot-seat, wearing a beret, looking like some cross between Jabba the Hut and a black Che Guevara in BHS’ best. Still clinging on to that fine man of God like the oniony stink of sweat clinging to that ghastly polyester ensemble she was wearing.

Smoothing down her own pure silk Hobbs dress, Gloria wondered what had gone wrong in her grand plan. The pastor, by rights, should have been hers now. She’d been giving it her best shot for years, praying to the good Lord that fate would finally bring her the true love with this wonderful man that she so needed and deserved. But despite her best efforts, his marriage to a woman who smelled of four-day-old chicken was no closer to disintegration, and Gloria was no closer to the union of holy souls with the pastor that she desired.

‘Praise Jesus!’ the congregation intoned. ‘Praise him. Oh yes!’

Amid much fervour and hubbub, singing started up. ‘Father Can You Hear Me?’ Naturally, Kitty Fried Chicken was out of her seat, clutching a microphone, her chins wobbling and a sweat breaking out on her forehead as she worked her way up from a delicate soulful whisper to a growling fever pitch. Belting the hymn out, with the choir answering her every worshipful stanza in glorious harmony; the band playing along with enough skilful dynamism to usher a host of angels into the church. The hall was thrumming with love for the Lord Jesus Christ, but Gloria felt only cold and loneliness and bitterness inside, for she saw the truth.

At that moment, the adoration visibly poured out of the pastor, directed not at Gloria but at his dumpy, fugly wife who sang better than any soprano in the Royal Opera House, and who had more soul than any two-bit R&B singer on the television. Gloria realised the game was up.

‘I’m wasting my time,’ she told Winnie.

Winnie popped a mint on the end of her tongue and fanned herself nonchalantly. ‘You give it a good go,’ she said, squeezing Gloria’s arm, like the mother she wished she’d had. ‘But it *is* time to move on, love.’

‘But she stinks of stale chicken, Win.’ Gloria could feel tears prick the backs of her eyes. ‘I smell of Christian Dior.’

‘Some men just don’t have a very good sense of smell, darling.’ There was sympathy in the milky-ringed irises of Winnie’s brown eyes. ‘He might have blocked sinuses.’

‘But she’s boring!’

Winnie offered her a mint. Speaking the quiet wisdom of the elderly, just audible above the jubilant singing, she said: 'The only difference between her and you, Gloria, is that she got there first. And he obviously needs his eyes testing, because Kitty has got a face like tripe and beans gone wrong. Or maybe she's got a diamond-encrusted tutu hidden in those big knickers of hers. Who knows? You can do better, love. Honestly. Pastor's not all that. He had bad breath last Sunday.'

With the service over, Gloria's heart thumped insistently inside her ribcage. Time to get face-to-face with the pastor and see for certain, now that the filter of hope had been removed from her sight, if there was any longing for Gloria Bell in his eyes. Just one last double-check. Maybe she could even whisper in his ear that she loved him, just in case he was too stupid to have sussed it after all these years. She knew men were often slow on the uptake like that. But the realisation that her dream was dying settled in her stomach like an accumulation of heavy metal, rendering her optimism nothing more than a giant, unwanted malignancy.

Gloria filed out into the cold vestibule with the other worshippers, buffeted along by her ever-thankful trafficked workers, looking like jewel-coloured parrots in their Nigerian wraps and skirts.

'Hello, Auntie Gloria! Blessings to you!'

'Coming for cake, Auntie G?'

'Loving your dress, Mrs Gloria!'

Kind words from her cleaners. At least somebody loved her, even if their love had been bought by offering them slave labour and free cramped living conditions as an alternative to prostitution in Benin City or destitution in the DRC.

'Greetings and blessings, ladies!' Gloria could hear that her voice was tremulous. It didn't do to appear weak in front of her employees. She opted not to say anything more.

But her legs almost buckled with adrenalin as she caught sight of the pastor's handsome face in amongst the crowd. Clyde, who owned the soul food takeout, was shaking his hand by the large, arched doorway. Was Pastor alone? No. Clyde stepped aside to reveal the short, squat Kitty Fried Chicken by the pastor's side. Fleeting, Gloria wondered if there was a passage in the Bible that would excuse ramming a ricin patty into Kitty's fat face at the next church mingle.

She muttered under her breath. '*Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, "I am a warrior!"*' If it's good enough for Joel, it's good enough for me.'

By the time Gloria had reached the vestibule to be thanked by the pastor, her anger had started to morph into sadness. She could see the lumpy bad skin of Kitty's cheeks, yet still the pastor had his arm around her. Rubbing her shoulder encouragingly, as the churchgoers heaped praise on her for her soulful singing.

Stepping forwards, Gloria held her hand out to the handsome man who had taken up residence in her heart with his flirtation and mixed messages. My, how he looked like Luther Vandross in his thin days. Even now, he caused the butterflies in her stomach to take flight. But as this heavenly man reached out to reciprocate her greeting, Gloria realised the pastor was not looking into her eyes at all. His radiant smile was not for her. She followed his gaze, glancing over her shoulder, whereupon it dawned on her that he was ogling fresh meat. Pat Nicholas' girl, Kendra. Wearing a miniskirt and stilettos, though she couldn't have been more than seventeen.

Gloria gripped the pastor's hand so tightly, he had no option but to make eye contact with her, finally. In a strong voice, she said, '*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith* – 2 Timothy 4:7,' and walked briskly out onto the street, before he had chance to see her first tear fall.

Making haste along the high street of Parson's Croft before the affable gang of illicit cleaners had the chance to sweep her up into their ranks and into the cake shop, as was the usual post-church arrangement, Gloria eventually came to a halt outside the Western Union money shop. She looked around the busy, scruffy street through blurred, watery eyes. Disoriented by the traffic that whipped past and the group of youths that were pushing by her, five abreast, one doing wheelies on

his mountain bike on the pavement. Ordinarily, she'd have shouted after him to get on the road where he belonged. But now ...

'Are you okay, Mrs Bell?' one of the boys asked her. 'Are you crying?'

Gloria shook her head vociferously, treating the lad to a hard stare. Who was he? She didn't recognise him. He looked like a younger Leviticus. She didn't need sympathy from a little toerag like him. 'Conjunctivitis,' she said, aggressively wiping the tears away with the back of her hand. Clutching her coat close and her handbag closer. 'And tell your mate to get off his bike. Pavements are for pedestrians.'

Where had she left her Mazda? There it was, on Samuel Street. Had she had any breakfast? She couldn't remember. *Get yourself together, Gloria Bell*, she chided herself. *Right, where am I going? Where are my car keys?* She turned over the engine. *Why has Jesus forsaken me and made a barren wasteland of my heart yet again?*

Driving away from the city, she found herself bypassing the quiet cul-de-sac on which she was living with her son and grandson. She continued on through the shower of falling golden leaves to Bramshott. Pulled up outside the high gates of Sheila's sprawling house, where she spotted the dogged detective, Ellis James, ensconced on the opposite side of the road in his foetid Ford – a sinner's vehicle, if ever there was one. He was clearly staking out the place. She paid no heed to the white van that was parked yet again outside the neighbour's pile.

'Let me in,' she shouted through the intercom through tears that simply wouldn't let up.

'Hey! Hey! What's all this for?' Sheila asked, ushering her through to the kitchen, draping a comforting arm around her shoulders.

Unable to stem the flow of heartbreak, Gloria sobbed openly, stumbling across the marble floor and throwing herself onto a bar stool.

'I'll put the kettle on and rustle up some cheese toasties,' Conky said, donning an apron as though he wasn't a murdering henchman at all but rather some Northern Irish alternative to Paul Hollywood. He wasn't wearing his hairpiece or sunglasses today. If anything, his kindness made Gloria sob harder. 'Let you ladies talk. Don't mind me.' He chuckled.

Five minutes and half a kitchen roll later, the tears were replaced by hiccoughs and fatigue. Running her work-worn fingers along the gleaming granite worktop of the island, Gloria sighed heavily. Turned to Sheila. 'I give up, Sheila. The pastor, I mean. He's a cad. Nothing but a broken, unhappy man with bad breath and an eye for the ladies.'

Sheila's carefully plucked brows furrowed. She squeezed Gloria's hand in solidarity. 'You'll get over it. Honest.'

Conky set a coffee down before her on a coaster, leaning in to offer her the dubious wisdom and sincerity behind those bulbous thyroid eyes. 'You've got to find someone new, Gloria. Someone better. Sure, I don't know what you saw in some attention-seeking Bible-basher anyway!'

'*Man shall not live by bread alone, Conky, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God – Matthew 4:4.*' She tried to treat him to a disapproving scowl but hadn't the energy to screw her features into the correct shape.

'Aye. Oh, well,' he simply said. 'Some things just aren't meant to be.'

Feeling her resolve weaken and her lip tremble, Gloria whispered. 'He was the love of my life. I'll never be able to rid myself of these feelings. I know it.'

'Bullshit!' Sheila said, smiling encouragingly. Glancing at the clock. Clearly, her sisterly support was on a time limit. How very Sheila. 'You're a fighter and a survivor, Gloria Bell. A successful entrepreneur! You're worth more.'

Conky set a plate full of perfect golden cheese toasties onto the worktop. Fidgeting at their side, as though he were waiting to hatch some nugget of manly advice. Sure enough ...

‘You have to push your feelings aside for this eejit and start again, Gloria,’ he said, waving a well-meaning spatula in her direction. ‘Don’t make a fool of yourself over a man that has the glad eye for every bit of skirt that comes his way.’

At her side, Sheila suddenly started to clap her hands like an excited seal. She encircled Gloria’s wrist in a cage made from those shellac talons. ‘You, my dear, are going speed-dating!’

‘What?’ Gloria said, biting into a triangle of toastie. Noticing Sheila’s plate remained empty.

‘You’ll be a guinea pig for our first speed-dating night!’

‘Beezer!’ Conky said, grinning. ‘Sure, you’ll find yourself a nice man that way. An emotionally available man, for a start.’

‘I am *not* going speed-dating!’ Gloria slapped her snack onto her plate in disgust.

‘Yes you bloody well are,’ Sheila said. All smiles. Eye on the clock. ‘Now, get your skates on with that cuppa because I’ve got a meeting with a Brummie who reckons he’s got the answer to all my problems.’

Chapter 3

Conky

‘Whereabouts are we meeting this Nigel Bancroft?’ Conky asked, shoving his handgun further into his waistband, turning his back to the grey-faced shoppers in the Lowry Centre’s multi-storey car park so that they couldn’t see what he was about. The cold metal dug uncomfortably into the overhang of his burgeoning belly. Sheila’s cooking was too good. He prayed he wouldn’t inadvertently shoot his own testicles off.

‘Near the bridge,’ Sheila said, slamming the car door. ‘Just by the water’s edge. He didn’t want anyone earwigging.’ She examined her reflection in the Panamera’s gleaming tinted window. Smoothed the tresses of her hair. Bared her white teeth at him across the roof of the car. ‘Have I got lipstick on my teeth?’

Peering over his Ray-Bans, Conky smiled. Continually surprised that Sheila should ever question her own beauty.

*‘Those cherries fairly do enclose
Of orient pearl a double row,
Which when her lovely laughter shows,
They look like rosebuds fill’d with snow.’*

He finished his recital with a grin, ignoring the sniggers from two teenaged girls who passed by on their way to the lifts.

Sheila frowned at him uncertainly. Touching her incisors with her index finger. ‘What?’

‘It’s a poem from the seventeenth century.’

‘So, have I got lippy on my teeth?’

‘No, darling. You’re grand.’ He touched his own carefully arranged hair ensemble, hoping that the wind wouldn’t be blowing stiffly along the waterway. It wouldn’t do to show weakness to a man like Nigel Bancroft.

Silence in the lift with the genuine punters hoping to nab a bargain in the M&S clearance section. Conky reached out in the squash of the stuffed metal box for Sheila’s hand but was disappointed. Her stern expression was all business. She clutched her Hermès handbag, holding it against her stomach as though it provided a force field protecting her from the unwashed mortals and whatever was to come.

He noticed people staring up at him as the lift travelled downwards; turning away abruptly as they suspected they had just made eye contact with the ominous-looking wall of man, clad all in black like a funeral director. They were lucky he was wearing sunglasses. Poor wee bastards would have a heart attack if he treated them to The Eyes.

‘Come on. We’re late,’ Sheila said, dragging him through the depressing upper mall of the shopping centre, where half the units were still unoccupied, post-recession.

She took a step onto the escalator down, checking her watch again. Her shoulders were so hunched up inside her cashmere coat, Conky was tempted to reach down and smooth them out.

‘He can fuck away off. Make him wait!’ he said, catching the reflection of the two of them standing together in a shopfront window. Still disbelieving that this doll was his lover. Paddy O’Brien would be spinning in his grave. But he now knew the truth of how Paddy had treated his wife behind closed doors. Screw him, the wife-beating bastard.

‘Tell me again what you found out about this Bancroft?’ She fixed him with those cobalt blue eyes, the crow’s feet crinkling around them like an elegant, ageing frame around crisp, perfectly composed photography.

Marching past the brightly lit shops to the exit, he explained. 'Nigel Bancroft runs Birmingham, basically. He's big in commercial property. He owns a chain of restaurants – tapas, burgers, Tex-Mex: places where you can eat and drink. Backs small business start-ups. But naturally, that's all bullshit.'

Outside in the gusting wind, Sheila click-clacked ahead of him to the stone stairs that led down to the Lowry Theatre. The giant silver structure, comprising several bold shapes lumped together, always put Conky in mind of the old metal storage tins that knocked around the kitchen of his childhood home, into which his Mammy had stashed food and cash for the bills, lest his father fritter it away down the bookies.

Today, as with most other days in Manchester, the cloud cover was heavy, lending the deserted paved plaza and the hulking grey structure that sat beside it an oppressive Soviet air.

Sheila was struggling on the steps in those shoes.

'Give me your hand?' he offered.

'I'm fine. I'm not a cripple.'

She shooed him away, but even after months as a couple, it felt more like he'd taken a hefty right hook.

Approaching the bridge by the dull grey-brown snake of the River Irwell, he spotted an average-sized man, standing by the rail. Expensively dressed, the man wore a camel overcoat with a grey suit underneath. A big bruiser with close-cropped hair, standing some ten feet away, clad in dark jeans and a leather donkey jacket. Muscle. More muscle – a big black guy with dreads, wearing a parka – standing further down. The well-dressed man glanced towards them, smiling expansively at Sheila. Conky was careful to make a show of touching the place where the gun bulged, not quite hidden beneath the fabric of his coat.

'Wait here,' Sheila said, squeezing his arm but not taking her eyes from the man.

'No. I'm coming with you. You're exposed.'

Sheila shot him a narrow-eyed glance. Lips thinned to a line. 'You're not the only one who's packing, Conky. I'm not an amateur.' Her features softened. 'At least hang back a bit. Give us a bit of distance, yeah?'

Conky halted. Exhaled heavily, chewing over his lover's stubborn streak like a piece of unpalatable gristle.

'Nigel?' Sheila asked, marching forwards with her hand held out.

'Sheila O'Brien,' Bancroft said, flashing a dazzling dentist's-dream smile that almost lit up the dank quayside scene. He clasped Sheila's hand between his, leaning attentively in for an air kiss on both cheeks, which Sheila reciprocated.

Bastard. Couldn't have been more than thirty-five, unless he'd had work done. Conky mused that he had the kind of face you saw on tired catalogue models. Starting to go at the jawline and underneath the eyes. A vain man, for sure with that fecking hair gel in his hair. A wedding ring on his finger though. Not that that ever stopped men like Nigel Bancroft. His words were being whipped away by a fickle breeze. What was he saying, with that grin plastered all over his nipped-and-tucked bake? There sure as hell was a lot of laughing going on.

Conky moved a little closer so that he was within earshot of the two once more.

'You're even more beautiful than they say,' Bancroft said in that Brummie accent of his.

'Who says that then?' There was a sceptical edge to Sheila's voice, despite the coquettish giggle.

'The great and the good of the criminal underworld, Sheila. You and I mix in the same esteemed circles, after all.'

It sounded like the prick had rehearsed his lines. *Ma gavte la nata*, Conky said to himself, musing on the classic line delivered by Jacopo Belbo in *Foucault's Pendulum*. Take the cork out of his arse and let some of that hot air out. Prick.

The two started to walk towards the footbridge that spanned the river. Conky followed, straining to catch their conversation.

‘I can tell you now,’ Bancroft said, ‘when it’s just between lads, the hardest nuts from Portsmouth to Glasgow all say they admire your assets, and I’m not just talking what you’ve inherited from Paddy.’ Wink.

Sheila came to a halt, clutching her bag close. ‘Flattery’s all very well, Nigel, but I can’t bank it, and there’s more to me than a pair of tits, *son*.’ The mirth had evaporated from her voice, leaving only a sour residue behind, Conky noted with some satisfaction. ‘Now what did you come up here to say?’

‘I hear you’re looking to offload your traditional business interests to a third party.’

‘Who the bloody hell told you that?’ Sheila raised an eyebrow. ‘I certainly never told anyone that.’

Bancroft’s men had moved from their positions by the river’s guardrail and were now also trailing the couple. Conky studied them surreptitiously through the dark lenses of his Ray-Bans, checking for sudden movements. These tossers had been at Paddy’s funeral. Casting his mind back to some of the lesser-known mourners gathered at the back of the throng, he recalled the black feller. Those dreadlocks, tied in a fat ponytail and that acne scarring that covered his forehead and cheeks were a dead giveaway. He had been standing at the side of your Man-at-Burton Bancroft. And now they were in Manchester, thinking they could simply swoop down and pick over the O’Brien empire’s carcass.

‘Let’s just say, I’ve got my sources of reliable information,’ Bancroft told Sheila. ‘News travels fast in our world, and I can help you get on with the things that are more in your comfort zone.’

Conky noticed that the veins on the backs of Sheila’s hands were standing proud. She appeared taut from her feet to her face, like a gymnast holding her body before executing a finale on the beam.

She poked Bancroft in the shoulder. ‘You can take that shit-eating grin off your face for a start, mister.’ Taking a step towards him. Matching his height in those heels. ‘Now, first, I want to know which double-crossing little shit you’ve got working for me, earwiggling and then mouthing off about my business. And second, cut the flirtatious crap and tell me what you’re proposing. South Manchester’s mine. All mine. I’m a businesswoman, Nigel. Not a bleeding hobbyist or the show pony you seem to be mistaking me for.’

Bancroft’s muscle marched towards her, puffing themselves up like peacocks, squaring for a fight over a hen.

Conky withdrew his weapon, pointing it at them but still keeping it for the most part concealed up his overcoat sleeve. ‘Back off, gentlemen,’ he said. ‘Or you’ll have more holes in you than Emmmental cheese, before you can shout *croque-fucking-monsieur*.’

The Midlander muscle looked to their boss for a signal.

Holding his hand aloft, Bancroft’s smile no longer reached his eyes. ‘Easy, lads. We’re just talking shop here, aren’t we, Sheila?’ He glanced at Conky’s gun, blinking too hard and fast. ‘No need for any nastiness. Call your dog off, will you?’ He turned his attention back to Sheila. His puffed-up ego seemed to have deflated somewhat, making that camel coat look a size too big.

‘Dog?’ Conky took a step towards him. ‘Catch yourself on, you cheeky wee bastard. You call me a dog again, I’ll show you the ferocity of my bite.’ He caught sight of Sheila’s steely glare and flinching jaw. Took a step back again and put the gun away. Satisfied that he had set his stall out for this posing ponce.

‘Now. Stop wasting my time, Mr Bancroft,’ Sheila said, checking her watch as though she had some more pressing engagement to attend. ‘I wanna know who fed you information about me and I want to hear your proposal. No dicking around.’

‘I’m not giving you my sources,’ Bancroft said, grinning like a bloody eejit again. ‘But I will say this: I’ll run your drugs, protection racket, any girls, gambling ... whatever. All the tough stuff, I’ll run and give you fifteen per cent. I take all the risk. You just sit back and take the money.’ He opened his arms, raising them up as though he had just announced he had found a cure for cancer to a hospital ward full of the dying.

‘Fifteen?!’ Conky said, hoping the asshole could hear the derision in his voice.

Sheila stalked towards Bancroft, pushing her face right up against his. ‘You’re taking the piss. Shall I tell you what you can do with your fifteen lousy per cent?’

Sheila dipped her slender hand into the handbag. Bancroft’s eyes widened as she pressed her gun into his gut.

Conky held his breath. Would she shoot?

‘You can stick your offer right up your jacksy,’ she said, seeming to grow even more in stature. ‘You’ve wasted my time. Getting me down here, just so you can wave your dick at me before you try to shaft me for my business?’

‘No, I haven’t!’ Bancroft said. ‘The offer’s in good faith.’

‘Feel that?’ Sheila said, pushing the snub nose down towards his abdomen. Still out of the eyeline of Bancroft’s henchmen, who hung back, too far away to hear this exchange, Conky calculated. ‘That’s *my* dick you can feel.’ She raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes like an excited child, boarding a ride at a fairground. ‘If you want me to shoot my load, carry on with the insults, pal. Because you’re insulting me right now, and my dick feels a romance explosion coming on that won’t end well for you.’

‘Twenty per cent, then,’ Bancroft’s skin had paled to a sickly yellow now. His eyes darted to and fro, as though he was desperate to alert his boys to the danger he faced.

Conky could see Sheila click the safety off. ‘There you go again with the insults. How about you tell me the name of the grassing little shit who seems to think my business is his business?’

‘Twenty-five. There. That’s my best offer, Sheila. Twenty-five per cent to run your drugs and protection and that.’

‘Raise your hands where I can see them,’ she said. ‘Any last words?’

‘All right! All right!’ Bancroft did as asked, shaking his head vociferously at his two men, as they moved in towards him, guns drawn, aimed at Sheila and Conky. ‘Just mull it over, will you? It’s good business sense, and you know it. Please.’

Appraising the scene with the swift eyes of a militia man, Conky noted the innocent passers-by some hundred metres away. Made a split-second decision as to whether he could take out these two lumps and their bossman before the situation got out of hand. The specially manufactured prisms in the lenses of his Ray-Bans boosted his weak thyroid-eyes back to better than twenty-twenty vision. He could take them out, all right.

‘Put your guns away, lads,’ Bancroft said. A sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead. ‘Sheila here is just being cautious, aren’t you? It’s understandable.’

‘She’s taking the piss, Nige,’ the black guy said.

‘Stand down, Steve. And you, Trev. It’s okay. We’re all good. Sheila’s just going to chew over my offer, aren’t you, love?’

Conky could almost taste the adrenalin in the air. Blood rushed and roared in his ears. Here was the crux of the meet.

‘Love? Don’t you, “love” me, you presumptuous bastard,’ Sheila said, taking an all-important step away from Bancroft, though she still clutched the pistol in her hand.

Bancroft lowered his arms uncertainly. Gestured for his men to back down.

A young woman, clutching the hands of two small children, had started to cross the footbridge. She was moving closer by the second to the shores of the Lowry Theatre. Conky estimated that they had thirty seconds tops in which to negotiate a peaceful conclusion to the ill-fated proceedings. He was relieved to see the black guy shove his weapon back inside his coat pocket.

‘This meeting’s over,’ Sheila said, clumsily opening her handbag with the hand that clutched her gun. ‘Now, piss off back down the M6 with your proposition.’

But the white man-mountain in the leather donkey jacket was still aiming his gun at Sheila’s head. His colour was high. His eyes were glazed. Conky knew a man who had lost control when he

saw one. The woman with the two small children was upon him, looking askance at the spectacle of a giant clutching a gun. When she screamed, Conky knew he'd left it too long to react.

Chapter 4

Paddy

‘Another pint, Marcus, kind sir!’ Paddy thrust his glass out towards the craggy-faced landlord, brandishing it beneath the short man’s nose as if it were a broken bottle. His words were slurring – he could hear that much. Had been for the last hour. But with every pint of bitter he drank, the reality of Kenneth Wainwright’s sad, shitty, low-rent world became more blissfully blurred around the edges; the ache of the scar where his body had been opened up with a boning knife by that little arsehole Leviticus Bell, posing as Asaf Smolensky, had dulled ... just for a booze-numbered while.

‘You’ve had enough, Ken,’ the landlord said, grabbing Paddy’s wrist with an unforgiving hand. Stronger than he looked. ‘Go home and sleep it off, mate.’

Swaying slightly, Paddy calculated whether he should accept the rejection or square up to this pint-sized hard nut. He slapped several pound coins onto the sticky bar with his free hand. ‘My money not good enough for you?’

The landlord released his wrist. Looked down at the money. ‘Go home. Sleep it off. Come back later. Then I’ll serve you.’ His face softened only slightly, revealing a smile that was like a tight fissure in his bark-like skin. ‘Come on, Ken. You’re not worth much to me as a regular if you get knocked down on the way home cos you’re too pissed to see straight.’

Feeling his pulse thunder with adrenalin, the Paddy of old relished the invincible feeling of The Rage taking over his battered body. But the part of Paddy that was still just about sober dimly acknowledged that he was – for now – no longer the boss of South Manchester. He was not the King. At the insistence of Katrina – the almighty Sister Benedicta – he had taken on the threadbare mantle of Kenneth Wainwright willingly and for a reason. *Lie low, Pad. Gather your strength. Sting those plotting, lying bastards when they least expect it. Destroy every last one of them. Tariq, Jonny, Conky, Lev, Gloria and Sheila. Sheila ... bring that bitch to heel and reclaim her as your wife.* His intentions, not Katrina’s. His sister had hoped he’d use the fresh start to make a new life for himself. But hadn’t she always played the controlling older sibling? Paddy, despite his new-found vulnerability, was in no mood to be ruled by another.

His sluggish, internal debate was interrupted by his phone ringing loudly. Buzzing its way across the beer-splattered mahogany, where it butted up against a washed-out bar towel. Katrina’s name on the display, of course.

‘Oh, bloody hell. Here we go.’

On the other end of the crackling line, Katrina’s voice sounded edged with hellfire and damnation. ‘Patrick! I got your message. You sounded drunk. Please tell me you haven’t burned through your week’s money already. And please tell me you’re not in that crumbling den of iniquity, The Feckless Oik’s Arms again.’

In the background, he could hear the noises of the nursing home that she ran with military bombast – the beeping of residents’ alarms; the monotonous verbal ramblings of old Rose, who tottered up and down the corridors all day long on her zimmer, repeating the same demented shit about needing the toilet, though she wore an inconti-pad so big that it barely fit inside her gusset. Swaying slightly on his bar stool, he imagined he could still smell the stale cabbage and cloying stink of soiled underwear.

He belched down the phone. ‘I can’t live on peanuts, Kat. Drop us hundred quid round, will you? Just til Giro day.’

There was a muffled noise on the other end – his sister, putting her well-scrubbed hand over the mouthpiece, perhaps, to stop the other nuns from eavesdropping. ‘I didn’t commit fraud to get

you a new identity just so you could wash your chance of a new life into a barman's swill bucket, Patrick O'Brien.'

Paddy tugged absently at the wadding that spilled out of the vinyl seat cover. 'Piss off, Kat. You don't have the first bloody idea what it's like for a rich man to need state handouts. Do you know how little a sad bastard like Wainwright—' In amongst the beer fumes, he realised he had slipped up. Eyed Mark the landlord furtively. 'I mean, a man like *me* gets in disability benefit? I spent more on my aftershave than I get to live on for a week now.' Damn. Another slip-up. Putting his mouth into gear before his brain was switched on. That's what his Mammy would have said.

'Patrick!' The agitation in her voice was clear. Paddy had called the shots for decades. Now, suddenly, the jackboot was on the other foot. 'I am not giving you extra money out of the nursing home's coffers to fund death by cirrhosis of the liver. You're turning into Dad.'

'Thanks a bundle. Is that a no, then?'

The line went dead. Paddy smashed his phone onto the bar top, cracking the screen.

'Right!' the landlord shouted. 'That's it, Ken. Out!'

Surprised to find himself deftly manhandled by the landlord towards the door, Paddy pointed confusedly at him. 'How did you get over the bar? Fucking ... Spiderman!'

The other drinkers barely looked up from their pints, sitting as they were, in silence around three or four old tables that were dark-stained with ages-old stout spillage and nicotine from a bygone era. Cracked and dirty single-glazed windows barely shed light on the dump, with its swirling brown and lime carpet.

'Shithole!' Paddy shouted, shrugging the landlord off. Searching for words that came only reluctantly through the hoppy fog of beer-thoughts. 'Shitty carpet.'

'See you later, Ken,' the landlord said, pushing him gently onto the street. 'Go home and eat something.' The door was closed firmly behind him.

Stumbling into the street, Paddy clutched at his stomach. Even now, after six pints, he could feel the ache of a body healing reluctantly.

A horn honked, loud and long. Then, an angry voice.

'Get out of the way, wanker!'

Paddy jerked himself backwards onto the kerb, surprised that he had veered into the road and the path of a white van without realising. The driver had stopped abruptly, his passenger hanging out of the cab window, screaming at him with an angry red face, peeping out from a plaster-encrusted beany.

Not registering the words but understanding their sentiment, Paddy stuck his middle finger up at the man. 'Shove it up your arse!'

The passenger opened the van door and got out. He was tall too, seeming larger in a hi-vis donkey jacket with baggy plaster-spattered cargo trousers and elephantine steel-toecap workmen's boots.

'Come on, you big bastard,' Paddy slurred, holding his fists aloft. Squaring up to the far younger man. Couldn't have been more than thirty. But even in his early sixties, Paddy was certain he was more than a match for this prick. He swung a punch. Missed.

The enraged plasterer, now accompanied by the van's driver – a giant of a man who looked like a brickie, judging by his physique – raised his fist.

'Leave him be! He's an invalid! Leave it, lads. No harm done, right?'

A woman's voice to Paddy's left. He felt someone link him and drag him across the road. With sluggish eyes, he registered that it was Brenda. He grinned.

'Hiya, Brenda, love! I thought you was at work.' Lunging for her, he planted a wet kiss on her cheek and squeezed her breast through her bright green liveried work fleece. 'C'mere gorgeous. Give Pad— Kenny a kiss.'

Brenda giggled girlishly and blushed. Swiped his hand away delicately. 'Not in public, Kenneth. Come on. I'll walk you home. I'm not due back off my dinner for half an hour. I'll microwave you something to soak up the booze. Have you got anything in?'

Paddy grabbed at his crotch. 'I've always got something in for you, Brenda!' The polar opposite of Sheila, he thought, eyeing up this new easy lay that he'd met during the pub's quiz night. All pillowy breasts and a nice big fat arse. He had never thought that would be his thing, but Brenda – recently abandoned by her ex and desperately needing a man to bestow her womanly love on – was comforting and obliging. She made good stew and cleaned his house for him. A man like him shouldn't go without.

Sturdy, reliable Brenda steered him along the road towards the purgatorial two-up, two-down that he had rented in Kenneth Wainwright's name. Rent paid by the dole. Furnished sparsely with MDF shit from the catalogue.

'Right, let's get you a nice, strong cup of tea,' Brenda said, rummaging in his trouser pocket and finding his keys.

Paddy stumbled through the door, making a beeline for the old-fashioned sofa – a British Heart Foundation shop classic in threadbare wine jacquard. The cig burns were all his. As the institutional magnolia-painted walls spun around him, he took out his phone. Realised Brenda was otherwise occupied, clattering around in the kitchen – no doubt looking for something edible among the empties and the mouldy takeout leftovers. He dialled the number that appeared most frequently in his call log, apart from Katrina's and Brenda's.

The familiar gravelly voice at the other end: 'All right, Paddy? How's it going?'

'Don't use my bleeding name!' he said, checking over his shoulder. No sign of Brenda. The room continued to spin. He drowned out the profuse apologies with his reason for calling. 'What have you found out? Anything?'

There was a brief pause. Squeaking – perhaps the sound of a window being wound up on a vehicle. 'That detective has been sat outside your old house day and night, from what I can tell,' his oldest school friend and now paid ally said. 'It's hard to say without getting inside the property. I followed her into town this morning though. She took a big sack of something into a safety deposit facility.'

'And? Have you seen her with any men?'

There was another pause. The sound of a cigarette being lit, inhaled, exhaled. 'The only one she knocks around with is Conky McFadden. I've seen them together in her car, coming out of her drive.'

Paddy scratched at his four-day-old stubble, mulling over the news. Was it unreasonable that Sheila would have retained Conky's services? No. And it was highly unlikely that she'd be shagging the big, ugly bastard. Not after she'd had Paddy O'Brien giving it to her for all those years like a proper man.

'Try to get closer,' he said. 'Keep an eye on that cow, Gloria Bell, too. And I want to know where she lives. I've got a bone to pick with that lump of shit she calls a son.'

'The black woman? She's a crafty bastard, that one. Slippery, like. I can never keep tabs on her. I've tried following her, like you asked, but she always does a bloody Houdini.'

'Try harder, then,' Paddy said, thinking of Sheila and reaching into his jogging bottoms to grab his erect penis. He started to massage himself rhythmically. 'That's what I'm paying you for, isn't it? I want information, not a damned sightseeing tour!'

Ending the call, he withdrew his hand from his jogging bottoms and hurled the phone onto the sofa. Hauled himself to his feet, swaying slightly, watching the scuffed skirting board move upwards, upwards, downwards, rising and falling in waves like a heat shimmer created from alcohol fumes. Brenda.

Weaving his way to the kitchen at the back of the terrace, he found his humble, willing shelf-stacker checking on the progress of a pie through the greasy oven door. He started to yank his jogging bottoms and underpants down, eyeing Brenda's ample bottom as she knelt down.

'Brenda, love,' he said. 'Grab the worktop. I've got something to give you.'

Glancing over her shoulder with a watery smile on her unadorned lips, she stood up, and turning, caught sight of Paddy's erection. Baulked.

'Oh, Kenneth. I've got to be back in work in five minutes.' She pointed to the clock. 'I'm already running late. I'll get told off by the manager.'

But Paddy wasn't interested in Brenda's work concerns or tardiness. He wanted what he wanted.

'Don't come all coy with me,' he said, advancing towards her. Grabbing her around her stout middle and pressing her large breasts against him. Grinding his penis into her stomach. 'You love giving me the runaround, don't you?' He reached behind her and hitched up her frowsy skirt. Yanked at her knickers and stuck his finger inside her, enjoying the feel of her struggling against him.

'I'm going to be late, Ken!' She giggled nervously, clearly unsure as to whether she should be flattered or affronted. 'We can do this properly later when you've slept the booze off. You're hurting me! The drawer handle's digging in my bum.'

'I'm going to fuck you through to the other side of Christmas,' he said. 'Your arse will be hurting from more than a frigging handle when I've finished with you.'

She tried to push him away. 'No, Ken! I need the work!'

'My chunky monkey.' He could feel she was dry and unyielding. It didn't matter. In fact, that was better. Made him feel like a triumphant Viking, claiming his spoils.

The fingernails digging in his neck and the knee in his inner thigh, however, were unexpected.

'No, Ken! *No!*' Anger contorted Brenda's smooth moon-face into something unfamiliar and unwelcome.

When he brought his fist down on her defiant face, he was pleased to see that it knocked the rebellion and fire out of her immediately.

He stood back to admire his work. completely unaware of Brenda's teenaged son, Kyle, who should have been at school but who had bunked off straight after chemistry, following his mother to her boyfriend's house. Now, stealthy, keen-eyed Kyle was lurking in the doorway, watching this domestic noir unfold.

Deciding the thump was assault enough, Paddy put his deflating penis – unreliable thanks to the alcohol slopping around inside him – back inside his pants.

Brenda cowered before him, sobbing, with hurt in her eyes that he found almost delicious. She pulled her skirt back down. 'Your pie's ready.' She wiped her tears away with the sleeve of her supermarket fleece.

Paddy said the words he knew would be balm for the bruise. They worked every time on women like her. 'You know I love you, don't you, Bren?'

Chapter 5

Youssuf

‘Ah. There you are! At last,’ Youssuf said in Urdu as his son Tariq marched towards him, wearing a concerned look on his face.

Grabbing his walking stick optimistically, contemplating hoisting himself off the leather sofa that was positioned against the wall near Tariq’s office, Youssuf opened his mouth to ask again if he was ready to drive him over to the old people’s day centre.

But Tariq had already disappeared into his office. And Youssuf’s words were swallowed by Mohammed, the book-keeper, who breezed past with his own demands, clutching at a sheaf of paperwork.

‘Tariq! What do you want me to do about this faulty order?’ Mohammed asked, pausing at the threshold to the office. Fingering the brass plate telling everyone that a Director occupied the sacred space beyond the door, with its big, oak desk and only slightly worn brown carpet tiles. ‘You know? For the *other* site.’

Tariq reappeared in the doorway, thumbing his beard contemplatively. Youssuf waved frantically at him, hoping to catch his attention, but his son’s focus was reserved solely for Mohammed.

‘Get the supplier on the phone. I’ll speak to them.’ He dropped his voice to a whisper, though Youssuf could hear well enough. ‘I can’t sell poorly recorded porn films as the latest from Leo DiCaprio. They’ve got a cheek. This is Jonny’s contact, isn’t it?’ He tutted. Finally, Tariq glanced towards his father. Scratched at the beard, clearly distracted. Turned back to Mohammed. ‘Not out here.’ He held his hand up to Youssuf, fingers splayed. ‘Five minutes, Dad. I promise.’ Slammed the door to the office.

Except Youssuf had been promised five minutes at least forty minutes ago and his bottom had gone numb.

‘This is nonsense,’ Youssuf muttered, rubbing his stomach that growled audibly, even beneath the layers of his tunic, cardigan and overcoat. He checked his watch, barely able to see the time clearly as his hand trembled with ill health and low blood sugar. It was almost midday. He’d spent too long with too many tablets in his system and nothing to eat beyond the toast that his daughter-in-law, Anjum, had given him for breakfast. The prospect of missing out on lunch at the day centre was a grim one. That stuck-up old idiot, Ibrahim, was sure to snaffle all the bhajis as was his wont if he didn’t get there soon. It wasn’t that great a distance to walk. Not if he paced himself.

With a grunt, he rose from the low sofa, donned his karakul hat and made his way downstairs. The staff of T&J Trading smiled benignly at him. Even the girl on the desk bade him a friendly, ‘Morning, Mr Khan!’ But nobody stopped him.

Outside, the air was fresh. Too fresh. Youssuf had never been a fan of the Mancunian cold and damp that crept into his bones a little more with every year that passed. He buttoned his coat, glanced up at the offices on the first floor and made a disgruntled harrumphing noise.

‘Treats me like a child,’ he said, making his way towards Derby Street where he would quickly blend in with the hustle and bustle of men going about their business. Here, among the poorly parked vans and mess of discarded cardboard packaging that was whipped around on the stiff wind like abandoned kites gone rogue, he could be just another brown man in an area full of industrious brown men. No longer somebody’s ailing father or liability.

‘Youssuf!’ A voice called after him on the other side of the street.

He looked beyond the black Volkswagen van that was hugging the kerb on the opposite side of the road, crawling along at a walking pace. Squinted, peering at the small old fellow in the smart

navy suit. 'Amir!' Wheezed with laughter as his sprightly chum from the Asian elderly people's day centre crossed the road with a spring in his septuagenarian step.

They embraced.

'I've escaped,' Youssuf said, nudging Amir. 'That boy of mine was driving me insane. Five times he promised me a lift to the centre; I gave up in the end.'

'Ah, the price you pay for having a child who's a big shot.' When Amir spoke, his false teeth clacked slightly. He smoothed his thinning, Brylcreemed hair, making sure Youssuf saw the gold watch his own son had bought him for his last birthday. The same trick, every time they met. 'I just dropped a packed lunch in to *my* boy. He didn't give me the time of day either. Come on! We don't need them.'

Together, they ambled towards Cheetham Hill Road, engaging in a well-intentioned game of one-upmanship on their son's behalves. Tariq was buying and selling this gadget from the Far East and that sought-after skincare from Paris. Making a packet, of course. Amir's son, Rashid, was importing that specialist model of Mercedes from Germany and exporting this must-have toy to America. Sitting on a fortune, naturally. In this game of vicarious career-tennis, Youssuf knew he could volley for hours with Amir and happily neither win nor lose. Old men loved to boast about their sons. This much he acknowledged.

As they neared the sprawling plot of the hand car wash on the corner of Derby Street and the deafening din of Cheetham Hill Road with its wholesalers and Asian fast-food takeouts and kebab shops, Amir stopped suddenly and looked askance at the black Volkswagen van.

'Are we being followed?' he said, tugging at Youssuf's sleeve.

Youssuf leaned on his stick, panting from the exertion of having walked some two hundred metres in sandals. 'What am I looking at, here?'

'The black man in the van.' Amir pointed, though Youssuf instinctively pulled his friend's arm down. 'Is he staring at you?'

'Keep walking,' Youssuf said, almost tripping as he sped up. He'd seen enough. The driver of the van had indeed locked eyes with him. He had dreadlocks, untidily stuffed beneath a knitted hat of some description. Though Youssuf had never seen the fellow before, the hairs on his arms were standing to attention and his bladder was throbbing as if in protest. 'If he's following us, he'll have to turn onto Cheetham Hill Road. Not so easy with all those buses.'

'Let's cut through the car wash,' Amir suggested. There was excitement in his voice as if this was some big adventure.

But Youssuf knew the line of business Tariq was actually in – beneath the shining entrepreneur-of-the-year veneer. And the dreadlocked stranger's face didn't fit round here, in the tight-knit business district that nestled in the long shadows cast by Strangeways Prison.

They shuffled onto the forecourt of the car wash. Youssuf stole a glance over his shoulder. All thoughts of steaming hot bhajis and of bagsying the massage chair in the day centre were gone. The driver was speaking on a phone. Nodding. But eyes still on them.

'Go through the car wash bit itself,' he told Amir. 'He'll lose sight of us in there. We'll just sidle past the cleaners.'

But the van's idling engine thrummed swiftly into overdrive. With squealing tyres, it hung a sharp right, bouncing onto the forecourt of the car wash, coming to an abrupt halt only inches from Youssuf and Amir. They were hemmed in between the unforgiving front end of the van and the rear of a large saloon in front, awaiting its turn beneath the spray.

The dreadlocked driver hopped out, a rash of acne scarring across his forehead and cheeks.

'Ya-allah, what's going on?' Amir cried. 'Help!'

Youssuf had swung around to face his assailant and was now gripping his walking stick like a baton. Ignoring the pains in his chest and the crippling icy pangs of fear that prodded his tired, old body. Trying to gauge the situation.

‘Get in the fucking van, granddad,’ the driver said in an accent that Youssuf wasn’t immediately familiar with. The man slid the side door open to reveal a cargo hold that was empty, save for a burly white man with shorn fair hair, crouched in the shadows. ‘Don’t give us no trouble and you won’t come to no harm.’ Birmingham. Maybe that was the sing-song accent. Same as his cousin in Solihull.

Chatting animatedly in some central Asian dialect behind him, Youssuf spotted the car cleaners in his peripheral vision. Would they step up to defend two defenceless Pakistani old codgers? But as the driver grabbed at Youssuf’s shoulder, he realised that, just for once, he didn’t want young men leaping to his aid, emasculating him.

He trod heavily on the driver’s trainer-clad foot, grinding the man’s toes beneath the sole of his unyielding chunky leather sandal. Somehow shook loose from his grip. Brought the walking stick down on his forearm with a satisfying crack.

‘Ow, you fucking old psycho!’ he yelled, clutching at his arm. ‘Who do you think you are? Paki Rambo? Sort this bastard out, Trev!’

Youssuf raised his stick, preparing to hit him again, when the giant white man clambered out of the van.

‘Oi! You can pack that in,’ Trev said, trying to wrench the stick from Youssuf’s determined grasp. ‘Don’t play no hero with us. Get in the fucking van, old man.’ His voice was gruff but tinged with amusement.

‘You think I’m some kind of joke?’ Youssuf shouted, steadfastly clinging to the stick. The incandescent fury that burned within him gave him courage. He aimed another hefty kick, this time at Trev’s private parts. Missed. Watched with irritation as his sandal flew off, skittering like a frightened rat beneath the van.

Suddenly Youssuf gasped as an icy deluge of water hit the side of his head, knocking his hat off. The jet bypassed him, becoming stronger and more directional as two of the car cleaners advanced towards Dreadlocks and Trev, training the spray on them. Shouting in pidgin English that these interlopers should get the hell off their forecourt.

Amir grasped at Youssuf’s arm, trying to drag him out from between the vehicles and away from the claustrophobic jet-wash enclosure.

‘Let’s get out of here!’ he said in Urdu.

Finding himself rooted to the spot, Youssuf was only dimly aware that the sock that covered his one bare foot was now ringing wet.

‘Come *on*!’ Amir yelled.

Youssuf snatched up his hat but still couldn’t move. Amir let go of his coat, slowly starting to back away from the scene.

Suddenly, Youssuf was standing alone, caught in the middle of a fight of fists and high-intensity hoses between out-of-towners, hell-bent on kidnap, and outraged Uzbeks. But the hoses started to fail. The flow of water slowed. Soon, there was nothing more than a trickle dribbling from the ends. The car-cleaners looked quizzically at their equipment, shouting to the kiosk in which their boss lurked. When the pressure didn’t return, they too started to retreat in haste.

‘Get Khan, and let’s go!’ shouted Dreadlocks.

Paralysed, feeling the adrenalin drain away rapidly from his ailing body as though someone had pulled a plug in his bunioned feet, Youssuf was aware of being grabbed from behind. Strong-armed towards the open door of the van. He shouted for help. He prayed to God that he might be saved. He thought of Tariq and his grandchildren, little Shazia and Zahid, whom he might never see again.

‘No! No! I’m not getting in!’ he cried, kicking against the side of the van, though the man-mountain hoisted him aloft like a doll.

‘Put my father down!’ A familiar voice sliced through the pandemonium. Tariq.

To his right, Youssuf caught sight of his son’s henchman, Asaf Smolensky, sprinting towards the kidnapping Midlands. Clad in his usual Hassidic garb of a full-length black overcoat and an

oversized felt Homburg hat, his ringletted sidelocks jiggling atop his shoulders, it was an unexpected sight to see him move with the pace of a panther. He was wielding a machete.

Dreadlocks baulked. 'Shit! It's the Fish Man. Leg it, Trev!'

Trev released Youssuf from his grip instantly, leaving him to stagger back against the enclosure's damp walls.

'I'm gonna kill you!' Tariq shouted, throwing himself onto the man-mountain.

As Dreadlocks scrambled into the van to escape the blade of a Fish Man with human harvest on his mind, Youssuf watched Trev square up to his only son. The difference in height between them was at least ten inches. Tariq's slender build didn't help. It was like David facing down Goliath.

'I'd like to see you try,' Trev said, swinging a punch at Tariq.

But Tariq was quick on his feet and deft with his hands. Years of aikido and judo lessons as a youth had stood him in good stead. Within three easy moves, he had thrown his outsized opponent to the ground and sat astride him now, clutching the man-mountain's bull neck with the manicured hand of a gentleman.

Overwhelmed by a fresh surge of outrage, Youssuf whacked at his felled attacker's legs with his walking stick, hurling insults at him in Urdu.

'Leave it, Dad!' Tariq said, calmly. Turned to the vanquished man, ignoring the van's revving engine and the hacking sound of the Fish Man slashing at the vehicle's tyres. Hissing, as the air in the back tyre escaped. One down ... 'Now, who do you work for? And what do you want with my dad?'

'No one,' Trev said, spitting in Tariq's face.

'Donkey!' Youssuf yelled, swiping at his ankles.

Tariq wiped the spit calmly from his face, though Youssuf knew his fastidious son must have been cringing inside. 'You work for the O'Brien crew?'

'Fuck you, man!'

'Smolensky!' Tariq shouted. He looked over to the Fish Man who had just punctured another of the van's tyres. Inside the vehicle, Dreadlocks was screaming something unintelligible through the closed window to his associate. 'Come here! Our friend needs a little encouragement.'

The tall, thin henchman stalked towards Tariq, holding the machete in his right hand. But he blanched suddenly, his gaze fixed on something on the far side of the road.

'Ellis James!' Smolensky's machete miraculously disappeared up into the sleeve of his coat. He slipped out of sight behind a parked van.

Like a startled goat, Tariq descended the man-mountain, disappearing swiftly into the shadows of the jet-wash enclosure, dragging Youssuf with him. He pressed his index finger to his lips, pushing his father out towards the kiosk on the far side of the car wash, where they could not be seen by whoever this Ellis James might be.

The Volkswagen van sped off on its wobbling, clack-clacking flats in the direction of Cheetham Hill Road, disappearing along with its kidnapping driver and passenger into the streets beyond the neighbouring Chapatti Corner and Gurdwara temple.

Youssuf staggered over to the low wall and slumped against it. Amir popped up from behind.

'Have they gone?' Amir asked. 'Have you called the police?'

Tariq nodded, putting his arm around his father. 'They're gone. You both okay?'

Youssuf shrugged him off, though he was now shaking with cold. Light-headed. He felt like he might vomit onto his wet feet at any moment. 'What a disgrace.'

'What were you two thinking, wandering these busy streets on your own?'

'Show some respect, Tariq!' Youssuf said, glancing over at Amir for moral support. 'We're not children, are we? We're grown men.' He picked up his walking stick and shook it. 'You think me and Amir can't see off a couple of amateur pick-pockets?'

When Amir muttered an insult about the younger generation in Urdu, agreeing with him, Youssuf silently hoped his friend had bought the story that the aspiring kidnappers were nothing more

than thieving opportunists. It wouldn't do for an elder of the Asian community to click onto the sort of nefarious dealings Tariq was involved with on the side. To realise that those men had come for him – Youssuf Khan. What a dreadful situation to find himself in! Lying to his respectable buddy to protect his fool of a son!

'Didn't we decide that you weren't going to leave my offices until I drove you to the day centre, Dad?' Tariq tried again to put his arm around Youssuf, encouraging him to stand.

'Don't be so patronising!' he said, taking his karakul hat out of his coat pocket. Agitated to see that it was sodden. He manoeuvred himself from the ground, using his stick. Wincing and grunting at the effort and stiffness in his knees. 'If I have to spend another morning sitting around, waiting for you to drive me quarter of a mile down the road, like I'm some kind of deranged, drooling halfwit, I'm going to get on the first plane back to Karachi and I'm never coming back.'

Amir laughed. 'And because the ladies love me, your dad's taking me with him, aren't you, Youssuf?' More cackling. 'Wait 'til Ibrahim hears about *this*! Ha. Me and Youssuf. Fighting off criminals. That will knock the stuffing out of the stuck-up—'

'Dad,' Tariq said, making another attempt to grab him by the elbow. Scanning the street. 'It's not safe. Come back with me. Both of you! I'll drive you both to the day centre once we've got Dad some dry socks and found his sandal.'

But Youssuf could barely articulate his mounting frustration. 'No! I don't want your help. Because it's the *wrong kind*, Tariq! I need that kind of help like I need a prostate check from a doctor with fat fingers.'

'I'll make my own way, thanks all the same,' Amir said, smoothing his suit down, starting to make his way across the forecourt. 'I don't need a babysitter.'

'Wait for me!' Youssuf called after his friend.

'Look, Dad. If you come with me now, I'll take you to Mecca for Hajj next year.' Tariq held his hand out, his eyes softening at the edges. 'How about that? We'll fly first-class on Emirates.'

Youssuf inhaled deeply and raised an eyebrow. Ignoring the hand. 'Really? You'd do that for me?'

But Tariq's face fell. A short, chubby white man clad in a beige raincoat had just got out of a grey Mondeo and was walking towards them. Ellis James, no doubt.

'We've got to go, Dad. *Now*!'

Too late.

'Well, well, well,' the man said, a twitch of a smile breaking the thin line of his lips. 'Tariq Khan.'

The confrontation in the middle of Derby Street was short and civil but, Youssuf noticed, with a clear edge of hostility to every word uttered by both young men. Tariq insisted that nothing whatsoever had come to pass at the car wash – Ellis James could feel free to question the workers – *if* their English was good enough. Ellis James insisted that he was watching Tariq and was in possession of some interesting information about the Boddington Gang that he would soon be acting upon. Youssuf knew to keep quiet.

When he got back to T&J Trading, stomach still rumbling, Youssuf rummaged in his coat pocket to see if there was perhaps a boiled sweet, hidden beneath the now sodden tissues and the container for his false teeth. His fingers picked out something smooth and dry with sharp, stiff edges. He withdrew a business card that had certainly not been there before. Took out his reading glasses to study the wording.

Detective Ellis James, GMP.

Beneath the name and number was a neat handwritten note.

Call me when the truth becomes too heavy to bear, Mr Khan.

Chapter 6

Gloria

‘You be careful,’ Leviticus said, cleaning Jay’s hands with a wet wipe before the child could shampoo the mashed banana into his hair entirely. ‘You wanna watch your back, Mam.’

Gloria eyed her son and grandson disdainfully. ‘I’d be more worried about him getting that banana on the carpets, if I were you. Don’t expect me to cover the cost of a lost deposit because you let him paint the floor with his pudding.’ She turned back to applying her lip liner in the make-up mirror that she’d set up on the kitchen windowsill. The remainder of the autumn daylight was best in there in the evenings. The last thing she needed was poorly applied lip liner. Her lips were her best feature, and first impressions counted.

‘Mam! Seriously. The farm’s on red alert. One of the lads spotted a van staking the place out the other day. And M1 House is definitely a target after that meeting between Sheila and Bancroft went tits up.’

‘Language, young man! I’m going to an elegant reception for grown-ups in Jack’s Bar. I’m sure nothing untoward will happen whatsoever. You’re being melodramatic.’

‘You’re being daft.’

‘Shouldn’t a child as little as my Jay be in bed by now?’

Her remark was pointed, she knew. It was an easy non-confrontational way to respond to her son’s flagrant impudence. Gloria was determined to have a nice evening and neither the perceived threat of Midland-based gangsters nor her cynical, paranoid son would rain on her parade. Speed-dating beckoned. Old Gloria felt like a hussy for even contemplating it; couldn’t stop thinking of how her heart had been smashed into smithereens by that scoundrel, Leviticus’ father and then, more recently, the pastor. New Gloria had relished every second of donning her most flattering Windsmoor dress and couldn’t wait to slip into the fancy matching heels that she could just about squeeze her only slightly swollen feet into. Water retention was a pig, but even that wouldn’t spoil her evening.

Climbing out of the taxi a while later, she felt a pang of apprehension at ever having agreed to this nonsense. The emotionally daring Gloria of old had been supplanted yet again by the heartbreak-fearing church elder.

‘Don’t do anything I wouldn’t, love!’ the taxi driver shouted after her as she approached the bouncers. ‘You tight old cow.’

She wondered if the fifty-pence tip had been adequate. Decided it had been, given the taxi had stunk of stale sick. Beastly.

To her delight, Frank’s bouncers stood to attention, opening the doors for her with some ceremony.

‘I’m here for the *speed-dating*.’ She spoke her intention with an air of secrecy, mouthing the words in exaggerated fashion as though she was hard of hearing. Checking over her shoulder to see she hadn’t been overheard or spotted by anybody she knew who might conceivably be walking around an industrial area at 8 p.m.

Toying with the strap of her Sunday-best handbag, wishing she hadn’t worn a dress with such a plunging neckline – because she had *no* intention of meeting anyone anyway – she crossed the lofty main space of the night club. Conscious of the click-clack of her heels on the parquet dance floor. Was she stepping over the spot where Jack O’Brien had breathed his last? She shuddered, suddenly tempted to about-turn and head for home.

‘All right, Glo!’ Frank loomed before her like a well-meaning, underfed spectre.

‘Hello, Francis,’ she said, her smile faltering as she saw the sign for ‘Speed-dating this way.’

‘Come to find a nice feller to keep you warm at night?’ Frank asked, draping his arm over her shoulder in a gesture of friendship that was far too familiar for her liking. ‘Well you’ve come to the right place, then. Love is all you need, right?’

She shrugged him off, shuddering at the prospect of being judged by strange men. ‘Sheila talked me into it, and I agreed, in a moment of lunacy.’

‘Get a drink down you, Glo,’ Frank said, nudging her and winking. ‘Bit of Dutch courage, eh? You’ll be sorted. It’s on the house.’

As she descended into the basement bar, she was both thrilled and horrified to see so many others of her age, milling around with drinks in their hands. The women were all dolled up to the nines, of course – the smell of their perfume and hairspray rose up to greet her in a heady fug of optimism and trying too hard. Far too much cleavage and leg on show. But the men ... Scanning the men, it was immediately apparent that not a single one of them bore any resemblance to the pastor. In fact, the only black man in the room was at least twenty-five stone in weight and, judging by his leper-like complexion, needed the curing hand of Jesus Christ and a better diet far more than a three-minute mini-date.

Somewhat crestfallen, realising that the notably absent Sheila had cleverly dumped the responsibility for their inaugural speed-dating event onto her by nagging her to take part, she grabbed a flute of prosecco from the bar. Took a sip, followed by a deep breath. The bell rang. *Here we go.*

Seated at her own numbered table, as were the other women, Gloria felt like livestock at an auction as the men moved around the room, one by one, to vet her. But even as she nodded politely while being spoken at by Steve, the forty-year-old man from Widnes, whose strange, rubbery face looked as though it had been partially melted by a blowtorch, she felt as though she was being watched. *You wanna watch your back, Mam.* Lev’s words buzzed in her head like unwanted tinnitus.

‘Well, I’d always been interested in ice cream,’ Steve told her breasts. ‘I like the whippy stuff, me. My vans sell a *lot* of Flake 99s.’ He wiped the sweat from his brow with the napkin from beneath his tumbler of whisky, staining the charcoal tissue black. Gloria noticed then that he had a bogey, suspended on the hairs in his right nostril. ‘I make a packet at the football after a match. Even in winter.’

‘Is visible snot considered acceptable in ice cream retail circles, Steven?’ Gloria asked, pointing to his nose. Irritated. Every pore in her skin and every tiny hair on her body became super-sensitive to her environment. She grabbed the number eight sign in the middle of the table, an anchor to her seat, as anxiety whipped the composure from under her feet.

As Steve poked at his nose with the bitten fingernail of his chubby index finger, wearing a bemused expression, Gloria took the opportunity to scan the room. Everyone was deep in stilted, hopeful conversation, wiping their sweaty hands on their knees beneath the table. Everyone, except the man at the next table to her – an orange man with perfect, gelled white hair, plucked eyebrows and a very smooth face. Though the blonde at his table was speaking, waving her manicured hands animatedly as if what she had to say was *hyst-er-i-cal*, the man’s bright blue eyes were on Gloria and Gloria alone. He smiled.

The connection sent a shiver down her spine that was not entirely pleasant. She was certain she recognised this over-groomed dandy from somewhere.

The bell rang. No time to scroll through her recent memories in a bid to place him. Gloria’s heartbeat escalated to a thunderous pace as Steve, the ice-cream magnate left and her mystery man moved towards her. He held his hand out and remained standing, expecting her to get out of her seat, clearly.

She stood, shook his hand formally and was surprised when he pulled her into him for a full-on peck on not one but two cheeks.

‘I like to *faire les bises*,’ he said, pronouncing the French like Spanish, spoken with a Lancashire accent.

‘How sophisticated,’ Gloria said, taking her seat carefully and hooking her hair behind her ear. Coquettishly smiling down at the table-top.

‘My name’s Bob,’ he said, pointing to the name-sticker on his shiny pin-stitched jacket. He peered at her sticker, positioned near her shoulder. ‘Pleased to meet you, Gloria.’

Studying his face, Gloria was transfixed by those piercing blue eyes. She took a sip from her prosecco, then a gulp. Felt a Bible quote about to push its way out of her mouth but inexplicably held back this time. Feeling like this Bob was the best of a bad bunch and that there was some peculiar chemistry between them, Gloria forced herself to delve deep into her long-term memory, to the time of The Wastrel, when talking to men had been easy. The time in her life when she had learned to please men professionally. Young Gloria had been hot stuff. Young Gloria had forgotten most of the Bible quotes drummed into her as a child. She would channel young Gloria now. Just for fun. Jesus could take an evening off.

‘Pleased to meet you, Bob. My, what arresting eyes you have.’

‘You’ve got me banged to rights. I can’t take them off you, love.’ He held his hands up, as if in surrender. ‘I’m under your spell.’

Gloria ran her finger around the rim of her prosecco glass. ‘Are you implying I’m wicked?’ She batted her mascaraed eyelashes. The thrill of flirting after decades of the utilitarian exchange of facts with Sheila or spouting of religious platitudes at church was intoxicating. She felt like an old, neglected engine that was being cleaned of a lifetime’s sludge and lubricated by fresh oil. She bit her lip. Felt the alcohol loosening up her muscles and short-circuiting her inhibitions.

Bob grinned. He had small, clean teeth that shone blue beneath the bar’s lights. His white hair was dazzling. Wondering how it felt, Gloria wanted to reach out and touch it.

‘I think you’ve got a naughty lickie twinkle in your eye, Gloria,’ he said, leaning into her. ‘What do you do?’

‘Me? Oh, I bewitch men with my womanly assets and sparkling conversation.’ She threw back her head and laughed, aware that in doing so, her ample bosom would be more noticeable. The pastor’s handsome face loomed large in her mind’s eye, castigating her for acting like a wanton hussy with a smooth-faced, strange man called Bob, who couldn’t enunciate ‘little’ properly. But then, prosecco-fuelled Gloria of old reminded her that the pastor thought nothing of sizing up a teenaged girl’s lower portions whilst pressing the older flesh of his adoring congregation and his devoted fat wife. ‘And you?’

Bob laughed, running his clean fingers along the edge of the table. ‘When I’m not property-developing, I’m making conversation with beautiful coloured ladies.’

Coloured. Aye, there was the rub.

The Gloria that was a capable entrepreneur and an elder at the Good Life Baptist Church was just about to castigate him for his outdated and racist terminology when she became aware of a ruckus, audible above the distant thump-thump-thump of the sound system in the club’s main area.

Girls, screaming. Shouts for help. The sound of breaking glass.

Watch your back, Mam.

Chapter 7

Frank

‘Keep an eye out for unfamiliar dealers.’ Sheila’s words of warning. ‘Call Conky *straight away* if you spot anything iffy.’

When Frank had gazed out at the sea of gyrating young people in M1 House from the vantage point of the DJ booth, he had considered the difference between the time when Paddy had ruled and his widow’s fledgling reign.

‘One, two, three ... four.’ He had inhaled sharply, counting on his fingers; drinking in the smell of sweat, dry ice and alcohol that had come from the writhing mass on the dance floor. ‘Ten, eleven.’ Ignoring the disapproving looks of the DJ whose concentration he had been interrupting, he’d turned to Degsy, who had been standing just beyond the threshold in the corridor. ‘Eleven. And those are just the ones I can see. I bet there’s more.’ Shaking his head, he had wiped the moisture from his upper lip with a quaking hand. Feeling doubly jittery, thanks to the speed he had taken earlier.

‘This would never have happened when Paddy was still alive,’ Degsy had said.

He’d voiced Frank’s niggling doubts over the new head of the O’Brien empire, but Frank wasn’t about to show disloyalty to Sheila in front of a foot-soldier. And he certainly wasn’t prepared to eulogise over Paddy.

‘My son died thanks to that bastard.’ Stepping down from the DJ booth into the corridor, Frank had slammed a fist into Degsy’s shoulder. ‘Now get out there and earn your money, you useless dick!’

‘What do you mean?’ Hurt in Degsy’s spotty, junkie-thin face.

Frank had reached up and had grabbed him by the collar of his Lacoste shirt, pulling him close. Without Paddy around as the unassailable enforcer, he’d had no option but to play the alpha with the likes of Degsy. Stepping up had been hard, but he’d done it. ‘I mean, Sheila’s paying you to run the drugs in my club. You’d have been well sacked by now if it wasn’t for the run on shifty arseholes, thanks to the war with the Boddingtons. I wasn’t keen to have any drugs in here at all after what went on, but I said you could still deal in M1 out of family loyalty. So, don’t be pissing my sister-in-law about.’

‘Hey! No need to slag us off, Frank. I run a tight ship, me.’

‘Oh yeah? Then who the hell are them dickheads out there? It’s not the first time I’ve seen them. There’s two black fellers – one with dreads, one’s wearing a red T-shirt. Asian lad in a denim jacket. Three or four white guys with tramlines cut in their heads. Dealers, Degsy. And not Sheila’s fucking dealers.’

‘I don’t know who you mean.’ Degsy’s small, bloodshot eyes, with their pin-prick pupils that said he consumed as much gear as he sold, had darted towards the dark corridor of the backstage area, as if he had been hoping for some way out of this awkward confrontation. He’d picked at one of the scabs around his mouth. All receding gums, when he spoke, and teeth that looked like he gargled in strong urine. That much had been visible, even in the crappy light. ‘I’m telling you Frank. I swear on my nan’s life. I haven’t seen nowt. It’s just O’Brien lads working the club. As far as I know.’

‘You don’t know your arse from your elbow, you!’ Frank had let go of Degsy’s collar, contemplating his next move. He hadn’t wanted to call Conky for backup. Not again. Every time he’d dialled the henchman’s number, he had felt like one of his balls had been snipped loose. ‘Get them dealers out of my club. Get the bouncers to help you. Find out who they’re working for. Report back to me. Right?’

‘Chill out, man.’

‘Don’t *chill out*, man me, you twat. Get out there and earn your cash. Or would you prefer to explain this to the Loss Adjuster? Don’t make me call Conky.’

Degsy had held his hands up. 'All right, all right. Keep your wig on.'

As he'd accompanied the hapless Degsy to the edge of the dance floor, the reverberation of the bass and beat had felt like warning tremors beneath Frank's feet, heralding a seismic shift of the club's karma in the wrong direction. The atmosphere in M1 House that Saturday night was distinctly off.

He'd grabbed Degsy by his shoulder. 'Be careful. Right? You're not packing are you? I said no more guns or knives.'

The memory of his son, Jack, already growing cold and bleeding out on an empty dance floor, had hovered like an unwelcome spectre above the reality of hot, hedonistic youngsters having the time of their lives. It had been joined by the recollection of Asaf Smolensky, creeping in through the open back door, bearing a Bren gun and the bloodlusty intentions of criminal-insanity-on-the-payroll. For a peace-loving temple to dance and music, M1 House had seen more than its fair share of violent death back in the spring. Frank had been keen not to let the grim reaper defile his altar to the beat ever again.

The crowd had parted reluctantly to absorb Degsy. Frank had watched as the other O'Brien muscle had appeared from the sidelines, all given the order. The spotlights had shone on the bouncers' bald pates as they too merged with the revellers from front of house.

'I can't see a bleeding thing,' Frank had muttered, wringing his hands.

He'd shooed some kids off a sofa in one of the seating areas then, scrambling onto the sticky leatherette seating to see what was going on.

Degsy had made for the black guys. The entry-fee-paying clubbers had scattered around them, sensing danger like a herd of antelope at the water's edge where hyenas lurk in the tall reeds. The bouncers had rounded on the white guys.

It had started with a scuffle. A little pushing and a testosterone-fuelled hokey-cokey where neither had conceded ground to the other.

'No guns,' Frank had prayed quietly to a God that never seemed to listen. 'Please don't let them have sodding guns.'

The transition from minor altercation to full-on fisticuffs had taken less than a minute. Otis, his burliest bouncer, had taken a right hook from one of the guys with dreads that had sent him flying backwards into a podium like an ungainly clown.

Now, Degsy had pulled a gun to best the Asian lad's knife in an underworld rendition of rock, paper, scissors. Shit, shit, shit. The lying, lanky arsehole was armed to the teeth. Should he stop the music? Should he call Conks, after all?

Frank withdrew a baggie of coke from the pocket of his jeans. Took a hefty pinch of the white powder and deposited it on the back of his sinewy hand. Snorted what he could. Rubbed the rest around his gums. The effect was instant. Pharmaceutical Columbian courage followed soon after.

'Right, you bastards,' he said to himself, pulling the sleeves of his old James T up in some deluded act of strong-arm bravado. 'Nobody messes with an O'Brien.'

Ignoring his racing pulse and the feeling that his legs were liquefying, he crossed the club, heading towards the scrum. No need for that big Northern Irish bollocks. Not tonight. *Remember Jack. Don't make this all for nowt.* He approached one of the white rogue dealers from behind.

'Get out my sodding club!' he screamed in the man's ear, grabbing him tightly by the scruff of his neck. Turning his collar into a garrotte. Kneeing him in the sweet spot on the backs of his legs so that they buckled.

Frank was a warrior, now, posthumously defending his son's honour. Heard his own voice, hoarse and venomous above the music.

'Who's your boss? Tell me or I'll rip your bleeding head off.' Fingers in the man's kidneys.

'Fuck you!' the dealer shouted, elbowing Frank in the stomach.

There was a flash of metal as the Asian lad stabbed one of the bouncers. Fists flew. It was carnage.

‘Back off, or I’m gonna blow you all into next Wednesday!’ Degsy yelled, waving his piece at the interlopers.

But the guy with the dreads and bad acne scarring was suddenly upon Degsy, waving a semi-automatic. ‘Drop the gun, Manc twat, or I’ll put a bullet in your ugly head!’ His death threats were levelled in a sing-song accent like some nightmarish nursery rhyme.

Degsy and Dreads both clicked their safeties off. A stand-off. Not good.

Frank was dimly aware of the shrieking of the clubbers on the fringes of his ill-fated dance floor and of the speed-daters who were clattering up the iron staircase from Jack’s Bar below, fleeing the scene. Gloria Bell’s face in among them, somewhere. An overwhelming sense of déjà vu and fear that his club-owning days were finished bore down on him. But his melancholy musings were interrupted by the unmistakeable growl of Conky McFadden, striding through the phalanx of onlookers.

‘Hands in the air, you scabby wee turds or I’ll take the lot of yous out!’

Who the hell had called the Loss Adjuster? The bouncers, almost certainly.

Upon them now and casting a long shadow over the interlopers like an avenging dark angel, Conky held a SIG Sauer before him. The music had stopped, as if to pay respectful tribute to the fabled Loss Adjuster’s appearance on the charged scene.

‘Do you remember me?’ he bellowed, bearing down on dreads-with-a-gun. Striding right up to him, as though his opponent clutched a child’s toy weapon. Pressing the nose of his gun right into the dealer’s jaw. With his free leather-gloved hand, he removed his shades with a flourish. His bulging eyes shone with obvious professional glee. ‘Do you know who I am?’

Dreads dropped his pistol. Held his hands up. Swallowed visibly. ‘Yeah.’

‘Get out of this club and get on a train back to Birmingham, like the yokels you are,’ Conky said, encasing Dreads’ throat in a large hand. ‘Tell your eejit boss Nigel Bancroft that if any of you set foot in South Manchester again, you’ll be going home in Tupperware stacking boxes. And you make sure he understands fully that if I see his ponce’s bake in O’Brien territory again, I’ll shoot some fucking wrinkles in him that Botox will never remove.’

Realising that he had been holding his breath all the while that Conky had been speaking, Frank straightened himself up. Inhaled. Exhaled. He acknowledged with some bitterness that he’d been unable to control what went on in his own environment. He felt the humiliation neutralise the bravado in his body. But his pulse thundered on apace and for a moment, as pain travelled up his left arm and encased his tired heart in pure, uncut agony, he wondered if he too would be going home in a wooden overcoat.

‘Frank. Are you okay?’ Conky’s voice, close by.

Clutching his arm, Frank dropped to his knees. *I’m coming, Jack. I’m coming.*

Chapter 8

Tariq

‘I’m not coming in,’ Jonny said. His voice was gruff and thick with sleep.

Tariq imagined his business partner lounging in bed or, perhaps, sprawled on the sofa in his den. Par for the course, these days.

‘Aw, come on, Jon. For God’s sake! You’ve been in work twice in a fortnight. When you do come in, you hole yourself up in your office with the Fish Man.’ Tariq held his phone in one hand, pouring muesli into a bowl with the other. He could feel Anjum’s eyes on him, scanning his every move for signs of subterfuge. The kitchen felt several degrees colder with every second that she scrutinised him. He lowered his voice, turning his back to her, hoping the sound of her mashing egg mayo for the children’s packed lunches would be enough to drown out the finer points of his conversation. ‘Plotting. That’s all you do. Plotting revenge. Like that’s going to bring Mia back!’

Screwing down the plastic muesli sack deftly, he replaced the box inside the cereals cupboard. Irritated that the flaps wouldn’t quite fold shut, destroying the neat line of the cereal packets. Taking the muesli out again, he jostled the phone in one hand and rummaged for the sellotape in the stationery drawer with the other.

‘Hold on,’ he said, exasperated. Setting the phone down, he detached a length of tape with his teeth and strapped the wayward flaps shut – the way he liked it. At least he could impose order on a cardboard box, if on no other area of his life. ‘Now. What was I saying?’ Eyeing his wife as she smoothed the eggs onto bread for Shazia and Zahid and buttered toast for his father, he imagined agitation, rising in waves from the top of her hair. She wore a chignon today – styled tightly against her skull, mirroring the tight expression on her unmade-up face. Only animosity between them now that she finally knew how he and Jonny really made their handsome living. ‘So, you’re staying at home. Again?’

‘Yeah. I’ll be in tomorrow.’

‘I won’t hold my breath.’

Tariq was just about to hang up when he remembered the point of the call. ‘Wait! Before you go ... You ever seen a black guy with dreadlocks and a big white guy with a dirty blond crop working for the O’Briens?’

There was silence, followed by a yawn. ‘No.’

Glancing at the finance pages of the newspaper, laid out on the breakfast bar, Tariq yet again scanned the article that reported on multi-millionaire Nigel Bancroft’s expansion into corporate property, north of Birmingham. He tapped the photo of the bland-faced playboy in his collarless, pin-tucked dress-shirt and jazzy leather-trimmed evening jacket, posing for a professional shot at some post-polo-match charity ball. ‘What do you know about Nigel Bancroft?’

On the other end of the phone, Jonny smacked his lips. A rustling sound as he rolled over in bed, perhaps, preparing himself for nothing more taxing than spending yet another day obsessing over the possible Margulies blood on Leviticus Bell’s hands while Tariq did all the work.

‘Runs the Midlands, doesn’t he?’

‘Yep.’ Tariq walked to the fridge. Scowled at the selection of milk in the door, staring in disbelief at the almond milk. Sweetened! He took out the carton, shaking it at Anjum with a questioning look on his face.

There was a hint of mischief in his wife’s eyes. A smile, playing at the corners of her mouth. Had she deliberately bought him the sweetened milk, knowing he wouldn’t drink it? Knowing that if he resorted to using the wrong milk, it would set him on edge for the rest of the day?

‘Look. I don’t know any more than you about Nigel-whatever-his-name-is,’ Jonny said. He hung up then, leaving Tariq staring at the word ‘sweetened’ with a bad taste in his mouth.

Had the men who had tried to snatch his father from the car wash forecourt been Sheila’s soldiers? Or had they heralded the arrival in Manchester of a sortie that had been despatched on a reconnaissance mission by an enemy force from beyond the Staffordshire hills?

He set the phone down. Held the almond milk out gingerly, as if it contained plutonium. ‘Darling, what’s with this?’ he asked Anjum. ‘You know I’ve cut out processed carbs.’

She slammed the plate of toast onto the butcher’s block counter in front of Youssuf with some force, sending the toast scudding onto the wooden surface. ‘You know where Tesco’s is, *darling*.’

With a bemused expression, Youssuf looked from Anjum to him, then to Shazia and Zahid. His father smiled at his grandchildren with a shrug and a wink, though Tariq could see the discomfiture behind those milky eyes. The children merely giggled in response, thinking their old Daada funny; not for an instant picking up on the bitter acrimony between their parents in that kitchen.

Sighing, Tariq poured the wrong milk onto his muesli, wincing inwardly as the sickly-sweet taste registered on his discerning palate as a culinary affront. Damned if he was going to give his wife the satisfaction of not drinking it.

‘What have you got on the cards today, my love?’ he asked, willing her to make nice for the sake of the kids.

She peered at him through her Prada glasses, narrowing her eyes. ‘Oh, you know ... preparing asylum cases for trafficked girls ...’ She raised her voice. There was an edge to it. Even the children fell silent. ‘Who have been forced into slave labour by morally bankrupt, money-grubbing hypocrites and subjected to systematic abuse by men who see them as nothing more than commodities made from flesh.’ Anjum sat down primly at the breakfast bar and took a violent bite of her apple, gnashing her molars together without moving her laser-like gaze from him.

Tariq felt a twinge of corresponding pain in his groin. He swallowed hard, wishing that time-travel back to the winter – the time when his secret had still been safe – were feasible, or that if parallel worlds were really a possibility, another Tariq Khan existed, still living a harmonious family life with a wife who still believed he was nothing more than a respectable, hard-working businessman. He pushed away the bowl of unpalatable muesli, realising that Anjum would never unsee the trafficked Slovakian girl in her offices or unhear the story of her enslavement at the hands of the Boddlington bosses.

In spite of the comforting sound of the children jabbering away excitedly in the back, the journey to school was agony. At his side, his father sat in silence, clutching his karakul hat on his lap and sighing repeatedly.

‘Give it a rest, will you, Dad?’

The old man threw his hands up. ‘What? You have a go at me for talking while you drive. If I sit quietly, minding my own business, you’re still not happy. I can’t win.’

‘Daddy! Daddy!’ Shazia shouted.

With mounting frustration, Tariq glanced at his daughter in the rear-view mirror. ‘What is it, sweetie?’

‘Is Mummy picking us up?’

‘No darling. Daddy is. Mummy’s in court today.’

The traffic came to an abrupt standstill. A black van pulled alongside his Mercedes at the lights. Tariq held his breath, feeling suddenly over-exposed on that school run. He strained to see who was behind the vehicle’s wheel. Exhaled when he realised it was an elderly white guy. Behind him, a white van was too close to his bumper. He edged forward, annoyed when the van driver closed the gap.

‘Change, damn it!’ he muttered under his breath.

In every car, on every bus, on every motorbike and, above all, in every van, Tariq saw the enemy, poised to snatch the light from his children’s eyes or to tear his father from the car’s passenger seat.

Standing at the school gates, Tariq still felt watched. Checking behind him, he looked for dreadlocked interlopers among the yummy mummies and the odd stay-at-home dad. He appraised the site's security measures and judged them insufficient. Made a mental note to call the head teacher of the exclusive preparatory school as soon as he was behind his desk. He was paying enough in astronomical termly fees, after all. The least they could do was install some sturdier gates and stick an extra security guard on the door. Old-fashioned striped blazers and the novelty of kids wearing straw hats suddenly didn't seem enough bang for his buck. Tariq wanted his family to be bullet-proof, and highly rated teaching staff couldn't promise that.

As he kissed Shazia and Zahid goodbye with a guilty lump in his throat, it suddenly occurred to him that the same white van that had hogged his rear bumper at the lights had parked up, two cars down from where his father was now sitting, glum-faced in the CLS. He cast his mind back to the driver, who had worn a baseball cap at a ridiculous angle. Was it feasible such a man was a parent of a kid at a private prep where solicitors and surgeons sent their kids?

You're being paranoid, he told himself, waving at the kids; sprinting back to the parking bays to see if the van was still there.

When he got back to his own car, the van had gone. *Get a grip, for God's sake. You can't turn into Jonny, dwelling on the pitfalls of this crazy path in life you've chosen.*

Pulling away from the kerb, he thumped his steering wheel in frustration.

'What's got into you?' his father asked, stroking the brain-like folds of fur on his hat.

'I'm a failure. I can't protect any of you.'

His father coughed – a deep, rasping rattle. Spat some phlegm into a snow-white handkerchief. 'You know the answer to that, son.'

'Look, when I drop you at the day centre, do me a favour. Don't go walkabout.'

He shot a sideways glance at the old man, noticing to his chagrin that he had trimmed one side of his white beard for him higher than the other. He was losing his touch.

'Red light!' Youssuf shouted.

Tariq faced forward abruptly, slamming on his brake. He yelped as somebody ploughed into the back of the Mercedes, sending him lurching over the stop line into the path of a heavy goods vehicle.

Chapter 9

Sheila

‘We’ve got a grass,’ Sheila said, pounding away at the Stairmaster as though she was wreaking vengeance on the little shit that had been leaking her business to Nigel Bancroft. She pumped the handles up and down, raining imaginary blows on his or her head. ‘And now you’re telling me that M1 House is overrun with Brummies? You idiot!’

In her brightly lit home-gym in the subterranean spa of the Bramshott mansion, she stared past Frank, fixated by their reflection in the ceiling-to-floor mirrors, repeated in infinite regress: an athletic, middle-aged woman in her prime, clad in pink Lycra, powered by long-suppressed ambition, bawling out a stooped, grey-faced middle-aged man, dressed like a youth, who looked as though the gravity of this harsh world had finally all but flattened him. It was a scene of the strong bullying the weak. And she didn’t like it one bit.

‘Sorry,’ she said, stepping off the Stairmaster. ‘I should be asking you how you are, not having a pop at you.’

The dimpling in Frank’s chin abated. He offered her a weak smile by way of a truce and sat down onto the seat pad of her lateral pull-down machine. He waggled his head from side to side uncertainly. ‘I’m all right, me. Ta for asking. I ended up in A&E thinking I was having a heart attack like our Pad. Turns out it was only bloody indigestion! I’d taken too much gear on an empty stomach and a load of painkillers a few hours earlier. Bugged me guts up, didn’t it?’

Sheila dried her sweaty hands on a towel and squeezed Frank’s shoulder in sympathy. ‘That’s lucky.’

‘The doc kicked us out with a warning about watching what I eat and stress and that. But is it any wonder I’m strung out? Them Brummies are taking the piss. The last thing I need is another shooting in the club. It was close, She. Bloody close.’

Sheila shook her head. Inhaled deeply, conjuring the memory of Nigel Bancroft’s easy, cheesy smile. It was like Paddy all over again. A man, trying to bully her when she didn’t do as she was told, like a good little girl. She ground her molars together until they squeaked. ‘I’m gonna sort this,’ she said. ‘Bancroft seemed to know I was mulling over selling the drugs and protection or farming it out as a franchise. The only time I’ve ever discussed that outside of my house has been at the weed farm. We’ve got a leak. I’m gonna find it. And we need more O’Brien men at the club.’ She pointed at her brother-in-law like an accusing schoolmarm. ‘*You* need to sort out your bouncers. They’re the gatekeepers and they’re not doing their jobs.’

‘Sorry, She.’

Taking a hearty swig from her water bottle, Sheila said, ‘Bancroft’s muscle nearly blew holes in some woman with a kid in a trolley outside the Lowry. Only reason they stood down was coppers showed up. If they hadn’t been doing a routine patrol, we all could have ended up in the cells or body bags. And Paddy surrounded himself with incompetents, apart from Conky.’ Glancing down, she noted the hurt in Frank’s haunted, bloodshot eyes. ‘And you, obviously.’ No. The hurt was still there. Frank wasn’t that easily fooled or flattered. Much of his child-like lack of cynicism had been buried along with his son. ‘Leave it with me, chuck.’

‘Chuck’, at least, put a half-hearted smile back on her brother-in-law’s woebegone face.

With Frank gone, Sheila pushed herself to put in twenty lengths in the glittering turquoise pool. Swimming on her back, she followed the line of the bricks in the spotlight, vaulted ceiling, savouring the notion that all this contemporary opulence was hers and hers alone, now. She was a woman of independent means with hundreds of staff on the payroll, no longer Paddy’s pushover trophy-wife and punchbag. She realised that it was time to step into the big boss’ shoes in earnest.

‘I’ve had enough of this,’ she told the lapping water, clinging to the side and wiping her face. ‘It’s time to get tough.’

Dressing for success in skin-tight leather trousers and her favourite Burberry leather biker jacket, she threw her highest-heeled boots into her Chanel tote and drove the Rolls Royce to Gloria’s house. Knocked smartly on the door to the rented semi, clutching the hard case in her right hand. Her freshly worked-out biceps protested at the weight.

When she answered, Gloria was already wearing her coat and shoes. Her best dress that she wore to most meetings was visible beneath the three-quarter-length coat. She looked like a formidable Latin mistress on a weekend off. ‘About time.’ Gloria thrust her watch-clad wrist towards Sheila, raising an eyebrow in the sort of disapproval that only the overtly religious mastered. ‘You’re late!’

Sheila thrust the case into Gloria’s hands. ‘I want a quick word,’ she said, waving her business partner back into the house.

‘What’s with the leather and the Roller? Who you trying to impress?’ Gloria asked, kicking off her chunky-heeled shoes and padding in her stockinged feet towards the kitchen. The straps had left an indent in her swollen ankles. ‘Take your trainers off, She! If the no-shoes rule’s good enough for you, it’s darn well good enough for me.’ She peered up the stairs towards the landing. ‘Leviticus! Shake a leg! You’d better be dressed and baby Jay better be ready to roll. *Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys* – Proverbs 18:9!’

Her words were met with a groan and something muffled in the long-suffering tone normally used by teenagers. Sheila stifled a smile. Remembered that she was here on business.

‘What’s in this case?’ Gloria asked, grunting as she heaved it onto the laminated surface of the kitchen worktop. ‘Your make-up?’

Ignoring the comment, Sheila strode over and clicked the locks open, revealing the contents of the red velvet interior.

‘A shotgun?’ Gloria took a step back, clasping her work-worn hand to her chest.

As Sheila waited for the surprise to sink in, Gloria approached the case again, gingerly lifting the box of cartridges from its recess. Frowning, holding the box at a distance, as though it might explode in her face.

‘It’s for you,’ Sheila said. ‘A gift.’

Her business partner turned to her, shaking her head in protest but surreptitiously stretching an arm back to run her fingers over the beautiful polished wood of the stock. ‘I’m a practising Christian, Sheila O’Brien. Why on earth would you give me an implement of violence?’

‘What do you think they fought the Crusades with?’ Sheila asked. ‘Charm? B.O.?’

‘The power of the Lord!’ Gloria said.

‘And weapons.’ Sheila marched up to the case, pushing Gloria aside. She lifted the shotgun out. Presented it to Jesus’ favourite sunbeam. ‘Hold it. See how it feels.’

Shaking her head yet again, Gloria took her gift. A glimmer of a smile and a hint of mischief in her eyes. ‘It’s very heavy.’ She dropped and raised the gun like barbells, hoisted it to her shoulder and peered down the barrel at Sheila. ‘Ka-pow!’

Steeling herself not to flinch, Sheila prayed that Gloria would play ball. ‘I need you, Glo. Paddy sent a load of boys in to do a woman’s job. I’ve got junkies pretending to run a drugs enterprise that’s worth millions a year. They’re hopeless and smoke most of the product. They wouldn’t know discipline or staffing structures if they came along and shagged them up the arse with a flip chart.’

‘Oh, Sheila! Language! If you please!’ Gloria winced.

Keep going, She. She’s buckling. ‘Your Lev is the most intelligent out of all of them put together. They’re not trustworthy. Someone’s shooting their mouth off to a rival gang in Birmingham. Frank’s overrun with them in the club. And now I think about it, I’m not queuing up to give eighty per cent of my hard-earned cash to some out-of-towner who thinks I should step aside, just because I’ve got a vagina instead of a shrivelled little cock.’ She wiggled her little finger for emphasis.

‘Sheila O’Brien! You’re *terrible!*’ Gloria snorted. ‘Why should I get involved with that side, though? We don’t have any agreement about Paddy’s old affairs. That’s sinners’ business.’

‘Ten percent if you take the job as my manager. If Christians weren’t supposed to earn money, Jesus wouldn’t have put zeros in “holy” and “godly”.’

‘That makes no sense. Fifteen.’

‘Done.’ Sheila grinned broadly. Knew she would get reliable old Gloria onside in the end. Even a Bible-basher like her had a price. Everyone had a price and Gloria’s was significantly cheaper than Bancroft’s.

‘What did you say about rivals in Birmingham?’ A man’s voice.

Sheila looked over to the threshold of the kitchen and saw Lev leaning against the door frame with Jay on his hip. The child still had a bandaged head after the brain surgeon in Baltimore had removed his tumour. Size of an orange, Gloria had said. But now he was smiling and poking at the lightning bolt shaved into Lev’s stubbled scalp. His honey-coloured skin was lighter than Lev’s mixed-race-mocha, thanks to his white mother, Tiffany. But the little boy’s beautiful, symmetrical features and the promise of high cheekbones once the baby-chub had gone were surely down to his father. Small wonder that Mia Margulies had had the hots for Leviticus Bell, Sheila mused. ‘I’ve got trouble with Brummies and there’s an internal leak. You seen anything out of place at the cannabis farm?’

Lev nodded, advancing into the kitchen. Ignoring his mother, who was rummaging in a broom cupboard for something or other. Gazing suspiciously at the shotgun on the worktop. ‘That’s not loaded, is it? I can’t be having no guns in the house with my boy.’ Little Jay stretched out towards the weapon but Lev pulled him gently back to hold him close against his body. ‘Not for Jay-Jay,’ he told the child. ‘Dangerous.’

Sheila was touched by the fatherly love she could see in his concerned frown and ensuing smile. She wondered if Gloria had ever shown Lev that much affection. Couldn’t remember her having done so when she had brought him to her house as a boy during the school holidays. ‘It’s your mam’s. She’s your new boss.’ The smile slid from Lev’s face. ‘My manager. She’s going to whip those little pillocks into shape. And I’m expecting you to be behind her every step of the way. None of that Boddington crap. Your loyalty now is to the O’Briens. And I’m watching you, Leviticus Bell.’

Scowling now, Lev yanked open a cupboard and took out some biscuits. Bit on one angrily and gave one to Jay to chew on. Slammed the cupboard door shut with some force. ‘I couldn’t work for Tariq and Jonny if I wanted, thanks to you and all the bullshit you stoked up.’

‘Need I remind you why your son’s on the mend?’ She knew it was a low comment but Sheila realised she was done for, the moment she allowed insubordination to creep in.

Lev blinked hard, a mouth full of biscuit. He chewed noisily, as if contemplating her sucker punch. Mouth open. Not so hot.

‘Degsy’s got a lad from Birmingham working in the weed farm,’ he said, shoving his tongue beneath his top lip.

‘You what?’

‘Yeah. Kevin. Brummie Kev. We both used to work for Scots Mavis, twocking cars for her cut-and-shut business. He’s been knocking around Manchester for years, has Kev. On and off, like.’

‘What’s he doing, working for me?’

Lev shrugged. ‘Ask Degsy. He’s the one give him a job. Said he was short-staffed after all what went on in the spring.’

Sheila narrowed her eyes. Took a step towards Lev and scrutinised his blemish-free face. ‘What’s he like, this Kevin? Do you trust him?’

Laughing, Lev threw his head back and closed his eyes. The thick cords of muscle in his neck bulged. ‘You’re having a laugh, aren’t you? He’s a fucking criminal. He’d steal the pennies off a dead man’s eyes! And he’s got no loyalty to you.’

‘You think he’s the grass?’

‘What do you think? You’re getting grief off some arsehole in Birmingham. Kev’s not called Brummie Kev for nowt and he’s a shifty little prick. Always was. He still owes us a tenner from 2007.’

‘How can I trust a word that comes out of your mouth?’ she asked.

‘I give up everything for you, didn’t I?’

‘Don’t come that shit. You gave up everything for money.’

Locking eyes, the two were caught in a silent battle of wills. Sheila could see that Lev had the same strength of character as his mother. But more than that ... He had integrity.

There was a clatter from the broom cupboard, accompanied by a celebratory, ‘Da-daaaa!’ Gloria emerged, wheeling a tartan shopping wagon across the kitchen.

‘What the hell is that?’ Sheila asked, smiling with bemusement. ‘You going to Alty market for spuds? Or are you moving into Sunrise Rest Home?’

‘Don’t be so quick to mock, Sheila,’ Gloria said. ‘This is the sheath for my righteous sword.’ She started to sing lines from some hymn or other that Sheila vaguely remembered from Paddy’s funeral. ‘Jerusalem’, maybe. ‘Bring me my bow of burning gold. Bring me my arrows of desire!’ Then, the words seemed to evade her. ‘La di di deee, da-dum-de-dum. Bring me my chariot of fire.’ She wheeled the shopping wagon round at speed and holstered the shotgun inside it with a flourish. ‘This is my chariot of fire, She.’ Rolling it back and forth, back and forth. Withdrawing the shotgun at speed and pointing it at the cooker.

‘Jesus, Mam,’ Lev cried. ‘Put it away! Not in front of Jay.’

Ignoring his protest, Gloria swung the shotgun over her shoulder, as though its mere presence had transformed her into Jules from *Pulp Fiction*. ‘Don’t be embarrassed by it on my behalf, young man.’ Clearly misunderstanding Lev’s complaint as a slur against the tartan atrocity. ‘This fine shopping wagon will save the rheumatism in your mother’s poor hands. Years of having my hands in water, that is! I’m crippled when it’s damp. And my back’s not up to much either.’

‘Pulp Friction,’ Lev muttered under his breath, as though he had read Sheila’s thoughts.

Chapter 10

Paddy

Staring at the flickering computer screen, Paddy considered what he might write next to Ellis James. He took a swig from his can of extra-strength lager, glad that he had managed to stave off another lunchtime hangover by continuing to drink steadily throughout the afternoon. Relieved that Brenda had taken pity on him and let him hang around at hers, where he could crank the heating up at her expense and raid her fridge. Kyle's laptop was infinitely superior to the piece of shit he had at his place. Kyle's bedroom was the only decent room in the dump, though the thirteen-year-old was way too old for the brightly coloured kiddy cars and trains that covered the wall, now partly concealed beneath posters of some dickhead band called *Twenty-One Pilots*.

Back to the screen. What to say today?

'If you want to know where Maureen Kaplan keeps bent accounting records,' he said out loud as he typed slowly with two fingers, 'check out *Bella's Afro Hair Supplies* in Crumpsall before end of month.' He signed the email off as 'Shadow Hunter', using the moniker of one of those YouTubing twats that Kyle followed. Pressed send and slurped at the beer. Waited for the response. And waited.

Paddy pressed F5 repeatedly, wondering when the hell the berk of a detective would get back to him. He scratched at his groin. Maybe he ought to shower more regularly. Kenneth Wainwright's shower in that tired two-up, two-down rental was shite. The water either came through scalding hot or freezing cold. The pressure was almost non-existent from the cheap electric shower rig-up that had been poorly screwed onto the tiled wall by the private landlord. Brenda's was no better.

Showering. Who would have thought that one of the things he missed most about being a wealthy man was daily access to a good power shower in a clean bathroom?

But Paddy was jolted out of his musings on personal hygiene and poor man's water pressure by the arrival of a response from his least favourite dogged detective.

Re: Maureen Kaplan tip-off

James, Ellis <ellis.r.james4@hotmail.co.uk>

To: Shadow Hunter (shadow.hunter@gmail.com)

Hi SH,

How do you know about Maureen Kaplan? Where are you getting your intel from? Can we meet? What can you tell me about Jonny Margulies and Tariq Khan?

Regards

E.J.

Paddy smiled at the screen. Ellis James was more than intrigued. He was well and truly on the hook, and Paddy would enjoy reeling him in slowly. All those years he'd spent trying to pull the thorn from his side that was the detective and his Rottweiler of a tax-inspecting sidekick, Ruth Darley, and now, here James was: the instrument of Paddy's revenge.

'Don't worry where I got info from,' he wrote. 'It's good.'

He contemplated his link to the outside world – Hank the Wank had had a busy week of it, installing hi-tech sound-recording equipment in the offices of Maureen Kaplan when she was out at meetings. His oldest school friend was proving to be the perfect choice for a spy. Loyal as they came. No criminal record. Blended in everywhere, because who gave a workman in overalls a second thought if he went about his business with a merry whistle and an air of confidence? Endlessly excited by the novelty of subterfuge, and inexperienced enough not to have a clue what his skills were really worth on the black market. So far, Hank was working for peanuts and considered it a small fortune. So far, Katrina was indulging Paddy in sticking him an extra few hundred here and there to assist his transition back to normal life.

By the time the money runs out, Paddy thought, staring at the blinking cursor, I'll have ruined the lot of them scheming bastards. He rubbed his hands together. Then, Kenneth Wainwright can shove it up his sad, dole-ite arse, because Paddy Big-Bollocks is coming back, baby!

With his index fingers hovering over the keyboard, Paddy contemplated what else to feed the detective with.

'Did you know the Boddingtons have brothels on Trafford Street and Grove Close in Sweeney Hall?' He clicked send.

The main focus for Paddy's anger was, of course, Sheila, since the lousy cow had sought to end him. Beyond that, he would not rest until Leviticus Bell was dead. Memories of that fateful poolside scene where he'd been sliced open and left for dead only months earlier were blurry, but he was certain that Lev Bell's face had been hiding beneath a false beard and those stupid bloody sidelocks – an imitation Shylock, coming for his pound of flesh, trying to pin it on Asaf Smolensky. Very damned clever. Not clever enough to dupe him – the mighty Paddy O'Brien, however. But the Boddingtons ...? Why the hell should they evade the strong arm of the law? It would be easier to take his empire back with the enemy already weakened.

Waiting for Ellis James to respond, he jumped when a thin voice behind him said, 'What the fuck you doing in my room on my laptop?'

Paddy turned around to find Kyle standing over him. A thin streak of piss with a sour expression on his malnourished face. The kid reeked of poverty – stale hand-me-down clothes that were too big on him; a whiff of unwashed boy, lard, school sports-hall changing rooms and the pervasive smell of mildew from living in a permanently damp Victorian terrace. Paddy hated the smell because he remembered smelling exactly like it as a child.

'Your Mam said I could,' Paddy lied, irritated that he had been caught in the act.

'Well, you can't. It's mine and I've got private stuff on there.'

Kyle reached out to snatch the laptop away but Paddy swung it out of his reach. 'Easy, tiger.'

'Give it back, Ken! It's mine! Mam bought it for me as a treat when my dad—'

'How long you been stood there?' He eyed the boy warily, keeping a firm grip on the laptop but snapping the lid shut. What had he seen?

'Long enough,' Kyle said, scratching at the florid rash of spots on his forehead.

The kid looked nothing like his mother. His eyes were small and too close together. Paddy found it odd that there were no photos of the father around the house whatsoever, as if he had never existed. Perhaps Brenda had never forgiven him for simply disappearing one day. But with a creep of a son like Kyle, who could blame the guy?

'I was googling my ailments,' Paddy said, pre-empting any confrontation. Who knew how much the kid had seen? 'And they're confidential, right? None of your fucking business, nosey hole.' Had Paddy been thinking aloud while his back had been turned to the doorway? Conky used to frequently pull him up for that sort of thing. It would be no good if Kyle had worked out he'd been talking to a cop. The kid didn't seem entirely daft. Unlike his dimbo of a mother. 'Shouldn't you be at school?'

Kyle's gaze was unwavering. His attentions were focused on the laptop. With a jolt of realisation, it was clear to Paddy that the kid wasn't suspicious of him at all! *He* had something to hide. And there was only one thing thirteen-year-old lads might be doing on a computer that they didn't want a grown-up to know about.

'I won't tell her,' Paddy said. 'About the porn, I mean.'

Suddenly, the kid's stern face cracked, offering Paddy a wry, knowing smile. Was this the start of some kind of truce? Was Kyle going to stop being a miserable little sod just because Paddy was poking his mother?

'Ta,' Kyle simply said, pulling the sleeves of his hoodie over his bony hands. That half-smile had turned to a grin, lighting up his cadaverous ugly face. Maybe the kid was relieved.

In truth, Paddy wouldn't have the first idea on how to check someone's browser history, but he wasn't about to tell the little dipshit that. 'Sling your hook, son, while I finish up here. Okay?' He held his can of lager out to the boy. 'You wanna swig? Is that what you're waiting for?'

Shaking his head, Kyle sloped off back downstairs, still wearing a lopsided smile as though he was the only one in on some big secret. Creepy little smartarse.

Opening the laptop's lid, Paddy refreshed the screen to see if Ellis James had responded. Sure enough, he had.

Re: Maureen Kaplan tip-off

James, Ellis <ellis.r.james4@hotmail.co.uk>

To: Shadow Hunter (shadow.hunter@gmail.com)

Have you got addresses for those brothels and also the place in Crumpsall? We'll treat this information very seriously. I'd really like to meet you face-to-face, Shadow Hunter. Can I take you for lunch? I want to get to know you and let you know how GMP can help you, if you'd like to testify against the O'Brien crew or the Boddlington Gang.

Regards

E.J.

PS: What do you know about the main criminal firm in Birmingham? Have you ever heard of Nigel Bancroft before? If so, what can you tell me about him? I've attached a photo.

Paddy clicked on the attachment and studied what looked like a professionally shot corporate portrait of Bancroft. With his blow-dried hair and bone-white teeth, he put Paddy in mind of some male model off a Just for Men hair-dye packet. He'd heard of him, all right, but the ponce had never dared set foot in Manchester while Paddy had been king. If Ellis James was trying to pump him for information on Bancroft, that meant Sheila – and possibly the Boddlingtons too – were getting the heat. With Paddy gone, why wouldn't a man like Bancroft have a pop at annexing a destabilised Manchester as Midland turf? It was the sort of stunt Paddy would certainly have pulled. A calculated business risk, well worth taking.

He thought about the prospect of that dozy show pony, Sheila, trying to defend herself against the likes of Nigel Bancroft: organised, established, semi-legal and experienced as hell. Threw back his head and laughed so hard, he began to wheeze.

'What a bleeding joke!'

Sheila was just a woman. If the Brummies were after the O'Brien empire, she didn't stand a hope in hell. Maybe Bancroft would do the job of bringing down his treacherous widow for him.

Chapter 11

Sheila

Sheila was surprised that her breath wasn't steaming on the air in the office perched high above the warehouse floor of the cannabis farm. Despite the hot, moist, tropical climes artificially created in the vast industrial area below to keep the crops lush, she shivered in that claustrophobic crow's nest of a room. The stiletto boots she had pulled on before leaving the car were causing her feet to spasm. Or maybe she was just tense as hell at the prospect of what was to come.

'I don't think this is a good idea,' Conky said, perched on the dated 1970s desk that still bore the splintered bullet-holes from the Boddingtons' attack back in the spring. He removed his glasses with a flourish and fixed Gloria with The Eyes. 'You don't have any experience of dealing with these eejits. Colin Chang just about managed because he had the technical nous. But you're an ex-cleaner, not a pharmacist, so you haven't even got that, have you? Having a gun in your shopping trolley won't give you any of the gravitas needed to run the O'Brien business interests.'

'Who says?' Gloria asked, folding her arms tightly across her chest. Bitterness audible in her clipped consonants. 'I manage over a hundred women. And you could do with one of our girls in here. Look at the state of it! Has this place ever seen a duster?'

Conky sighed, rubbing The Eyes like a despairing parent. He looked to Sheila for support, but Sheila focused on Lev, who was rolling Jay's pushchair to and fro along the wrinkled, threadbare old office carpet.

Seize control before Conky steam-rollers over you, Sheila O'Brien, she counselled herself. *Draw your sodding boundaries*. 'Gloria's taking over from that prick, Degsy, and that's my final decision.' Sheila turned back to her lover and noticed the dejected expression on his craggy face. Right then, Conky put her in mind of a chastised dog. 'I want him demoted so he's just running errands. I'm not having him mismanaging staff, leaving us open to attack and losing me money because he can't organise a piss-up at a brewery. We either pull him into line or he gets booted out on his arse completely.' She turned to Gloria. 'That's your first task, Glo.'

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