



She's got a
score to settle...

The Sting

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**The Sting: Pre-order the
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Kimberley CHAMBER

The Sting



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Dedication

In memory of my brave friend Suzanne's son
Ricky Paul Hayden
14.05.89—13.09.16
Cruelly taken far too soon
RIP Ricky xxx

Epigraph

**‘Every saint has a past,
and every sinner a future’**

Oscar Wilde

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PROLOGUE

New Year's Eve 1972

'Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind.
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And auld lang syne.
For auld lang syne, my jo,
For auld land syne,
We'll take a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.'

I'm in the middle of the circle holding hands with my sisters Hazel and Linda. My mum, dad and Nanny Noreen are all singing at the top of their voices. My mum looks happy, even though she still has the remainder of a black eye that my dad gave her on Christmas Eve.

'Open the front door, Tommy,' orders my dad. He calls New Year's Eve Hogmanay after an oatcake.

I do as I'm told. Old Mr Cleaver across the road is banging two dustbin lids together. I feel something brush past my leg and then I scream when I realize what it is. It's a black cat and it's obviously been run over. It collapses in the hallway right in front of me.

Nanny Noreen goes ballistic and blames me. She's very religious and believes in Scottish folklore. 'You stupid boy,' she bellows. 'You know the first to step through the door after midnight affects the fortunes of everyone who lives in the house. I've told you that enough times, so what do you invite in, a dying black cat. Now we're going to have bad luck all year. You wait and see.'

I stare at the cat as it takes its last breath. Little did I know at that point Nanny Noreen was speaking the truth.

In a few days' time, my life as I'd known it would no longer be. Everything was about to change for the worse.

My name is Tommy Boyle and this is my story ...

PART ONE

When sorrows come,
they come not single spies,
but in battalions.

William Shakespeare

CHAPTER ONE

Christmas 1972

Tommy Boyle pressed his nose against the cold glass of his bedroom window. The weather had taken a turn for the worse this week. It was literally freezing, but Tommy didn't care about the cold. All he was bothered about was his father coming home from the oil rigs. He was so excited; he'd barely slept last night.

Hearing his sisters squabbling over the record player, Tommy sighed. Three months at a time his father worked away for, and it was difficult being surrounded by females. He missed the simple things: such as watching *The Big Match* or *Match of the Day* and discussing the games. Girls knew nothing about football. Nor Cowboys and Indians, or Battleship.

'Not this rubbish again. Turn it off,' shouted twelve-year-old Tommy. His younger sister had obviously got her way. Linda was obsessed with little Jimmy Osmond, reckoned she would marry him one day. 'Long-Haired Lover from Liverpool' was one of only two songs Linda ever played. Benny Hill's 'Ernie (The Fastest Milkman in the West)' was the other and Tommy hated both. He thought they were silly songs.

'Breakfast's ready, kids.'

Tommy ran down the stairs, but slipped, landing in a heap at the bottom.

Valerie Boyle picked her son up. 'What did you do? You silly sausage. Have you hurt yourself?'

Tommy had hurt himself. His knee was throbbing, but he was determined not to cry. 'Boys don't cry,' his dad had always told him. 'I'm all right. My pyjamas are too long. I fell over the bottoms of 'em.'

Valerie had only bought her son the fleecy pyjamas the previous day. They were meant to fit a twelve-year-old, but Tommy was small for his age. 'I'll get the machine out in a bit, alter them for you. You'll live, eh?' Valerie smiled, ruffling her son's mousy blond hair.

'Where's Rex?' Tommy enquired. Rex was the Alsatian his father had purchased to protect the family in his absence. Tommy loved Rex and the feeling was mutual. He would often take the dog out with him. Rex was too strong on his lead for Tommy, but he would walk happily by his side and never went into the road.

'Rex is having his breakfast in his kennel, love. You know your dad doesn't allow Rex indoors while he's here, and he'll be home soon, won't he?'

'Yeah, but it's cold. Rex can't sleep in his kennel this time of year. He'll freeze.'

'I've put some blankets in there, Tommy. He'll only be out there for ten days, until your dad goes back to work. Then he can come inside again,' Valerie replied, wishing her husband wasn't coming home for Christmas at all. She didn't love Alexander any more, hadn't for a long time. But the children did, so she put their happiness first. For all Alexander's faults, he was a hard worker and good provider. They lived in a nice three-bedroom house: private, not council. Working on those oil rigs paid extremely well.

A deafening scream filled the air, followed by ten-year-old Linda holding two halves of a seven-inch single in her hands. 'Hazel snapped Jimmy in half,' she cried.

'No, I never. It was an accident,' lied fourteen-year-old Hazel. 'I wanted to play Alice Cooper and she—'

'Enough.' Valerie Boyle held her hands in the air while eyeing her eldest daughter with suspicion. Hazel had a nasty streak at times, just like her father. 'Go eat your breakfast, now!'

'I loved that record, Mummy,' Linda whimpered.

Valerie held her youngest child close to her chest. 'I know you did, darling. Don't worry. Mummy will go to the record shop after breakfast and buy you another one.'

Tommy Boyle stared out of the front-room window nervously chewing at his fingernails. His father had been due home at lunchtime and it was now teatime.

‘Sausage rolls are ready. Who wants one?’ Valerie yelled, trying to keep her voice sounding jovial. Alexander had promised her faithfully he would come straight home, what with it being Christmas Eve. Him stopping off at a pub for this length of time would only lead to one thing. Arguments. Alexander was a horrible drunk, would always drag up the past.

‘Will Dad bring us presents too? Or is Father Christmas bringing them all?’ enquired Linda.

Hazel sniggered. ‘Father Christmas doesn’t exist, divvy.’

‘Yes, he does. He eats the mince pies we leave outside and his reindeers drink the milk.’

‘No, he doesn’t. Rex does.’

‘Stop it, Hazel. Christmas is meant to be a time of joy, not disagreements. And if I catch you breaking your sister’s records again, you’ll get no pocket money for a month,’ warned Valerie.

His stomach churning like it always did when he feared his dad might come home drunk, Tommy continued to stare forlornly out of the window.

It was gone midnight when Tommy was awoken by shouting and what sounded like glass smashing. He immediately started to shake. His mum was only five foot two, his dad a whole foot taller, and he knew who would end up with the cuts and bruises.

Linda appeared in his bedroom, tears streaming down her face. ‘They’re fighting, Tommy.’

‘Get in my bed and put the quilt over your head.’

‘Dad won’t hurt Mum, will he?’ Linda asked fearfully.

‘No. I’ll sort it. You stay here,’ Tommy replied bravely.

Sitting on the top of the stairs rocking to and fro was Hazel. Tommy sat next to his sister and put a comforting arm around her shoulders. The argument was loud, but muffled in parts.

‘You lying whore. I know you’ve been with Terry Fletcher because you were seen in the fucking pub with him,’ bellowed Alexander Boyle.

Tommy winced as he heard something else smash. It sounded like china. ‘I’m gonna make sure Mum is OK.’

‘No, Tommy. Don’t go down there,’ Hazel pleaded, grabbing her brother’s arm. ‘He’ll only hit you again, like he did last time. Don’t get involved.’

Remembering the time he’d got a clump for intervening, Tommy sat down. For as long as he could remember, his parents had argued. His dad was a tall broad-shouldered man with black hair and blue eyes. He was from Glasgow originally and spoke with a deep Scottish accent. So much so, some of Tommy’s friends struggled to understand what he was saying. At forty-five, he was thirteen years older than Tommy’s mum.

‘Who is Terry Fletcher?’ Hazel asked. ‘Is he Billy Fletcher’s dad?’

Tommy shrugged. Billy Fletcher was older than him and in Hazel’s year at school. Tommy thought he was a flash git and steered well clear of him. Whoever this Terry Fletcher was, it was clear he was the cause of the argument. From what he could gather, his dad was accusing his mother of fornicating with Terry while he’d been away.

Tommy didn’t know too much about his parents’ past. They never really spoke about it. The snippets he had learned mostly came via his dad’s mum, Nanny Noreen. She reckoned his father was happily married to a good Catholic girl before he’d been forced to travel to London to find work. According to Nanny Noreen, his mother was working as a barmaid back then and she’d trapped his father by falling pregnant with Hazel.

‘A laughing stock you’ve made me, you no-good slut. Parading around with another man while I’m working my balls off to provide for you. Have you any idea how that makes me feel? You’re a prostitute, same as your mother was,’ bellowed Alexander.

‘Do you think our dead nan really was a prostitute?’ asked Linda.

Not realizing Linda had snuck out of his bedroom, Tommy leapt up and held her in his arms. 'Nah, take no notice. Mum says when Dad is drunk he doesn't know what he's saying.' Tommy had actually heard Nanny Noreen say that his other nan had been a brass and had died while having an illegal abortion, but he liked to protect his sisters from such horrible gossip.

'Mum has been going out lots of an evening lately and she has been wearing her best frocks and shoes. Do you think Dad could be telling the truth? Perhaps she hasn't been going to the bingo?' Hazel suggested.

Once again, Tommy shrugged. The boys at school were all infatuated with his mother. She was short, very pretty and blonde. The boys insisted she was a ringer for the actress Barbara Windsor, but Tommy reckoned that was because of the size of her boobies. She did look a bit like Barbara, he supposed, but to him she was plain old 'Mum'. He had heard a few rumours though, that she was a 'Good Time Girl'. Tommy hadn't really understood what that meant at the time, but he was kind of getting the gist now.

Hearing more shouting, then a loud scream, Tommy decided enough was enough and bolted down the stairs.

'No, Tommy. No,' Hazel shrieked, running after her brother. Linda followed suit. As siblings, they often had disagreements. But whenever their parents fought, the three of them stuck together like glue.

'What you doing? Leave Mum alone,' Tommy ordered. His mother was lying on the kitchen floor and his father was crouched over her with his hands around her throat.

'Go back to bed, you,' Alexander hissed, without even looking around.

'None of us are going back to bed. Not until you leave Mum alone,' Hazel bravely defied him.

The sound of his first-born's voice was enough to jolt Alexander Boyle back to reality. He loosened his grip around his wife's throat and gingerly stood up. He grinned at Hazel. A stupid, drunken grin. 'You going to give your dad a hug then?'

Knowing it would be better for her mother if she did, Hazel walked towards him and put her arms around his waist.

'Daddy's home. Come on you two. Give your old man a hug.'

Linda was hiding behind her brother's back, but when Tommy squeezed her hand and led her over to their father, she also guessed playing normal was the right thing to do.

Valerie stood up. Her left eye socket was throbbing where the bastard had given her a right-hander. Alexander had his back towards her, so she brushed herself down and locked eyes with her beloved son. 'Thank you,' she mouthed.

Unable to sleep, Tommy thought about his family. They were happy most of the time and all parents argued, he supposed.

His mum was from Poplar originally. She was bubbly and laughed a lot. She had sea-blue eyes and her smile could light up a room. There'd been rows in the past caused by other men chatting to his mum. His father had hit a man at Old Mother Flynn's daughter's wedding because he said the man was taking liberties with his mother.

Since his dad had gone to work on the oil rigs things had got better. His last few visits home had been such good fun and there hadn't been a cross word. Tommy wasn't sure why Nanny Noreen wasn't a fan of his mum. Hazel reckoned that was because their mother wasn't Catholic and she had liked their dad's first wife. She was very religious, Nanny Noreen, and his mum didn't believe in religion. His dad did though, especially when it came to football. He was a big Celtic fan and hated Glasgow Rangers with a passion. He called them 'Protestant scum' and had been raging when they'd won the UEFA Cup Winners Cup at the Nou Camp earlier this year. His dad's sorrow had turned to joy when Rangers had got banned from defending the trophy thanks to a pitch invasion from their fans. 'Serves the Protestant scum right, lad,' he'd chuckled, doing a jig of unbridled joy.

Unlike most of his friends, Tommy had no cousins. His dad had a brother who lived in Scotland, but they didn't speak. Tommy had no idea why they'd fallen out because nobody ever wanted to talk about such things. His mum also had a brother, but he had no children and they rarely saw him anyway. Uncle Ian lived in South London and Tommy's dad said he was a 'weirdo'. Even his mum didn't seem to like Uncle Ian very much.

Tommy liked the house he lived in. It was ever so modern with brown and orange patterned wallpaper. Apparently, when he was little they'd lived in a house in Seven Kings. Tommy didn't remember that, the one they lived in now in Barking was all he could recall. Unlike most of his pals, Tommy had his own bedroom that he'd decorated with posters of his favourite footballers. He was a Celtic fan like his father, but Tottenham Hotspur was his English team. He had decided to become a Spurs fan after watching them win the UEFA Cup Final in May. Martin Chivers and Alan Mullery had scored the goals. Chivers was Tommy's favourite player.

Hearing Rex howling outside, Tommy prayed that he wouldn't wake his dad. He had heard his father come up to bed about an hour ago, but not his mum.

Linda stirred as her brother got out of bed. She could never sleep alone if her parents had been fighting. 'Where you going, Tommy? Has Father Christmas arrived?'

'No. You go back to sleep. I'm going to check on Rex. I won't be long.'

Aware his father was snoring like a pig, Tommy tiptoed down the stairs. It wasn't just Rex he wanted to check on. Sleep would not come unless he was sure his mother was all right.

Valerie Boyle was sitting by the lit-up Christmas tree wrapping the last of the children's presents. She could barely see out of her left eye now, the socket was so swollen.

Tommy crouched next to her. 'Are you OK, Mum?' he asked softly.

Willing herself not to cry, Valerie forced a smile. 'Of course I am. Tough as old boots, me.'

'Is Dad still angry?'

'No. I don't think so.'

'Who is Terry Fletcher, Mum?'

No way could Valerie tell her son the truth. Not only would it break his heart, she would hate him to think badly of her. She shrugged. 'I have no idea, Tom. You know what your father is like when he gets a bee in his bonnet, especially if he's been drinking.'

Satisfied his mother would never lie to him, Tommy nodded. 'Rex is howling. I think he must be cold. Can I bring him in the kitchen? I will sleep with him and I promise I'll put him outside before Dad gets up in the morning.'

Valerie reached her arm out and stroked her son's cheek. Tommy was a good boy with a big heart. 'Go on then. I'm going to sleep on the sofa tonight anyway, so I'll hear your dad getting up.'

Valerie finished wrapping the presents, then went to check on Tommy. He was fast asleep on the lino and so was Rex. She covered them both with a blanket, then glanced at her face in the bathroom mirror. She looked a mess and she would have to endure her bastard of a husband's sanctimonious mother tomorrow. 'You're an animal, Alexander Boyle,' she mumbled. 'Merry bloody Christmas.'

CHAPTER TWO

Christmas morning started out like any other. The kids opened their presents, then watched *Clapperboard's Christmas Cracker* and *Play School* while munching on home-made sausage rolls. Considering the events of the previous evening, the atmosphere was relatively normal. The only telling sign of the drama was their mother's swollen eye.

Alexander poked his head around the lounge door. Hazel was engrossed in her *Jackie* annual, Tommy in his *Roy of the Rovers* and Linda's head was in a *St Trinian's* book. 'Look what I found in the dining room,' Alexander grinned.

Realizing they had more presents, all three children jumped up excitedly.

'Wow! A real Celtic kit, like the actual players wear. Look, Mum,' Tommy gabbled, taking his tank top and shirt off and putting the top on. 'Can I wear it today? Please can I, Dad?'

Alexander chuckled. 'I don't see why not – do you, Mum?'

Valerie forced a smile. She loved Christmas as a rule, always decorated the house with a huge tree, paper chains, tinsel, and put all the cards up on the wall either side of the fireplace. She even blew up an enormous inflatable snowman; he stood in the corner next to the glass cabinet she kept her collection of china dolls in. This year, however, apart from enjoying the children's excitement when opening their gifts, Valerie was only going through the motions. She was counting down the days until her husband went back to work and she could spend time with the man she truly loved.

'Oh my God! It's those yellow dungarees we saw in Rathbone market,' Hazel exclaimed. 'I love them. Can I put them on now?'

'Go on then,' Alexander laughed.

'Barbie and Ken! And they're wearing cords like you made me, Tommy and Hazel, Mum.' Linda was over the moon.

Valerie smiled. She was a dab hand with a sewing machine. Not only did she make lots of pretty frocks for herself, whenever the kids spotted one of their idols on *Top of the Pops* or in a magazine wearing something they desired, Valerie would find a pattern and make them an identical version. 'Your father and I wrote to Father Christmas ourselves because we knew how much you wanted Barbie and Ken, didn't we, Alex?'

'We sure did. And this is for you,' Alexander replied, handing Valerie a gift. He hadn't forgiven her. Would never forgive her for the past. But he only had Irish Tony's word on seeing her out with Terry Fletcher and, to be fair, Irish Tony was always pissed and rarely knew what day it was. Valerie had sworn to him last night that the only times she had been out of an evening while he was working away was to the bingo with her mate Lisa, so for the children's sake Alexander had chosen to believe that. For now, at least.

'Thank you, Alex. They're beautiful,' Valerie said, darting off to the bathroom mirror to secure the knotted gold hoops to her ears. She didn't like them much, preferred dangly earrings, but she was determined to play the dutiful wife for the sake of her kids. She had quite liked the perfume Alex had given her earlier, which was a bonus. *Aliage* by *Estée Lauder*. She'd been amazed he'd got that right. Every year he bought her scent and he usually got it so very wrong. She liked musky perfumes and no matter how many times she told Alexander that, she always ended up with something with a sickly sweet aroma.

Having already received numerous presents from his wife and children, Alexander was surprised when Tommy ran out of the room then returned with another. 'I chose this and bought it out of my pocket money, Dad.'

Alexander ripped off the wrapping paper. It was a small framed photo of the victorious Celtic side who had won the league last season.

'I thought you could take it to the oil rig with you,' Tommy suggested.

Alexander stood up and ruffled the boy's head. Tommy was a lovable kid, but Alexander could never love him, not properly anyway. He glared at Valerie. 'I'm off to the pub now. I'll pick my mum up on the way home.'

'What pub you going to?' Valerie asked, her heart in her mouth.

Alexander liked to drink back in his old stamping ground Seven Kings, rather than Barking. 'The Joker,' he replied. 'Why?'

Valerie breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. Terry Fletcher wouldn't be in there. 'No reason. Have fun. Dinner will be ready at half three.'

'Why isn't David on here? He's so much better than Chuck Berry. "My Ding-A-Ling" is a stupid song,' Hazel complained.

Tommy rolled his eyes. What was it with girls? His eldest sister was in love with David Cassidy. 'Because David's a poofta.'

Hazel punched her brother in the arm. 'No, he is not.'

Watching *Top of the Pops* was a ritual in the Boyle household. Tommy liked David Bowie, but he would never admit that to the lads at school because David wore make-up and he would get ribbed for it.

'Yes! Jimmy's on,' Linda squealed, jumping up and down with excitement.

'They didn't even have the Shangri-Las on there,' Hazel moaned. 'Leader of the Pack' was her current favourite record. It reminded her of Jimmy Young, who lived across the road. He was a bad boy who rode a motorbike. He was also very handsome.

Valerie was singing along, merrily basting the potatoes when she heard Alexander arrive home. Her heart beat rapidly and she said a silent prayer he wasn't half-cut. She would hate him to spoil the kids' Christmas by kicking off again. 'Did you have a nice time?' she shouted out. She could hear the nervousness in her own voice.

'So-so. Come and say hello to Mum then,' Alexander bellowed. Irish Tony had wound him up again. 'I'm more than ninety-nine per cent sure it was your Valerie with Terry Fletcher, Alex. I'm a hundred per cent. I saw 'em holding hands.'

'Hello, Noreen. Merry Christmas,' Valerie said, wiping her hands on her apron before kissing the old cow on the cheek. She could tell Alexander had heard more gossip due to the sneer on his face.

'Oh dear! Looks nasty, that eye. Walk into another door, did you?' Noreen knew full well her son clumped Valerie at times and she didn't have an ounce of sympathy for the woman. Valerie was a born flirt and, unfortunately for Alexander, she couldn't keep her knickers on. Noreen would never forgive her for how she'd treated her son and she rued the day Alexander ever met the whore. His first wife Mary had been a lovely lady.

'Dad's still got the hump with Mum. You don't think they'll fight again, do you?' Hazel whispered in her brother's ear.

Tommy shrugged. He'd been doing a lot of shrugging lately.

Valerie Boyle was a good cook and had gone to town as per usual with the Christmas dinner. The turkey was succulent, the stuffing crispy, the parsnips just on the right side of burnt and the vegetables not too soft.

'Bit soggy, these roast potatoes,' Noreen complained, pushing the spuds to one side of her plate.

Tommy glared at his grandmother. She wasn't a loving woman and he could tell Hazel was her favourite. 'I like the potatoes. It's a nice dinner, Mum.'

'You would say that, wouldn't you? You're your mother's son all right,' Noreen spat.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Tommy asked.

'Don't answer your grandma back, eat your dinner, boy,' Alexander ordered.

'You never answered my question, Valerie. What happened to your face?' Noreen pried. Her son hadn't mentioned anything was amiss on the journey.

Aware of her children's eyes on her, Valerie cleared her throat. 'I tripped and fell down the stairs.'

Noreen pursed her lips. She knew Valerie was lying, guessed she'd been hawking her mutton again. 'Best you be more careful in future then, eh?'

'Hello, Rex. Look what I got for you, boy. You'll like this. It's turkey,' Tommy said, stroking his best mate. Rex looked so forlorn living in his kennel, it broke Tommy's heart. But his dad wouldn't budge, not even when he'd begged to let Rex inside for Christmas Day. 'It's a dog, Tommy. Dogs live in kennels and humans live in houses. Fact.'

Rex nuzzled his head inside Tommy's navy blue Parka. He hated being out in the cold, alone.

Alexander dropped his mother home early evening, then drove back towards Barking with a face like thunder. Irish Tony's words had been on his mind all day and it had been an effort playing happy families. He was far too embarrassed to admit the truth to his mother. She'd warned him not to leave Mary for Valerie in the first place, and he felt like a bloody fool.

'How could you do this to me, you bitch?' Alex mumbled under his breath. He loved Valerie with a burning passion. She was an absolute stunner and the thought of another man even touching her filled him with rage. He'd always been insanely jealous, couldn't help himself. Perhaps he should hand in his notice? Quit the oil rigs and stay at home where he could keep a watchful eye on her. Trouble with that idea was, local jobs paid nowhere near what he earned on the rigs and they had a very expensive mortgage. Only other option was to pay this Terry Fletcher a visit and warn him off. Alexander didn't know the bloke personally but had heard through the grapevine he was married and lived in Barking with his wife and two kids. Alexander didn't want to turn up at Terry's door in case the wife chucked him out. That would only push him and Valerie closer together.

Alexander punched his steering wheel in frustration. 'Slag.'

Valerie Boyle put the Party Susan on the dining table. 'Supper's ready, kids. Would you like me to bring a plate of sandwiches in the lounge to you, Alex?' she shouted out. Her husband was sitting in his favourite armchair, knocking back the Scotch like it was going out of style.

'I'm not hungry,' Alexander replied.

'Whassa matter with Dad, Mum?' Linda asked. It was clear to all three children that after dropping their nan off their father had arrived home in a foul mood.

'He's probably just tired and winding down from work. Why don't you three take your sandwiches and pickles upstairs, eat them in your bedrooms. You don't have to go to sleep yet. You can play with your toys upstairs too.' Valerie was a protective mother, would hate her children to witness any more violence. She had always tried to hide that from them.

'No. I'm staying downstairs with you,' Tommy replied. He was determined not to leave his mother alone with his father. That thought scared him.

The girls went to their bedroom and Tommy sat next to his mother on the sofa. His dad had a film on, but Tommy could tell he wasn't really watching it. His mood was tense and you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. 'What's this film about, Dad?' Tommy asked.

'It's about a slag, son. A slag who has affairs while her old man is working away.'

Valerie felt her heart lurch. 'Please don't say such things to Tommy, Alex. I have done nothing wrong. I told you that last night.'

'That isn't what Irish Tony says. He's seen you out with your fancy man, holding hands. How often does your mother go out of a night, Tommy?'

'Not much. Once a week usually, to the bingo,' Tommy lied.

'Hazel, Linda, get down here a minute,' Alexander bellowed.

'For goodness' sake, Alex. Please don't do this, not on Christmas Day. If you want to argue with me, then fine. But leave the children out of it,' Valerie urged.

Hazel precariously poked her head around the lounge door. 'What's up?'

‘Come in the room properly,’ Alexander ordered. ‘Stand in front of me and look me in the eyes, love.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I want to ask you something.’

‘Me too?’ Linda enquired, looking at Tommy, who stared at her, willing her not to put her foot in anything.

Alexander held his eldest daughter’s hand. ‘Don’t you dare lie to me, Hazel, this is important. I want to know how often your mother goes out of a night?’

Hazel didn’t know how to respond. She didn’t want to get her mum into trouble but neither did she want to lie to her dad. ‘Sometimes she goes out,’ Hazel mumbled.

‘Yes, but how many times? Think back to, say, last week. You can remember that clearly, can’t you?’

Hazel nodded.

‘How many times did your mother go out of an evening last week? Mind, I will check with the neighbours and if I find out you’ve fibbed to me, you’ll get no pocket money for a whole year. Do you understand?’

Valerie squeezed Tommy’s trembling hand. ‘Please stop this nonsense, Alex. The children don’t deserve it.’

Hazel chewed nervously on her lower lip. She got far more pocket money than any of her friends and she would hate not to be able to buy her records, favourite magazines and sweets. ‘Five times, Dad. Mum went out five times last week in the evening.’

‘Thank you, Hazel. You and Linda can go back upstairs now.’

Alexander waited until the front-room door was shut, then leapt up and whacked Tommy hard around the head. ‘That’s for fucking lying to me. Now get your arse up them stairs and I won’t be taking you to football tomorrow either.’

Tommy burst into tears and ran from the room. He had been so excited about attending his first ever proper football match, had been bragging about it at school before he broke up. What was he meant to say to his pals now?

Valerie winced as Alexander moved closer to her. She knew what was coming next and had little choice but to take it.

Alexander punched his wife in the side of the head, then pinned her to the carpet. His breath smelled of Scotch, his face etched in a sneer. ‘You’re my woman. Nobody else’s. You belong to me,’ he spat as he ripped her knickers off. Seconds later he raped her, brutally.

CHAPTER THREE

The rest of the festive season went quite quickly with no more major drama. Tommy had heard his parents doing naughties as his bedroom was next to theirs, so he guessed they must have made up.

On 3 January, Alexander hugged his family and said his goodbyes. 'I meant what I said, Valerie. I am paying someone to watch you,' he warned before strolling down the path with his case.

'You OK, Mum?' Tommy asked, as his father disappeared in the distance.

'I am now. Go and let Rex in, love.'

'You look nice, Mum. You going out?' Linda asked, later that afternoon. Her mum was wearing a pretty green flowery frock she hadn't seen before.

'Yes. Only popping round Lisa's. I haven't seen her all over Christmas and want to give her her present. I won't be late. Don't forget to get all your stuff ready for school. I'll be back before you go to bed.'

'You not going bingo?' Hazel asked suspiciously.

'Not sure. We might.'

Tommy gave his mother a hug. 'Me and Rex will look after the girls. Have a nice time.'

'I'm the oldest. So it's me who looks after you,' Hazel argued.

Valerie kissed her son on the forehead. 'Be good. Love you.'

As Tommy waved his mother goodbye at the front door, he had no idea he would never see her again.

Terry Fletcher opened a Babydam for Valerie and a can of bitter for himself. He didn't have a lot of spare cash, especially at Christmas, but he'd scraped together enough to book himself and Valerie a hotel room today. Usually they would do the deed in the back of his Ford Cortina, but it was bloody freezing and Terry had wanted to treat the woman he loved.

'So, how was your Christmas?' Valerie asked. She'd just been telling Terry what a dreadful time she'd had with Alexander.

'Same old, same old. Susan was her usual miserable self,' Terry replied, referring to his wife.

'Your kids enjoy it?'

'Yeah. Kids always enjoy Christmas, don't they? Did yours have fun?'

'No. To be honest, they didn't. They're getting older now, sense what is going on more. Which is why I've come to a decision.'

Terry was the total opposite to Alexander in every way imaginable. He was blond, had a cheeky grin, sparkling blue eyes and a bubbly personality. He worked as a docker and at thirty was two years younger than Valerie. He'd been married for fourteen years though, had got Susan pregnant when she was sweet sixteen and was forced into a shotgun wedding by her father. 'What you decided, my love?'

'That I'm leaving him, Terry. I hate him with a passion. It's you I want to be with.'

Terry puffed his cheeks out. He hadn't been expecting this. 'I do love you, Val, more than anything, you know that. But where we going to live? And what about the kids? It's awkward, isn't it?'

'There's stuff you don't know, Terry. About Alexander.'

Terry knew that Alexander knocked Valerie about and would have done something about it ages ago if he could. But for obvious reasons, he couldn't. He squeezed his lover's hand. 'Tell me.'

Tears streaming down her face, Valerie admitted the one thing she had vowed never to admit to anybody. 'He gets off on our arguments and fights, Terry. Then afterwards, he rapes me.'

'You fucking what! I'll kill the bastard.'

The roads were treacherous, thanks to the snow and freezing conditions. 'This is a joke, Val. No way are we going to get home in this. We're going to have to turn around and go back to the hotel,' Terry said. The hotel he'd booked was in Canvey, miles away from Barking, and it was becoming impossible to steer the car. The roads were like an ice rink.

‘I can’t leave the kids alone, Terry. They’ll be worried sick. I’ve never left them all night before.’
‘Can’t you call them from the hotel? I can’t drive back to Barking in this. It’s too dangerous.’

Imagining her beloved children looking out of the window, wondering where she’d got to, Valerie shook her head. ‘No. I have to get back, Terry. Tonight.’

*

Tommy Boyle stared out of the window. There was a kind of eeriness about the stormy weather; nobody was about and a dog was howling in the distance. He was getting worried now as his mother always came home when she said she would.

Hazel and Linda were sitting next to the blazing coal fire with Rex. ‘Where do you reckon she is, Tom?’ Hazel asked.

‘I told you a hundred times already, I don’t know,’ Tommy snapped. ‘Go look for her address book again, see if you can find Lisa’s number,’ Tommy ordered.

‘I looked everywhere already. Linda reckons she put it in her handbag.’

‘I’m sure I saw her put it in her handbag earlier, Tommy,’ Linda insisted.

‘I’m going to get dressed and walk to Lisa’s house. You two stay here and do not answer the door to anyone,’ Tommy ordered. He was ready for bed, had his pyjamas on.

‘You can’t go out this time of night on your own, Tommy,’ Linda warned. ‘If Mum comes home and you’re not here, she will be furious.’

‘Linda’s right. Besides, you’ll freeze to death. There was ice on the inside of our bedroom window earlier,’ Hazel stated.

‘I’ll be fine. I’ll take Rex with me.’

Hazel and Linda waited anxiously for their brother to return home.

‘He’s back, Haze,’ Linda squealed.

Hazel bolted to the front door and yanked it open. ‘Did you see Lisa? Is Mum with her?’

Teeth chattering, Tommy sat by the fire rubbing his frozen hands together. ‘Mum was with Lisa earlier, then she went to visit another friend. She said the weather must’ve stopped Mum getting home and we’re not to worry. Mum told Lisa if she wasn’t able to get home, we were to go to school as normal tomorrow.’

‘Thank God for that,’ Linda sighed.

Tommy and Hazel went to the same school, but usually walked separately with friends. Today, however, Hazel was waiting outside Tommy’s classroom for him and the pair of them ran home together.

Their mum kept a key they all used under the plant pot, and it was Tommy who did the honours. ‘Mum, Mum,’ he shouted.

Hazel ran up the stairs, then reappeared, crying. ‘She ain’t been home, Tommy. Mum’s make-up is still on the dressing table like it were yesterday. No way would she come home, then go out again without putting her make-up on fresh.’

By teatime, all three children were extremely worried and at a loss what to do. Hazel had warmed up the stew their mother had cooked the day before, but nobody was very hungry. Their mum was a good mum, their world, and she never left them for long periods of time. Even when she went to the bingo she was always back by 9.30 p.m. at the latest to tuck them into bed.

‘What we gonna do, Tommy?’ asked Linda.

‘I’m going to ring Nanny Noreen. She will know what to do,’ Hazel replied.

Tommy leapt up. ‘No. Don’t ring her. Nanny Noreen hates Mum. If you call her, it will only cause more trouble between Mum and Dad.’

‘What we meant to do then?’ Hazel shrieked.

When his eldest sister began howling louder than Rex ever did, Tommy went outside to get more coal for the fire. He didn’t know what to do, he was only twelve, but he was the man of the house and he would decide what was best.

By 10 p.m., Tommy was in panic mode himself, but was trying not to show it as he didn't want to upset his sisters.

'Shall we all walk round to Lisa's house? See if she knows where Mum's other friend lives,' Hazel suggested.

'No. Not tonight. But if Mum isn't back by tomorrow afternoon, then we will,' Tommy replied.

'I'm scared. I think we should call the police,' Linda stated.

'The weather is still really bad. Hopefully, Mum will be home as soon as the ice and snow has thawed,' Tommy said. He sounded far more reassuring than he actually felt.

Hazel's eyes welled up again. 'I got a bad feeling in my tummy about all this.'

Tommy clapped his hands excitedly. 'I know what we can do: pray to that man Nanny Noreen always prays to when she loses something. What's his name? Saint something.'

'Saint Anthony,' Hazel sneered. Her grandmother drove her mad, spouting her religious claptrap. Hazel thought it was rubbish. 'How's he meant to find Mum?'

'I don't know. But he found Nan's wedding ring that time, and her back-door key. It's got to be worth a try, surely?'

'Tommy's right, Hazel,' Linda added. 'If we pray, Mum might come home tonight.'

Hazel shrugged. 'OK then. Do we have to kneel and clasp our hands together?'

'Yes. Let's do it properly. Shut your eyes too,' Tommy ordered. He waited until his sisters were in position, then closed his eyes. 'Please, Saint Anthony, can you find our mum and send her home for us. We will be ever so grateful. Her name is Valerie Boyle. Amen.'

It was the following morning, during history, when Tommy's headmaster entered the classroom. He whispered something in Mrs Jeffries' ear, then she looked directly at him. 'Tommy, do you want to go with Mr Andrews, love.'

'Why?' Tommy mumbled. All the boys were scared of Mr Andrews, who often caned them. As far as Tommy was aware, he'd done nothing wrong.

'Come along, boy,' the headmaster urged.

Outside the classroom was Tommy's next-door neighbour, Mrs Talbot. 'Hello. What you doing here? Have you seen my mum?' Tommy asked, hoping Saint Anthony had found her.

'I'll get Hazel,' the headmaster said.

'What's going on, Mrs Talbot?' Tommy asked. He had a terrible feeling of unrest in his stomach.

'Your nan's at home, love, with Linda. She'll explain everything to you.'

'What! Nanny Noreen? She's at our house?'

'Yes, Tommy.'

It was at that precise moment Tommy knew something was dreadfully wrong. Nanny Noreen wouldn't set foot in the house unless his dad was at home.

Mrs Talbot said very little on the short journey, then came inside the house with them. The mood was sombre. Nanny Noreen had a face like thunder and Linda was sobbing.

'Whassa matter? Where's Mum?' Tommy asked, dreading the answer.

Linda flung herself at her brother. 'Mum's dead, Tommy. She died.'

Tommy had no idea what being struck by lightning felt like, but he should imagine it was similar to this.

Hazel sank to her knees, screaming blue murder. Even Mrs Talbot was crying and Tommy had never seen her cry before. 'When? How? What happened?' Tommy muttered. They had been studying Jack the Ripper in history and he fleetingly visualized his mum being murdered, like those poor victims had.

'Sit down, children,' Nanny Noreen ordered.

Tommy lifted Hazel off the carpet and all three sat on the sofa, holding hands.

'Your mother was involved in a fatal car crash. She died, along with her fancy man. I've managed to get a message to your father and he's on his way home.'

‘Fancy man! Dead! No. She can’t be. Mum was visiting her friend Margaret,’ Tommy insisted.

‘Your mother was a hussy and a liar, boy. She was having it off with a man called Terry Fletcher. He was driving the car when it crashed. How your father will ever live down the shame, I do not know. May your mother’s soul burn in hell.’

‘Don’t say that. We love our mum,’ Linda cried.

Hazel was shaking uncontrollably. ‘Mum can’t be dead. There must be some mistake.’

‘Mum’s friend Lisa said she was with Margaret,’ Tommy repeated.

‘Well, I’m afraid your mother’s friend is a liar too, Tommy. It’s your poor hard-working father I feel sorry for. His side of the bed wasn’t even cold and that whore was out fornicating. It is not hard to obey when we love the one whom we obey, is it?’ Noreen said, quoting a line from the Bible.

‘That’s enough now, Noreen. The children are clearly distraught. No matter what you thought of Valerie, they loved her. She’s their mother.’

Noreen glared at Mrs Talbot. ‘*Was* their mother.’

CHAPTER FOUR

Valerie Boyle had been popular within the local community, therefore news of her untimely death, and the circumstances surrounding it, spread like wildfire.

‘Where have all Mum’s sympathy cards gone, Nan?’ Linda made the mistake of asking.

‘In the bin, where they belong. Your father will be home this afternoon and he won’t be wanting to see those, will he? Not after what your mother did.’

Linda burst into tears. Hazel and Tommy had told her last night what lovely comments the neighbours had written and she’d yet to see them with her own eyes.

Tommy marched over to the bin and took the lid off.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Nanny Noreen shouted, yanking Tommy away from the bin by his arm and smacking him across the backside.

‘Linda hasn’t seen those cards yet. I’m getting them out the bin.’

‘No, you’re not. I ripped them up into tiny pieces. Now make yourself useful. There’s a shopping list on the kitchen top. I need items from the butcher’s, the baker’s, the greengrocer’s and Mr Abbot’s. The girls can go with you. You’re getting no fresh air stuck in here.’

Lip quivering, Tommy picked up the shopping list and money. It was two days now since they’d heard the life-changing news and Nanny Noreen had not shown an ounce of compassion. Tommy hated living with her and could not wait until his dad got home. ‘Come on, girls.’

‘I don’t want to go to the shops. We’ll bump into our mates on their way to school and they will all know about Mum,’ Hazel warned.

‘You’ve got to face your friends at some point, love, so best to get that out of the way. It isn’t your fault your mother was a whore,’ hissed Nanny Noreen.

Tears streaming down both their faces, Linda and Hazel reluctantly followed their brother out the door.

It didn’t take the children long to realize the gossip-mongers were out in force. People whispered on street corners, then stopped and looked in pity as they walked past. Some even crossed the road to avoid them. A few of their neighbours were kind. Mrs Young who lived opposite gave them a sixpence each to spend on sweets, and Mr Abbot wouldn’t take the money for the baked beans, sugar or brown sauce. ‘You put that towards some flowers for your lovely mum,’ he said softly.

‘We should have brought Rex with us,’ Tommy said miserably, as they trudged towards the butcher’s. Tommy was worried about his beloved dog. Nanny Noreen wouldn’t allow him inside the house, and he could sense Rex was miserable in the kennel. His eyes were forlorn.

About to reply, Hazel heard a voice from behind her scream, ‘Oi, I want words with you, Tommy Boyle.’ Hazel recognized the voice immediately. It was Billy Fletcher, who was deemed to be the best fighter in her year at school.

His face as angry as hell, Billy ran towards Tommy and pushed him hard in the chest. Tommy stumbled backwards and fell on his arse. ‘What did you do that for?’

Billy towered over Tommy. ‘Your mother was a slag. If it weren’t for her, my dad would still be alive.’

‘Takes two to tango,’ Tommy mumbled bravely. Billy was at least a foot taller than him and a stone heavier.

‘My mum is in bits, thanks to your whore of a mother,’ Billy shrieked. He then proceeded to kick Tommy in the head and stomach as though he were a football.

Linda burst into tears. ‘Stop it! Leave our brother alone,’ she yelled, trying to push Billy away. ‘Do something, Hazel. Do something!’

Not knowing what else to do, Hazel picked up a nearby loose paving stone and cracked Billy over the head with it. He fell to the pavement, and unfortunately for him, smashed his skull against the edge of the kerb.

Cliff the butcher came running out of his shop. 'What's going on?'

Seeing copious amounts of blood oozing from Billy's head, Hazel dropped the paving stone in horror.

News of Billy Fletcher's untimely death and the circumstances surrounding it also spread like wildfire. So much so, Nanny Noreen heard about it minutes before the police knocked on the door. She was distraught, Hazel was her favourite grandchild.

Alexander Boyle arrived home during the mayhem. He was shocked to the core and immediately offered to accompany Hazel to the police station. It was said parents shouldn't have a favourite child, but Hazel was his, by miles. She looked like him and had all his mannerisms. There would never be any doubt over him being her father. None whatsoever.

Stony-faced, Alexander witnessed his daughter being questioned. 'Tell the policemen the truth, love. You need to tell them everything that happened,' he urged.

'I already told you: Billy pushed Tommy over then started to beat him up. Tommy is only small and he's younger than Billy. Billy is in my year at school and all the boys say he is the best fighter. I didn't mean to hurt Billy, I swear I didn't. I just wanted him to stop hurting my brother.'

'Did Tommy say or do anything to antagonize Billy?' asked one of the coppers.

'No. Not really,' Hazel replied truthfully. 'All Tommy said was "It takes two to tango," because Billy called our mum a slag. Since our dad started working away, Tommy is the man of the house.'

Alexander pursed his thin lips. Not any more Tommy wasn't, he thought. Not after all that had happened this week. Things needed to change. Like father, like son.

Tommy and Linda were huddled up together inside Rex's kennel. Both were scared that Hazel would get into big trouble. They were also discussing their future.

'I don't like Nanny Noreen,' Linda admitted for the first time. 'She has never been like a real nan to us. It's only Hazel she buys nice things for.'

Tommy sighed. Their father was the same, but over the years Tommy had got used to that and learned how to deal with it. 'I think it is because Hazel was the first-born child. I never used to think Dad liked me much, but once I started getting into football things got better. Perhaps we have to find more in common with Nanny Noreen.'

'Like what?' Linda asked. 'All she ever talks about is God. She doesn't even like the Osmonds. She told me Little Jimmy is spreading bad vibes amongst girls my age. What does that mean, Tommy?'

'I don't know. But I really hope Dad and Hazel come home soon. Hazel was only protecting me. It was an accident.'

'All that blood, Tommy. It was awful,' Linda mumbled.

Tommy shut his eyes. Witnessing Billy Fletcher die would haunt him for the rest of his life.

When their father arrived home alone later that evening, both Tommy and Linda were gobsmacked.

'Where's Hazel?' Linda panicked.

Alexander pointed at Tommy. 'Thanks to him, your sister isn't allowed to come home. Now, go to bed. Both of you. This very minute!'

The next time Tommy and Linda saw Hazel was the day of their mother's funeral. She was outside the chapel with a woman and man they'd never seen before.

Tommy ran over to her. She looked awful, had lost weight and had dark circles under her eyes. 'We've missed you, Hazel. Where you living? Dad hasn't told us anything.'

As her brother tried to hug her, Hazel showed little emotion. 'I'm in a bad girl's home.'

'But you're not a bad girl. You didn't mean to kill Billy Fletcher,' Linda replied bluntly.

Hazel shrugged. This time ten days ago, she had a loving mum and family. Now she was living in a horrible place, with horrible children. She hated it there, wished she was dead.

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The chapel was packed to the rafters. Valerie had been a chatterbox who loved nothing more than a good old chinwag as she scrubbed her doorstep, cleaned her windows or walked to the shops. The rumours of how she'd died and who she had been with meant the nosy parkers were all in attendance. Some had barely known Valerie, but felt compelled to attend her funeral.

Tommy sobbed like a baby as he stared at the coffin. His mum had been so pretty and full of life. How could she now be dead and inside that wooden box?

Alexander leaned towards Tommy. 'Stop snivelling. You're showing yourself up,' he hissed.

Tommy bit his lip and pinched himself in the hope it would stop him from crying. He couldn't help being so upset. He had loved his mother dearly.

'I miss her so much, Tommy,' Linda wept.

Tommy squeezed Linda's hand and glanced at Hazel. She was showing no emotion, just staring into space. Uncle Ian locked eyes with him and smiled, so Tommy forced a smile back. The woman and man who had accompanied Hazel were standing at the back of the chapel by the door and Tommy wondered if they were staff from the bad girl's home. He doubted they were Old Bill, as very few women were capable of doing that job. That's what his dad said anyway.

Secretly pleased Nanny Noreen had refused to come, Tommy glanced at his father. His face was devoid of expression. He had been really nasty to him this past week, but Tommy guessed he was sad because of losing his wife and Hazel having to go away. They didn't even watch the football together at the weekend; his dad said he was too busy.

The vicar said some nice things about his mum, but not enough, Tommy thought sadly. She had been much more than just a mother of three. She had cooked delicious dinners, knitted him tank tops, run him up flares on her sewing machine, and taken him to the pictures regularly. She wasn't some average mum, she truly was the best.

When everyone stood up to sing 'The Lord Is My Shepherd', Tommy and Linda both heard shouting. They turned around. The door of the chapel was open and two policemen were struggling with some people.

'Where is she? Where's the evil child who killed my Billy?' Tommy heard a woman bellow. Nobody was singing any more, they were all fixated by the commotion. Tommy stood on the pew to get a better view.

'Murderers! First, my Terry and then Billy. My heart is broken in pieces. May you all rot in hell,' the woman screamed, before being carted off by the police.

'Was that Billy Fletcher's mum?' Linda asked Tommy. She hadn't seen the woman.

Tommy was about to reply when his father yanked him off the pew with such force he twisted his ankle.

Tommy woke up next morning with a throbbing ankle and broken heart. He and Linda had thought their mum would have a grave nearby that they could visit and lay flowers on. It had been a huge shock to find out her body had been burned and all that was left of her now was a pile of ashes.

'You awake, Tommy?'

'Yeah.'

Linda perched herself on the edge of her brother's bed. She had been so upset over the awful events of yesterday, she had wanted to stay with Tommy last night, but Nanny Noreen had forbidden her to. 'You're not a little girl any more, Linda. Brothers and sisters of a certain age shouldn't share the same bed,' she'd snapped.

'Dad wants to take me out for the day, but I don't really want to go,' Linda informed her brother.

'Is he taking me too?'

‘No. That’s why I don’t want to go. Did you hear him come in drunk around midnight? He knocked the grandfather clock over and it smashed. He scares me when he drinks too much.’

‘I heard him knock something over. Did he say where he’s taking you?’

‘No.’

‘I ain’t staying indoors with that old witch. But I’m too scared to go out in case I bump into any of Billy Fletcher’s mates. They’re bound to want to beat me up after everything that’s happened and I can’t even run properly ’cause my ankle hurts too much.’

‘I wonder when we will see Hazel again? I don’t ’arf miss her, Tom. And Mum.’

Tommy’s eyes filled with tears. ‘Me too.’

As the children clung together like two lost souls, neither had any idea there was far more upset to come.

‘You need to pack a case, Tommy. Your Uncle Ian will be picking you up soon,’ said Nanny Noreen.

Tommy dropped his *Shoot* magazine in shock. ‘What! Why?’

‘Because you’re going to stay with him. Your dad can’t look after you. He has to go back to work soon.’

‘What about Linda? Is she coming too?’

‘No. Linda will stay with me.’

Tommy felt his pulse quicken. This didn’t sound short-term. ‘What about Rex? Where will he live?’

‘Rex is going to live on a farm. Be nice for him. He’ll have lots of space there to run around,’ Noreen lied.

Tommy’s face crumpled. ‘No. I’m not leaving Rex, or Linda. I can’t. I won’t.’

‘There’s no alternative, I’m afraid, Tommy. Your dad’s going back to the oil rigs and I can’t look after two of you.’

Stifling a sob, Tommy ran out into the garden and crawled inside Rex’s kennel. He draped his arms around the dog’s neck. ‘I’m being sent away to live with my Uncle Ian. You’re being sent away too, but not with me. You’re going to live on a farm. You’ll like it there. Be better than being stuck out here, boy. And I will visit you, I promise. I’m so gonna miss you, though. I love you, never forget that, Rex.’

Within the hour, Tommy’s anguish had turned to acute anger. He barely knew his Uncle Ian, had only ever met him about four times. What right did his father have to palm him off like some unwanted rubbish? Any decent man wouldn’t go back to the oil rigs. He would stay at home and care for his kids who’d lost their mother, Tommy fumed.

‘I made you a fried-egg sandwich,’ Nanny Noreen said as Tommy came into the kitchen. She didn’t hate the boy, but could never love him either.

‘I ain’t leaving Linda and I ain’t leaving Rex. What time will my dad be home?’

‘Not until late. Now, go pack your case. Uncle Ian will be here soon.’

‘You can’t make me go. I won’t,’ Tommy yelled, knocking the plate and sandwich on to the lino.

Nanny Noreen sighed. ‘You have to. Uncle Ian is your only known blood relative. It’s either that or a children’s home.’

‘What? I don’t understand.’

Nanny Noreen actually felt quite sorry for the child and wished Alexander would have told him. ‘There is no easy way to say this, Tommy, so I shall just be blunt. Your father isn’t your real father; so I’m not your real grandma either. I’m sorry, boy. But you have your mother to thank for that.’

Feeling nauseous and dizzy, Tommy bolted out of the front door.

It was the local bobby, PC Kendall, who found Tommy in a dishevelled state in Barking park. He had only recently joined the police force and Mrs Young had told him, while he was on the beat,

that she'd seen young Tommy run from the house in his navy Parka, tartan flares and white trainers, looking extremely distressed.

PC Kendall sat on the bench next to the forlorn figure and ruffled his hair. Valerie Boyle had been a beautiful woman inside and out. A lot of his colleagues had fancied her. They reckoned she was the spitting image of the actress in the *Carry On* films.

'Go away. I want to be alone,' Tommy mumbled.

'I want to help you, Tommy. I'm a policeman and that's my job. I wasn't much older than you when I lost my mum, ya know. Fourteen, and it was tough. It's true what they say, though: time is a healer. I know it doesn't feel like it at the moment, but one day you'll be able to think about your lovely mum and smile again. Nobody can ever take the wonderful memories of her away from you. They last for ever.'

'But it's not just my mum, is it? It's everything.'

PC Kendall sighed. The Hazel incident had been a major talking point at the police station. It wasn't every day a fourteen-year-old girl clumped a lad of the same age over the head with a paving block, killing him stone dead. 'Why don't we get you home, eh? Your dad will be worried and it's cold out here. That wind is bitter today.'

'I ain't got a dad.'

'Course you have. Alexander's your dad.'

Tears streamed down Tommy's face as he looked the local bobby in the eyes. 'He ain't my real dad. My nan told me today. She ain't my real nan either. That's why Rex has to go to live on a farm and I gotta live with Uncle Ian,' he gabbled.

PC Kendall winced. He knew life could be cruel, but not this cruel. Poor little Tommy had lost everything in less than a fortnight. He hugged the freezing boy close to his chest. 'I'm so sorry, mate. I truly am. I know how much you love Rex. So, is Uncle Ian related to your mum?'

'Yeah. He's her weird brother.'

'Weird? What do you mean by that?'

Tommy shrugged. 'My dad – sorry, I mean Alexander – always called him a weirdo. Not to his face, like.'

Though he hadn't been a copper long, this triggered alarm bells in PC Kendall's mind. 'Is your uncle married?'

'Yeah. To a woman called Sandra. She's very fat.'

Kendall relaxed slightly. 'They got kids?'

'No. They got cats.'

'Where do they live?'

'South London, but I don't know the road name. It's a smaller house than ours and not very clean.'

PC Kendall took a notepad out of his pocket and wrote something down. He handed it to Tommy. 'This is the phone number of the police station I work at. Any problems, you call and ask for me, OK?'

Tommy nodded. 'Thank you.'

'Right, let's get you home. I thought we might stop at Mr Abbot's on the way and buy you some sweets. What's your favourite?'

'Sherbet lemons.'

PC Kendall smiled. 'Sherbet lemons it is then.'

CHAPTER FIVE

So, that's where it all began. Feels pretty good to get it off my chest, if I'm honest.

It makes me smile to think I once confided in the Old Bill. Having said that, he was all right was PC Kendall. Not like some of the sharks I've since met.

So many coppers are on the payroll of villains, you wouldn't believe it. No integrity or conscience. Always on the take. I know because I've dealt with the unscrupulous bastards. They are worse than most of the gangsters I've mixed with. Reason being, they couldn't give a shit who they trample on. Play ball or get nicked, that's the option for many.

I'm rambling now, so let's go back to my story. From the day my mother died, my life wasn't my own for a while. Saying it had its ups and downs wouldn't just be an understatement. I'd liken it to a Boeing 747 hitting a hurricane.

I was twelve, naïve, and honestly thought I had hit rock bottom. I hadn't. There was far worse to come.

You know the name: Tommy Boyle. Now read on and I'll explain what happened next ...

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Tommy was walking along the canal looking for the stray dog he'd made friends with, when he was unexpectedly jumped on and bundled to the ground.

'No. Give me that back. It's mine,' Tommy insisted as his duffel bag was ripped from his shoulder and the contents tipped on the grass.

'Shut it, ya little squirt,' said one of the lads, aiming a sharp kick at Tommy's head.

Another boy pinned Tommy to the ground.

'Oi! Whaddya think you're doing, Marshall? Leave him the fuck alone,' bellowed a voice in the distance.

When his attackers fled without his belongings, Tommy sat up and locked eyes with a dark-haired lad who looked slightly familiar. 'You all right?' the boy asked.

'Yeah. Thanks for that.'

'You're the new boy at school, ain't ya?'

Tommy nodded and stood up. The boy was a lot taller than him. 'You in my year?'

'Yeah. I'm Danny. Danny Darling.'

'I'm Tommy Boyle. Who were them boys, by the way? Do they go to our school?'

'Nah. They live on the Walworth Road side. Us Bermondsey boys don't like 'em. You won't get no more grief from that lot. I already did three of 'em over.'

Tommy's eyes widened. 'Are you a good fighter then?'

Danny grinned. 'Yeah. I'm a boxer. Gonna be a pro one day. You should try it, ya know. Look at my muscles,' Danny bragged, taking off his jacket.

Tommy felt Danny's biceps. 'Wow! I dunno if I'd be any good, mind. I'm too short.'

'No, you're not. A lot of the best boxers are short lads. There's all different weights in boxing. Come on, I'll show you the gym.'

And just like that a friendship that would last a lifetime began.

Lynn's Boxing Club was off Albany Road, and as soon as Tommy walked inside he was filled with a sense of excitement.

The smell, talk and general atmosphere was electric and Tommy couldn't take his eyes off the lads sparring in the ring. Alexander had never been into boxing, therefore Tommy had little knowledge of it up until now.

'See that lad in the photo on the wall – the one in the blue shorts holding a trophy?'

'Yeah.'

‘That’s my elder brother, Ronnie. He’s turned semi-pro now, but my trainer reckons I’m far better than he was at the same age.’

‘Really! How old are you then? And how old’s Ronnie?’

‘I’m in your year at school, you numpty. Thirteen, I am. Ronnie’s eighteen, and I got a younger brother Eugene who’s ten. I also got a sister, Donna. She’s fifteen. You got brothers and sisters?’

‘Two sisters: Hazel and Linda. I don’t live with ’em no more, though. I got sent to live with my uncle.’

‘Why?’

‘Cause my mum died in a car crash and I then found out my dad weren’t my real dad.’

‘That’s well shit. Bet you miss your mum.’

‘I do.’

‘I miss my dad too. He’s been in prison for the past ten years, but he’ll be out soon.’

Tommy’s eyes widened. ‘Why has he been in prison?’

‘Because he murdered someone. He shot them with a gun.’

‘My sister Hazel murdered someone too, with a paving stone.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. The police took her away then sent her to a bad girl’s home.’

‘Wow! That’s mental. Shall we spar in the ring? I won’t hurt you, I promise. I wanna teach you how to protect yourself.’

Tommy grinned. ‘Yeah, I’d like that.’

‘There we are. All tucked in. Would you like me to bring you up a mug of cocoa and a couple of chocolate digestives, Tommy?’ Uncle Ian asked.

Tommy faked a yawn. ‘No, thank you. I’m very tired tonight.’

Uncle Ian kissed Tommy on the forehead. ‘Night, night then. Don’t let the bed bugs bite,’ he grinned.

When his uncle left the room, Tommy smiled as he thought about his magical day. It was seven weeks now since his mum had died, and this was the first time he’d felt truly happy since.

Moving to South London hadn’t been easy. Uncle Ian and Auntie Sandra lived in a two-bedroom house off the Old Kent Road. Tommy’s mother’s house had been spotlessly clean, but Auntie Sandra’s wasn’t. It was shabby, dusty, smelled of cat’s piss and very often there were shit stains down the toilet for days on end. She didn’t even have a toilet brush and bought the most awful toilet paper. It wasn’t soft like his mother had used. It was like grease-paper, and Tommy struggled to clean his bottom properly with it.

Auntie Sandra was a short, fat woman who ate like a horse. She rarely bathed and her hair was long, grey and greasy. She stank too, of sweat and another odour Tommy could not quite distinguish. She was all right towards him, but he could sense she didn’t really want him there.

Uncle Ian, on the other hand, had been very welcoming and generous. He bought Tommy all his football magazines, and as many sweets as he wanted. He’d recently surprised him with the best kite Tommy had ever seen. It looked like a big multicoloured eagle. Uncle Ian had even promised to buy him a portable TV for his thirteenth birthday, which he could watch alone in his bedroom. Tommy was elated by this news, as the small TV downstairs was rarely switched on. Auntie Sandra and Uncle Ian only ever watched the news and Tommy felt awkward asking if he could watch *Top of the Pops* or *The Big Match*. He would also feel a bit silly watching such programmes with them. Neither of them were into pop music or football. They listened to the radio and played board games such as chess or draughts.

Starting a new school hadn’t been easy either. Tommy had felt invisible at times, like a lost sheep. Hopefully, now he’d met Danny all that would change. They were walking to school together tomorrow and going back to the boxing gym after their lessons.

For once, Tommy drifted off into a happy sleep. But at 4 a.m. he woke in a cold sweat. It was the usual kind of nightmare. In this particular one, Hazel had hit Rex over the head with a paving stone and killed him. Then his mother had told him she wasn't his real mother.

'I didn't know you lived at number forty-four. Nobody likes your aunt and uncle, ya know. My mum calls them oddballs,' Danny informed Tommy after school the following day. 'And your aunt well stinks,' he added.

Munching on a bag of chips dripping in vinegar, Tommy suddenly didn't feel hungry any more. He felt embarrassed.

Uncle Ian was a short, dumpy man who wore thick-rimmed glasses and old-fashioned clothes. Tommy thought he looked like the comedian Benny Hill, but he was far less cool. At least Benny Hill was funny. 'My mum was nothing like my uncle.' Tommy squirmed. 'Wanna see a photo of her?' He carried one around with him; it made him feel she was still with him.

Danny nodded, then studied the image. 'She is very pretty. She looks like Barbara Windsor. My brother Ronnie well fancies Barbara.'

Tommy handed Danny another photo. 'That's my sisters and my dog Rex.'

'Are you keeping in touch with your sisters?'

'No. I tried to, but the phone has been cut off where Linda is living and she hasn't replied to my letters. I don't even have an address for Hazel.'

'Where's your dog?'

'Alexander found him a farm to live on in Essex.'

Danny felt sorry for Tommy. It had been tough for him over the years because his dad was inside, but at least he had his brothers, mum and sister. 'Wanna come round mine for Sunday dinner? My mum cooks an ace roast.'

Tommy nodded. Auntie Sandra's roast was the worst he'd ever tasted. 'Yes, please. You sure that will be OK with your mum?'

'Yeah, course. Don't say where you're going, though. My family have got a bit of a reputation round 'ere. Your aunt and uncle might try and stop us being pals,' Danny warned.

'I won't. I promise.'

'Cool. You wanna go to the boxing gym now?'

Tommy grinned. 'Yeah. Race ya there.'

On the Saturday morning, Tommy was bored, so lay on his bed reading his football magazines. Danny wasn't around today. His elder brother had recently bought a car, so he'd driven Danny up north to watch Millwall play away.

Tommy much preferred spending time alone in his room than downstairs. He had very little in common with his aunt or uncle, which made it a struggle to find subjects to talk to them about. He had a portable radio in his room, so would rather listen to his favourite stations, alone.

A tap on his bedroom door made Tommy jump. 'Who is it?'

'Uncle Ian. OK to come in?'

'Yes. Of course.'

Tommy smiled as Uncle Ian sat on the edge of his bed. As usual, he was at a loss for what to say. If a person didn't like pop music, TV, or football, Tommy had come to the conclusion it was difficult to have a conversation with them. Those were the main topics of conversation in his old house.

'Sandra is going to visit her sister in the Isle of Sheppey today. She won't be back until tomorrow. So, I thought you and I might do something nice.'

Tommy's heart sank. Saturday afternoons were all about listening to the football results come in. 'Like what?'

'Well, the wind seems reasonably strong. How about we go to the park and fly your kite? I thought I would treat you too. I know how much you want a record player in your bedroom.'

Having missed his old record player almost as much as he missed Rex, Tommy flung his arms around his uncle's plump shoulders. 'Thank you. I would love that.'

Flying the kite was a bit of a let-down. The wind had dropped and the kite wouldn't stay up in the air for long.

'Cor, look at that, Uncle Ian!' Tommy was transfixed by the red and orange plane some boy was flying.

'Do you like aeroplanes, Tommy?'

'Never been in a real one, but I like that. It's ace.'

'Let's go and ask the boy's dad where he bought it from then.'

'Why?'

'So we can get you one.'

'No. You've been too kind to me already and I don't expect you to keep buying me things.'

'I can afford it. That's why I go to work in the factory.' Uncle Ian put an arm around Tommy's shoulders. 'I just want you to be happy.'

Tommy felt uncomfortable, but couldn't put his finger on why. 'I am happy. Thank you,' he mumbled.

Tommy was thrilled with the record player from Dixons, then even more elated when Uncle Ian handed him a fiver and suggested they stop at a record shop. 'You're going to need some vinyl to play on it, aren't you? Go on, take it,' his uncle urged.

Tommy excitedly leapt out of the rusty Morris Minor. Slade were currently topping the charts with 'Cum On Feel The Noize' and he couldn't wait to get his hands on that. 'How much can I spend?'

'All of it. Want me to come inside the shop with you?'

'No,' Tommy said, rather too abruptly. Record shops were for cool dudes and he would hate to be spotted inside one with his uncle. 'I shall be a while. I'll meet you back at home.'

Uncle Ian pointed towards a pub. 'I'll be in there. Just poke your head around the door when you're ready. I thought we'd stop and get fish and chips on the way home for our tea.'

'OK. See you soon.'

Tommy had never been inside a record shop in South London before and this one was buzzing. The Sweet's 'Blockbuster' blasted out of two giant speakers and the bloke and lady serving behind the counter both wore tartan flares, high shiny red platform boots and black leather jackets. They looked like twins.

Tommy was in his element as he sorted through the vinyl. Seven-inch singles weren't cheap any more, had gone up to fifty pence each, and this was the first time he'd ever had the luxury of buying ten all at once.

Tommy bought Slade, The Strawbs, The Faces, Gary Glitter plus six more, then left the store with a big smile on his face.

'Did you enjoy today, Tommy?' Uncle Ian asked, before stuffing a whole wally in his mouth.

'Yes. Thank you.'

'Best dish in the world this, you know.'

Tommy nodded in agreement. He'd already devoured his cod and chips.

'Fancy a game of chess?'

'I don't know how to play chess,' Tommy replied honestly.

Uncle Ian squeezed his nephew's hand. 'I will teach you.'

Tommy was dying to go upstairs and play his new records, but he didn't want to seem ungrateful or unsociable. 'OK, thank you.'

Uncle Ian set the board up. 'Have you made some new friends at school now? I noticed you've been coming home later.'

'Yes. I have actually. Is it all right if I go out with them tomorrow afternoon? We've organized a game of football over the park,' Tommy lied.

‘Of course. You be good to me, Tommy, and I will be good to you, if you get my drift?’

Tommy didn’t understand, but smiled and nodded nevertheless.

Tommy stared at the TV in silence. It had been Uncle Ian’s idea they pack up the chessboard and watch *Match of the Day* together.

‘Who’s that who just scored?’ asked Uncle Ian.

‘Martin Chivers.’

‘What team does he play for?’

Tommy glanced at his uncle as though he were an alien. Surely everyone knew who Martin Chivers played for? He had scored the two away goals in the 1972 UEFA Cup Final, for goodness’ sake.

‘I’m going to run a bath. Sandra doesn’t like us to use too much water, but seeing as she isn’t here, we’ll make the most of it.’

Having missed the regular baths he was allowed to have at home, Tommy nodded in approval. He wanted to be clean and look his best to meet Danny’s family tomorrow. ‘OK, thanks.’

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The first warning bell rang in Tommy’s head when his uncle informed him they couldn’t be using two lots of water and they had to share the same bath.

‘Erm, can’t I have a bath after you?’

‘No. The water will be dirty and cold. Didn’t you ever share a bath with your mother and sisters? Or your dad?’

‘Well, yeah. But not for ages. I used to get in after my sisters.’

‘We can’t upset your Auntie Sandra. I had to fight tooth and nail to take you in and she always checks the water bill.’

Tommy breathed deeply. He could not think of anything worse than having to share a bath with Uncle Ian, but the man had been so kind to him recently, he could hardly refuse. ‘OK then.’

Uncle Ian’s body looked even more awful with no clothes on and Tommy averted his eyes from the rolls of fat. Thankfully, there were lots of bubbles in the bath and Tommy sat frozen against the end with the plug hurting his bum, while his uncle splashed about like a beached whale at the other, cracking unfunny jokes.

‘Want me to scrub your back, Tommy?’

‘No, thank you. Can I go to bed now, please?’

‘Of course. Let me get you a towel to dry yourself.’

Having not gone through puberty himself, Tommy was shocked as his uncle struggled to get out of the bath. His willy looked huge and hard. Like a snake.

CHAPTER SIX

Suzie Darling was a funny, loud lady with auburn hair, dimples and a welcoming smile. She swore a lot and her house was clean, but not particularly tidy. Tommy immediately felt at home as he sat on the brown Dralon sofa.

‘You OK, Tom? Not gone all shy, have ya?’ Danny joked.

‘I’m fine, thanks,’ Tommy lied. He had lain awake most of the night thinking about Uncle Ian. Tommy was yet to get sexual urges himself, but he knew lads who had, and he couldn’t help worrying his uncle had been sexually aroused when he’d got out of the bath. Was that why Alexander always called him a weirdo? Was Uncle Ian some kind of pervert?

‘Whaddya think of me mum?’

‘She’s nice and very pretty. Where are your brothers and sister?’

‘Eugene’s playing football, Donna’s gone down Petticoat Lane with her mate and Ronnie’s a biker, so he could be anywhere. They’ll all be home for dinner though. No one cooks a roast like my mum. She works in the Prince of Wales pub as a cleaner. Do you know it?’

Tommy shook his head.

‘She don’t earn much, but Ronnie does. He pays for most of our food, bills and rent as my dad’s inside.’

‘Does Ronnie work as a boxer? Is that his actual job?’

Danny chuckled. ‘Nah. He earns some from the boxing, but he does other stuff too.’

‘Like what?’

‘Same as me dad. Ronnie’s a ducker and diver.’

Knowing Danny’s father was banged up for murder, Tommy decided not to ask any more questions.

Danny was right about one thing. Suzie Darling cooked an ace roast. Tommy had thought nothing could beat his mother’s and felt disloyal even admitting as much to himself.

‘Want some more pigs in blankets, Tommy?’ Ronnie Darling asked. Danny had told them about the tough time Tommy had been through. They were all shocked who the lad lived with. Ian and Sandra Taylor kept themselves to themselves in this neck of the woods, but even so they weren’t liked. Rumours had surfaced a few years back – about Ian in particular.

Tommy grinned and gratefully accepted the food. He liked Ronnie, who had arrived home dressed in black leathers. He was funny and extremely cool.

‘Want some more parsnips?’ asked Suzie, shoving a load on Tommy’s plate. The poor little mite looked like he needed feeding up a bit.

‘Thank you, Mrs Darling. This is like a Christmas dinner. It was very kind of you to invite me round.’ Tommy’s mother had always told him ‘Good manners cost nothing.’

‘You’re very welcome, my love. Our Danny speaks highly of you. Anytime you want to pop round, feel free. But please call me Suzie. Mrs Darling makes me sound like one of the blue-rinse brigade down East Street market,’ Suzie chuckled.

‘Do you really live at number forty-four, Tommy?’ asked eleven-year-old Eugene. He was quite impressed with Danny’s new friend, but he and his pals played knock-down ginger at Tommy’s aunt and uncle’s house. They called them ‘The Stinkies’.

Kicking his youngest brother under the table, Ronnie quickly changed the subject. ‘Danny says you like football, Tom. Who do you support?’

‘I did support Celtic, but since finding out my dad ain’t my dad, I don’t want to support them any more. Spurs are my team now.’

Ronnie ruffled the boy’s hair. Tommy was a good lad; he could sense that, with an air of vulnerability about him. ‘Wanna come over Millwall with me and Danny next Saturday? I’ll treat you.’

Tommy's eyes shone. He had yet to attend a proper football match. 'You bet I do. Thank you.'
'Here she is, the latecomer. Dinner's in the oven, burnt, young lady,' tutted Suzie. 'Serves you right for saying you'd be home by three and coming in at four.'

Tommy was rather taken aback when the stunning girl with big blue eyes and glossy long blonde hair sauntered into the kitchen. She was wearing a white catsuit and red platform shiny boots like those people serving in the record shop yesterday. He nudged Danny. 'Is that your sister?'

'Yeah. That's our Donna. Pain in the bloody arse, she is,' Danny laughed.

Eyes as big as organ stops, Tommy stared at the girl. At that moment, he had his first ever sexual feeling and it felt like heaven.

Life returned to normal back at Uncle Ian and Auntie Sandra's house. The dinners were bland, Auntie Sandra spoke to him only when she could be bothered and Tommy spent most of his time in the sanctuary of his bedroom, playing his records and listening to the radio.

On the Saturday he was due to attend the Millwall game, Tommy heard the tap-tap he'd come to dread on his bedroom door. The bath incident had not been mentioned again and Tommy was far too embarrassed to tell Danny about it. 'Who is it?'

'Uncle Ian. OK to come in?'

'Yes. Of course.'

Uncle Ian smiled as he plonked his fat self on the edge of Tommy's bed. 'Sandra is visiting her sister in the Isle of Sheppey again this weekend, so I thought we might do something together. I found a shop that sells those aeroplanes. I'll treat you to one, then we'll fly it over the park. Sound good to you?'

Uncle Ian stank, a mixture of stale sweat and smoke. Tommy had a strip wash every morning at the bathroom sink, but he'd never noticed his uncle or aunt do so. 'I'm sorry, but I'm going out with a friend today.'

'Can't you cancel seeing your friend? I thought you wanted one of those aeroplanes.'

'No. Thank you for offering, but I'm not bothered about having one now.'

Uncle Ian eyed Tommy suspiciously over his thick-rimmed glasses. 'You've been going out an awful lot recently. Where exactly are you going today?'

'Football. I'm going to watch Millwall.'

'You will do no such thing, lad. I am not having you mixing with hooligans. You are my responsibility now.'

'But I can't let my friend down and we are going with an adult. My friend's older brother is eighteen,' Tommy protested.

'Who is this friend of yours? Only you've been spending a lot of time with him recently. You're hardly ever at home.'

Fighting the urge to inform Uncle Ian that this wasn't his home and never would be, Tommy bit his tongue. He felt like crying. 'Johnny – he's in my class at school,' he lied. 'Please let me go, Uncle Ian. I've always wanted to go to a proper football match. I promise I won't be home late. We can spend the evening together and do whatever you want then. Please, I beg you.'

Uncle Ian softened and handed Tommy a pound note. 'Go on then. Enjoy yourself. But I want you home here by seven at the latest.'

Feeling a sense of relief wash over him, Tommy took the money and smiled. 'Thank you.'

Uncle Ian stood up. 'Your friend Johnny. What's his surname?'

There was a lad called Johnny in his class, so Tommy decided to play it safe. 'Rodgers.'

As he left the room, Uncle Ian frowned. He knew the Rodgerses and wasn't aware Johnny had an older brother. Tommy had better not be lying to him. He hated liars.

Tommy was buzzing as he walked towards Millwall's ground. Fans were already singing at the top of their voices and the delicious smell of fried onions wafting from the burger and hotdog stalls made him feel a bit emotional. His mum had cooked lots of meals with onions and that smell

reminded him of happier times. He was genuinely happy today though, and was sure his mum would approve of his new friend and Danny's family. They were all very kind to him.

'You hungry, Tommy?' asked Ronnie Darling.

'I am. Get us a burger,' ordered Eugene.

Ronnie grabbed his younger brother in a playful headlock. 'Nobody asked you, ya little squirt. And you'll get sod all until you say the word please,' Ronnie chuckled.

When a group of men collared Ronnie for a chat, he handed Danny a fiver and told him to get them some food.

'Doesn't your brother know a lot of people,' Tommy said to his friend.

Danny grinned proudly. 'Yeah. My dad's even more well known, ya know. My whole family are really. Nobody messes with us. That's why them boys who picked on you ran off sharpish.'

Not wanting to pry, Tommy changed the subject. 'Isn't your brother a biker all the time?' Ronnie wasn't wearing black leathers today. He was dressed in faded flared jeans, trainers, and a black bomber jacket. He looked no different to any other football fan.

'Ronnie's a biker when he wants to be a biker,' Danny laughed. 'He's the master of disguise, my brother. The pigs hate him.'

Not understanding what Danny meant, Tommy decided the best thing to do was smile politely.

'Hello, Ian. How are you and Sandra keeping?' asked Mr Patel the newsagent.

'Yes, we're fine, thank you. Could you make me up an extra-large bag of penny sweets, the kind that twelve-year-old boys like. And I'll take a copy of every football magazine you have, please.'

'Ah, is this for young Tommy who is staying with you?'

'I'm actually Tommy's guardian now. His mother unfortunately died in a car crash.'

'Oh, I am very sorry to hear that. I see Tommy earlier with his friend, young Danny. They buy bubble gum to take to the match with them.'

'Danny who?'

Mr Patel handed Ian five magazines and a big bag of mixed sweets. 'Danny Darling. Everybody knows young Danny around here,' he chuckled.

With a face like thunder, Ian threw the money on the counter, snatched the magazines and sweets out of Mr Patel's hands and stormed out of the shop.

Tommy Boyle joined in with all the fans chanting 'We are Millwall, from the Den' as he left the ground. Everyone was buoyant and the atmosphere was awesome. Millwall had scored a late winner, but the funniest part of the day had been when the peanut seller had asked Ronnie to look after a sackful. Ronnie had started chucking handfuls in the air, then everybody nearby joined in, including Tommy. The crowd then started singing, 'We hate peanuts and we hate peanuts,' which Tommy thought was hilarious. He'd felt part of something for once, a tribal feeling.

'Wanna come back to ours?' Danny asked, when they made it back to the Old Kent Road.

Tommy's heart suddenly lurched. 'No. Erm ... I better not.'

'There'll be lots of nice grub. Mum always lays out a big spread for us after we've been to football.'

'I can't. Uncle Ian said I got to be home by seven.' The thought of spending another evening alone with his uncle without Auntie Sandra being around filled Tommy with dread. Say he insisted they share another bath together? Tommy had already made his mind up. No way was he doing that again. It made him feel dirty, not clean.

'Right, I'm off to meet a bird, lads. Make sure you take Eugene straight home, Dan,' ordered Ronnie Darling.

'Thank you so much for taking me to the game today, Ronnie, and paying for me to get in,' said Tommy.

Ronnie ruffled the boy's head. 'You're very welcome, pal. So, you still a Spurs fan? Or you gonna be a Millwall nutcase, like us?'

Tommy grinned. 'Millwall, definitely.'

'You're late,' Uncle Ian snapped.

Tommy stared at his feet. He'd literally salivated at the mouth when Danny informed him his mother was preparing chicken, ham, beef, pork pies, pickles and hot crusty bread, so had ended up having his tea at his pal's house after all. 'I'm sorry.'

'So, where have you been?'

'Erm, with Johnny,' Tommy lied. 'His mum invited me in and I didn't want to come across as rude. I won't be late again, I promise.'

Uncle Ian forced a smile. 'Come and say hello to our guest.'

Tommy followed his uncle into the small dining room that was adjoined to the lounge. The chessboard was out and there was a bottle of brandy on the table. The man grinning at him was fat, bald and looked older than Uncle Ian. 'Hello,' Tommy said awkwardly.

'This is my friend, PC Norman. He's off duty tonight and wants to have a word with you. I'll leave you to it,' Uncle Ian said, shutting the door.

Tommy eyed the policeman suspiciously. He looked nothing like PC Kendall or any of the other local bobbies in Barking. He wasn't wearing a uniform and Tommy could not but wonder if one would even fit him.

'Sit down, Tommy.' Norman patted the seat next to him.

Tommy did as he was told. 'Have I done something wrong?' he asked innocently.

Norman smiled. 'No. But you are knocking around with a bad crowd. I have said nothing to your uncle as I didn't want to get you into trouble, but those Darlings are bad news. I know you have been to the Millwall game today with Danny. I also know you went back to Danny's house. You must promise me you will have no more to do with that family. Your Uncle Ian has been very good to you, taking you in when nobody else wanted you, so you need to be a good boy for him.'

Tommy was a bit taken aback. 'OK,' he muttered.

'The Darlings are bad people, Tommy. The last lad Danny got friendly with was found floating in the River Thames.'

Tommy's eyes widened. 'No way! Really?'

Norman ruffled Tommy's hair. He was a handsome kid and he could see why Ian was so smitten with him. 'Yes. Really. Keep away from the whole family.'

'What did PC Norman want to talk to you about?' Uncle Ian enquired later that evening.

'Not much. Just told me to be a good boy. Can I go to my room and play some records, please?' Tommy was confused. He felt at ease with Danny and his family, much more at ease than he did with his uncle and aunt.

'Not so fast. I bought you some presents earlier. They're on the kitchen top.'

Instinct told Tommy he shouldn't accept any more big presents from Uncle Ian, so he was relieved to see only sweets and football magazines.

'Well?' Uncle Ian grinned.

Apart from flying saucers and blackjacks, Tommy wasn't a fan of penny sweets. Linda had loved them. She'd scoff bagfuls. But he was chuffed with the football magazines; he only had one out of the five. 'Thanks, Uncle Ian. Can I go to my room and read my mags, please?'

'Not until you've had some supper and a bath.'

Tommy froze. He was yet to get big stonkers himself (that's what the lads at school called them) but he was sure Uncle Ian had had one last time they shared a bath. 'I'm not hungry, I ate at Johnny's. And I'm not dirty, I had a strip wash at the sink this morning.'

'I won't force you to eat, but you have to have a bath, lad. Auntie Sandra doesn't like us to use too much water, so now's the time to have one.'

'No. I don't want one.'

Uncle Ian knocked back his drink and paced the room. ‘You are starting to get on my nerves, Tommy. I have been very kind to you, and not only are you lying to me, you are also defying my orders. Do you see me as some kind of a fool? Do you? I know exactly where you have been today and who with, you lying little toerag. Now do as I say. Go run a bath.’

‘OK. But I’m getting in it on my own, not with you.’

Uncle Ian grabbed Tommy by the shoulders and pushed him up against the wall. ‘I make the rules in this house, not you.’

Tommy felt extremely uncomfortable. Uncle Ian reeked of alcohol, his eyes were glazed and he had a twisted, vicious look on his face that reminded Tommy of Alexander when he’d come home drunk and lash out at his mother.

‘Bullies come in all shapes and sizes. Always stand your ground, Tommy, even if there are four of ’em or a bloke is bigger than you. You’ll survive if you get a good hiding. It’s better to fight back than surrender,’ Ronnie Darling had told him earlier today.

‘Tommy, Tommy! Get back here,’ Uncle Ian bellowed, when his nephew kicked him hard in the ankle and bolted up the stairs.

Gutted that his brilliant day had been spoiled, Tommy flung himself on his bed and wept. He so wished he could speak to his sisters or hold Rex in his arms once again. He missed his mum most of all though. Why did she have to die? He hated living here.

Ever since his mother had died, Tommy had taken to leaving the radio on low of a night. For some reason, the music comforted him and made him sleep better.

David Bowie’s ‘John, I’m Only Dancing’ was playing when Uncle Ian crept into his room. Tommy decided to pretend he was asleep, as he usually did.

Normally, Uncle Ian would kiss him on the head and turn the radio off, but tonight he was lurking and breathing heavily.

‘Leave me alone. What d’ya think you’re doing?’ Tommy squealed when his uncle put his hand under the blankets and started tugging at his pyjama bottoms.

‘Shut it. You belong to me now.’

Tommy tried to scream, but Uncle Ian pinned him down and pushed his face against the pillow.

Wriggling like an eel, Tommy didn’t stand a chance against a man who weighed seventeen stone.

Tears streaming down his face, Tommy wanted to die. He had thought losing his mother was the worst thing imaginable, but it wasn’t. This was.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tommy threw a stone into the canal and watched it skim across the muddy water. He'd spent the past few days hanging out here, could not face going to school.

Stroking the stray dog he'd nicknamed Lassie, Tommy pondered his predicament. He had debated whether to call PC Kendall and tell him what had happened, but not only did he feel too ashamed to do so, the pervert's words were still fresh in his mind: 'This has to be our little secret, Tommy. You mustn't tell Auntie Sandra or anyone else. Nobody would believe you anyway.'

The awful happenings of Saturday night had only lasted a few minutes, but to Tommy it had felt like an eternity. One thing he was sure about was it would never happen again. He couldn't and wouldn't allow it to. The pain had been indescribable and he was still struggling to walk properly and go to the toilet.

'There you are!'

Tommy jumped at the sound of his friend's voice.

Danny Darling plonked himself next to Tommy. 'Why ain't you been at school? I was gonna knock on your door yesterday, but I didn't want to get you into trouble.'

'Not been well.'

'What's up with you then?'

'Just a bug.'

Danny eyed Tommy with suspicion. He hadn't known him that long, but Tommy's sparkling eyes and big grin had disappeared completely. 'Has something happened? That Walworth mob ain't picked on you again, have they?'

'No. Not seen 'em.'

'Well, you were fine over Millwall last Saturday and I can tell you're not now. What's wrong? I might be able to help.'

Tommy angrily threw another stone into the canal. 'You won't.'

'Has something happened to one of your sisters?'

'Dunno. Don't hear from 'em.'

'You ain't had agg with those weirdos you're living with, have you?'

Tommy wanted to cry, but instead kept a stiff upper lip. No way could he tell Danny the truth, but he desperately needed some advice. 'If I tell ya something, you got to promise me that you will never breathe a word to anybody.'

'I won't.'

'Swear on your mum's life.'

Danny did as Tommy asked.

'I think my uncle's a pervert. He made me share a bath with him and I noticed he had a big stonker when he got out. I'm scared of what might happen next, Danny. Say he comes into my room of a night or something? Say he touches me?'

'The dirty shitbag. Ronnie was right then. He always said he was a nonce. Why don't you let me tell Ronnie? He'll sort the bastard out for you.'

'No. You can't tell anybody. You promised you wouldn't.'

'OK. I won't. What about your aunt? Was she at home when he got in the bath with you?'

'No. She stays at her sister's sometimes. If he comes into my room, Dan, what should I do? What would you do?'

'I'd hide a big dagger under my mattress and stab the dirty fucker.'

'Where can I get a big dagger from?'

'Come with me. I'll show you.'

'So, how was school today, Tommy?'

‘Fine,’ Tommy lied, without looking up. He shoved a whole sausage in his mouth. Mealtimes were the only time he spent in his aunt and uncle’s company now and he couldn’t bolt his food down quick enough. How could that perve act like nothing had happened? Tommy couldn’t even look the bastard in the eye, let alone have a normal conversation with him. The most upsetting thing for Tommy though was that Ian was his mother’s brother. His mum had been such a kind, funny, gentle woman. How could they even be remotely related?

‘I thought we might go to Battersea Dogs’ Home this weekend, Tommy. I know how much you miss Rex and your mum and sisters. Perhaps a new furry companion is the tonic you need to perk you up a bit?’

‘The cats won’t be happy,’ Sandra hissed.

Ian smiled at the woman he’d married out of convenience. He worked long hours at the factory, was the breadwinner, so she would have no say in the matter. ‘I was thinking of a small dog, dear. What do you reckon, Tommy? Would a dog make you happy?’

Tommy pushed his plate away, his face distorted with anger. ‘I don’t want a dog. I don’t want nothing off you.’

When Tommy bolted up the stairs, Sandra scraped the remains of his dinner into the bin, then silently washed the plates. They’d had to move out of their last address as a local lad had accused Ian of inappropriate behaviour. The case had never gone to court, the boy had withdrawn his allegations, and Ian had sworn blind to her he was innocent.

‘You OK, love?’ Ian asked. ‘Tommy will be fine. He’s missing his family and dog, that’s all.’

Sandra nodded. She had an awful feeling in the pit of her stomach. Perhaps she should cancel stopping over at her sister’s next weekend. Only, if history were to repeat itself, she couldn’t bear the thought of vigilantes throwing eggs and bricks at the window again. She actually liked living round here.

‘I’m sorry, David, but ...’ Tommy said, as he snapped each Bowie record he owned into tiny pieces and chucked them in the bin. No way could he listen to his favourite artist’s music ever again. ‘John, I’m Only Dancing’ had been playing when the pervert had done what he’d done.

Tommy felt incredibly melancholy as the DJ on Radio Caroline played ‘Long-Haired Lover from Liverpool’. He missed his sisters immensely and hoped they were faring better than he was. Nanny Noreen had definitely had her landline cut off or changed. Tommy’s guess was she had altered her phone number so he could not contact Linda. He reckoned she had intercepted the post too, as no way would Linda ignore his letters. As for Hazel, Tommy could only pray she was holding her own in the home. She’d always had a fiery temper, so could look after herself.

Picking up his duffel bag, Tommy took out the dagger. He ran his hand gently across the blade and was surprised to see blood spurting out of two of his fingers. Danny had said it was sharp, which was a good thing. Because, if that pervert ever tried to touch him again, Tommy would do what Hazel had done to Billy Fletcher. He would kill him, stone dead.

*

‘Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday, dear Mum,
Happy birthday to you.’

Wishing he could sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to his own mother once more, Tommy plastered a smile on his face. He had become good at doing that recently, especially in front of the Darlings.

‘I bought you these, Suzie,’ Tommy announced, handing Danny’s mother a box of Milk Tray.

Suzie thanked and hugged the little boy she had become so very fond of. There was a sadness about him and she guessed it was due to all that he had been through. His mother must have been a wonderful woman, Suzie thought. Tommy’s manners were impeccable.

‘I got you this, Mum,’ Danny announced, thrusting a Carpenters album into his mother’s hands. It was easy to thief down that record shop in the Old Kent Road. So simple, he’d also helped himself to three seven-inch singles.

‘Here’s my present, Mum,’ said Donna. She winked at Danny. Woolworths was also a doddle to thief out of and she had presented her mother with far more than him.

‘And last but not least ...’ Ronnie Darling chuckled, dragging a massive square thing into the lounge.

With an arm still around Danny and Donna’s shoulders, Suzie looked bemused. ‘What the bleedin’ hell is that, Ron? Only, I ain’t got room for ornaments of that size in my front room.’

Ronnie grinned. ‘No more scrubbing the whites and soaking our underwear in a tin bucket for you, Muvver. This does it all for you. It’s a washing machine.’

Suzie put her hand over her mouth. ‘What! Like the ones they have at the laundrette?’

Ronnie kissed his mother on the forehead. ‘Even better, angel. This one has a built-in tumble dryer.’

When Eugene handed her some Mary Quant eyelashes and a bright red lipstick, Suzie hugged each member of her family. ‘How lucky am I to have such thoughtful children?’

Suzie turned to Tommy and gave him a second hug. ‘And you can be my adopted son. You are welcome here any time, day or night, and I truly mean that, Tom.’

‘Thank you.’ Seeing Donna smile at him, Tommy quickly averted his eyes. She made his tummy flutter, a feeling he’d never experienced before. She also made him tongue-tied.

Over the next few weeks, Tommy spent more and more time with the Darlings. He was now totally converted to Millwall Football Club, having been to a couple more games, and he couldn’t get enough of the boxing gym.

‘Tom, enough please. Tommy! What the hell you doing? You’re meant to be sparring, lad,’ yelled the trainer as he yanked Tommy away from the kid he had pinned to the rope in the corner.

Tommy apologized to the boy and the trainer. He could not help the red mist that seemed to descend upon him the second he stepped inside the ring. All he had to do was think of what life had thrown at him recently, and before he knew it, he was knocking seven bells out of whoever.

‘What the fuck is wrong with you lately? Has that nonce done something else to you?’ Danny Darling asked, as he and Tommy walked home together.

Luckily for Tommy, ‘The Perve’ – as he now referred to Uncle Ian – had been giving him a wide berth. Auntie Sandra had not been to visit her sister again and, bar mealtimes, Tommy either hung out with the Darlings or listened to music and read in his room.

Spotting PC Norman, the perve’s mate, walking towards him, Tommy ducked behind a nearby wall.

‘What you doing now? Ya nutter.’

‘That fat geezer, he’s Old Bill. Ian is friends with him and if he spots us together, I’m dead.’

Danny burst out laughing. ‘Who? Noncey Norm? He ain’t the filth, you div. He’s the local perve. Stand up. Don’t be a wimp.’

Tommy did as he was told and was surprised when Norman crossed over the road and pretended not to see him. ‘You sure he ain’t Old Bill?’

‘Positive. He’s another oddball, like your uncle. Why are you dead if he spots us together? What’s been said?’

Briefly explaining, Tommy was horrified when Danny chased after the man bellowing, ‘Oi, nonce-case, I want a word with you.’ Danny was totally fearless.

Tommy chased after his pal and grabbed his arm. ‘Leave it, Dan,’ he pleaded.

Refusing to look at Tommy, Norman cowered in the bus shelter. He was scared of the Darlings. Jack was a lunatic, which was why he was banged up, and Ronnie wasn’t far behind his father. They

were like a pack of dogs – if you touched one, the others would be on you. ‘Leave me alone. I’ll call the police if you touch me.’

‘But you are the police, ain’t ya? Only that’s what you told Tommy, you fucking weirdo. You say one more bad word about me and my family and I will personally make sure Ronnie sorts you out good and proper. Why you lying? Pretending you’re something you ain’t. Ian put you up to it, did he?’

Norman Jenkins could feel the beads of sweat dripping down his face. He always perspired when cornered or frightened. ‘Yes. Ian asked me to say it. I don’t know why, I didn’t ask. But I’m sorry and I can assure you, nothing of the kind will ever happen again.’

‘It had better not, ’cause if it does, Ronnie will break both your fucking legs. You haven’t seen me and Tommy together. Understand?’

Norman could barely breathe. He might be forty-two years old, while Danny was only thirteen, but he’d been a coward for as long as he could remember. He hated confrontation, had been picked on at school, and he was annoyed with himself for allowing Ian to talk him into a lie that might land him in trouble with the Darlings. ‘I understand. Fully.’

When Norman scuttled away, Tommy slapped his pal on the back. ‘That was well ace. He’s petrified of you. How comes?’

‘Cause I’m a Darling, Tom. Everyone round here is wary of my mob. We ain’t a family to be messed with.’

‘Do you think I could come and live with you? I would be ever so good and do lots of chores. I hate living with Ian and Sandra.’

‘Dunno. I can ask my mum, see what she says.’

‘Would ya?’

‘Yeah. I’ll ask her tonight.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘Hello. I’m Mrs Ebdon from the children’s Social Services department. May I come in, please?’

Ian immediately felt panicky. Surely Tommy hadn’t told his teacher or friends what had happened? The boy had been acting strangely, keeping out of his way a lot, but Ian supposed that was to be expected. He remembered the first time the same had happened to him. His mother had been a brass, used to leave himself and Valerie alone of an evening while she earned a few bob on street corners. He was only nine years old when a neighbour whom he’d called ‘Uncle Ted’ had forced himself upon him while his mother was out grafting. ‘How can I help you?’ Ian asked, desperately trying to sound composed.

‘It’s about Tommy. I had a visit from a Mrs Darling asking if Tommy could live with her family. She seems to think it is not working out, Tommy living with you, and he would be happier living with her.’

Ian was livid. ‘I have forbidden Tommy to go anywhere near that family. Murderers and scoundrels, the lot of them. I am quite capable of taking care of my own nephew, thanks all the same.’

‘Well, this is the thing, you see. We can’t just hand children over to families who have no blood ties to the child. They would have to apply to adopt Tommy and, as you say, the family do not have the best of reputations. Mrs Darling was insistent Tommy was unhappy living with you though, which is why I felt the need to pay you a visit. Tommy’s welfare has to be top priority. Can I have a little chat with him?’

Having popped to the shops to get a loaf and some corned beef, Sandra returned home. ‘Who are you?’ she asked, eyeing the woman with suspicion. Sandra knew her house was filthy, and somehow visitors made her even more aware of it. Especially posh-looking ones like the stuck-up cow who was currently standing in her hallway.

Ian gave his wife a warning glance. ‘This is Mrs Ebdon from children’s Social Services. It seems that Tommy has been knocking around with that awful Darling boy and the mother wishes to adopt him. Tommy’s been fine here, hasn’t he, love? He’s fed and clothed well. That music you can hear is coming from Tommy’s bedroom. He’s thirteen next week and we’ve bought him his own portable TV for his bedroom, haven’t we, Sandra?’

‘Yes. Ian has bought the lad lots of gifts. He wants for nothing.’

‘Could I speak with Tommy, please?’ Mrs Ebdon asked again.

‘Yes, of course. You make Mrs Ebdon a cup of tea, Sandra, while I get Tommy. He’s probably not even dressed yet.’

‘No tea for me, thank you. I’ve not long had one,’ Mrs Ebdon fibbed. It was one of those dirty homes that smelled of cat’s piss, therefore no way would she drink out of a cup.

Lying on his bed singing along to ‘Metal Guru’, Tommy jumped as his uncle burst into the room. ‘What d’ya want?’ he asked fearfully. His uncle always knocked first and Tommy could see he didn’t look too happy.

Ian turned the music up a touch and grabbed Tommy by the arm. ‘There is a woman downstairs from Social Services. She wants to ask you some questions. You are to tell her you are very happy living here, got that? Only, if you tell her any different, I will find out and I won’t be best pleased. You know what happened last time you upset me, don’t you?’

Feeling nauseous, Tommy gabbled, ‘I’ll tell her I’m happy. I swear I will.’

‘Thank you for your visit,’ Ian said curtly as he shut the front door. Mrs Ebdon had spoken to Tommy alone in his room and the devious little scrote had then announced he was off out. Ian hadn’t wanted to argue with the lad, not in front of that nosy cow, so had wished Tommy a nice time. He would wait until the ungrateful little shit came home later, then give him what for.

‘Why are you drinking?’ Sandra asked, as Ian poured himself a large port and brandy. Even he knew that he turned nasty when inebriated, which was why he rarely touched alcohol.

‘None of your business. I want you to go and stay at your sister’s tonight. You haven’t visited her for a while.’

Sandra felt uneasy. ‘Why?’

‘Because I bloody said so, woman. Go pack some things. Stay two nights. Off you go.’

As Sandra trudged upstairs, she could not help but feel sorry for Tommy. If Ian was drunk, he was bound to batter the lad when he came home, like he’d battered her in the past. All she could do was hope he did nothing worse than that.

‘You should have told the woman the truth. Why didn’t you say your uncle got in the bath with you and he had a big stonker? She would have let you live with us then,’ Danny Darling stated.

‘Because he threatened me, then I heard him come up the stairs. He was earwigging outside my room, I know he was.’

‘How did he threaten you? What did he say exactly?’

‘Nothing much,’ Tommy muttered. ‘He just sort of said I’d be in trouble if I didn’t say I was happy living there.’

‘He needs a clump. You should tell Ronnie everything you’ve told me.’

‘No. I can’t. Please don’t say anything to Ronnie.’

‘I won’t. I promised ya and I never break a promise.’ Danny took his penknife out of his pocket and made a small cut on the palm of his hand. ‘Do the same,’ he ordered, handing the knife to Tommy.

‘Why?’

‘You’ll see.’

When Tommy did as asked, Danny clasped his hand so their blood mixed together. ‘Don’t matter if you don’t live with us. This means we’re brothers anyway. Blood brothers.’

Tommy’s eyes shone with delight. He had always wanted a brother. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah, really. Now where shall we go? Record shop or boxing gym?’

‘Boxing gym.’

Danny leapt up and playfully punched Tommy on the chin. ‘Come on then, Henry Cooper. Race ya there.’

*

‘Hello, Norman. I have been ringing you for the past few hours. Have you only just got home?’ Ian enquired.

‘Yes,’ Norman lied. He hadn’t been answering his phone since his altercation with the Darling boy.

Ian produced a bottle of port and a bottle of brandy from a carrier bag. ‘Sandra is visiting her sister, so I thought you and I might have a bit of fun with the boy later at mine.’

Norman shook his head. ‘I can’t. I’ve already made plans.’

‘You! Plans! Don’t make me laugh. You never go out, only to the shops or mine.’

‘I’m visiting my aunt. She hasn’t been too well.’

‘Be a devil and let’s have some fun. Tommy has been a naughty boy, roaming the streets with that Darling lad again. Bad boys deserve to be punished,’ Ian chuckled.

‘No can do. Sorry, Ian.’

‘But you said you liked the lad.’

‘Yeah, I do. But I really need to see my aunt. She sounds as though she’s on her last legs.’

‘Oh well, your loss is my gain,’ Ian smirked.

‘Certainly is. Enjoy,’ Norman shut his front door, ran to the bathroom and doused his sweaty face in cold water. If Tommy squealed to those Darlings, Ian was a dead man walking. Literally.

‘You’re late,’ Ian snapped when Tommy walked through the front door.

Tommy glanced at his watch. He hadn't wanted to come home tonight, but knew he had little choice. His only consolation was that Auntie Sandra would be here, as he'd asked her yesterday if she would be visiting her sister this weekend and she'd said no.

'It's ten past nine. You are taking liberties lately, Tommy. Massive liberties. I thought I told you to stay away from those Darlings. They're no good, do you hear me? No bloody good at all.'

'But I like Danny and he's the only real mate I've met round 'ere. If I stop knocking about with him, then I got no one and I'll be lonely.'

Ian smiled. 'You've got me, but you don't seem to want to spend any time in my company these days. I'll do you a deal. You be nicer to me, and I'll allow you to be friends with Danny. How does that sound?'

Suddenly aware the perve had been drinking, Tommy froze. 'Where's Auntie Sandra?'

'Answer my question first, then I'll answer yours.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Oh, I think you do, Tommy.'

Tommy's eyes burned with fire. 'You come anywhere near me again, and I swear I will tell Ronnie Darling. I mean it. I will, and he will do you over.'

When Tommy ran up to his room, Ian paced up and down the lounge. Ronnie Darling would most certainly do him over, as his nephew had so politely put it, but Ian doubted the lad would ever have the balls to tell Ronnie anything. Bar his sister, he had never told anyone what had happened between himself and Uncle Ted. Especially once he'd got used to all the wonderful gifts Uncle Ted bought him and the great days out they had together. Surely, given time, once the initial shock had worn off, Tommy would feel the same way about him?

Brain fuddled by the amount of alcohol he'd supped, Ian paced up and down the threadbare filthy carpet. He had to think very carefully about his next move. Very carefully indeed.

*

Tommy lay on his bed thinking about his mum, sister and Rex. He never thought about Alexander or that old witch Nanny Noreen. They had put him in this situation so, to him, they were both dead.

Feeling nauseous, Tommy put his hand under the right-hand side of the pillow to check the handle of the dagger was in the right spot, if push came to shove. No way would he tell Ronnie or Danny if his uncle were to violate him again. He never wanted anybody to know. It would make him feel abnormal. He was a Millwall fan now and wanted to be a boxer when he grew up. He refused to be known as some poor molested orphan. He'd die of shame.

Deciding to turn his music off so he could hear Ian approaching, Tommy picked up his *Shoot* magazine. He couldn't concentrate on reading it though. He had no idea where that fat cow he was forced to call Auntie Sandra was, but he prayed she would come home soon.

It was past midnight when Ian made his way up the stairs. He had decided at one point not to touch the boy again, but then he'd had a few more drinks and his mind had drifted back to the past ...

Valerie had always been the popular one. Like him, she had no idea who her father was, but it was obviously a different man to the one who'd fathered him. Valerie was pretty, vibrant and confident, whereas he had always been the total opposite. He'd been a chubby boy with few friends and no one to confide in. It had taken him weeks to pluck up the courage to tell his sister what Uncle Ted had been doing to him, but she'd been going out with pals that day and was too busy tarting herself up to even listen.

And now her precious son was going to be well and truly initiated into the world Uncle Ted had introduced him to all those years ago.

Unable to sleep, Tommy could feel his heart beating at an incredibly rapid pace. He hadn't got undressed, was too scared to in case he needed to run out of the house. He'd even debated whether to sleep down by the canal, but that was no long-term solution. Danny was right. Killing the perve

was the only way out and he didn't even care if he was sent to a bad boy's home. Hazel might not have been happy in the home she'd been sent to, but at least she was safe from perverts like Uncle Ian. Anything had to be better than living like this.

'Tommy, you awake?'

Having switched his lamp off, Tommy did not reply. He could smell the stench of alcohol mixed with cigarettes. He could also hear the perve's laboured breathing.

'Tommy, Tommy, wake up. Look, I am sorry if I shouted at you when you came home. But I miss what we had. I want us to be close again,' Ian slurred.

When the perve began to stroke his face, Tommy wasn't taking any chances. He pulled the dagger from under his pillow and plunged it straight in the left-hand side of Ian's neck.

Stunned, Ian fell backwards on the bed.

'You dirty bastard,' Tommy bellowed.

Having guessed it would come to this, Tommy had already packed the treasured photos of his mum, Hazel, Linda and Rex in his duffel bag, along with PC Kendall's phone number, his Millwall programmes and records.

'Tommy, help me. Call an ambulance,' Ian rasped, holding the neck wound.

Tommy took one last look at the fat bastard. 'I hate you, ya nonce. I hope you die.'

'Please. Please help me.'

Aware that his once grey-looking sheets were rapidly turning to claret, Tommy grabbed his belongings, ran down the stairs and legged it along the street as fast as his little legs would take him.

CHAPTER NINE

The nearest phone box was only a couple of minutes away, but it was out of service, so Tommy ran towards the Old Kent Road.

It was gone midnight and there were drunks staggering about the streets, but Tommy wasn't scared. After living with that perve, nothing and nobody would ever scare him again.

There was a lad already in the phone box and Tommy silently willed him to hurry up. PC Kendall was the only person he could think of turning to for help in this particular situation. He was too young to run away and was bound to meet other perverts like Ian if he was forced to live on the streets.

When the phone box became free, Tommy darted inside and with trembling hands dialled the number. 'Can I speak to PC Kendall, please?'

'PC Kendall isn't on duty at the moment. Is there anything I can help you with?' came the reply.

'No. I only want to speak to PC Kendall. He's my friend. It's important. I think I might have killed someone.'

The officer on night duty could tell Tommy was a kid. Instinct told him this was no crank call though. 'What is the number you're calling from, lad? Have a look and read it out to me.'

'Will PC Kendall call me back? I'm not telling anyone else what happened, only him.'

'Yes. I will call him at home. What's your full name?'

Tommy reeled off his name and number, put the phone down and it rang within a couple of minutes, the shrill tone making him jump. 'Can you help me, please? Uncle Ian turned out to be a pervert and I think I might have killed him.'

PC Kendall was alarmed. 'Where are you, Tommy?'

'Along the Old Kent Road. I'm not sure exactly where, but there's a club over the road playing Ska music with lots of black people going in and out.'

'Where is your uncle?'

'At his house. In my bedroom.'

'What's the address, Tommy? I need to call an ambulance. It's for the best, trust me.'

Tommy reeled off the address.

'Right, stay where you are and I'll find you. Stay close to or inside the phone box. I'm on my way.'

A man turned up, wanting to make a call, so Tommy had to leave the phone box. He was huddled inside a shop doorway, clutching his duffel bag to his chest, when he spotted Ronnie Darling walking towards him. Ronnie had his dark hair slicked back, was dressed in a smart suit with a pretty woman on his arm. Tommy had to look twice to make sure it really was him.

'Shit,' Tommy mumbled, looking at his feet, but it was too late. Ronnie had already clocked him. 'What's happening, Tommy lad? What the hell you doing sat there this time of night?'

'I'm waiting for someone.'

Highly suspicious, Ronnie crouched next to the lad. He looked frozen. 'Who? Only it's nearly one and that club over the road kicks out in a bit. Full of Samboes, that is. No way am I leaving you here, it ain't safe. Come on. You're coming home with me.'

Tommy shook his head while praying PC Kendall would hurry up. It seemed ages since they'd spoken. 'No. I must stay here. I'm waiting for a friend.'

'Danny?'

'No. Not Danny. Look, I'm fine, honest. You go.'

'I'm freezing, Ronnie. What we standing here for?' asked the pretty blonde.

Ronnie glared at his current bit of fluff. 'Cause this kid is a close family friend and he's out here on his own. Jump in a sherbet if you're cold.'

Clocking a car crawling along the kerb, Tommy leapt up. Thankfully, it wasn't a marked police car. It was a Volkswagen Beetle.

As Tommy ran towards the vehicle, Ronnie grabbed hold of his arm. 'No you don't, lad. Who is this pal of yours?'

PC Kendall stepped out of the car and flashed his badge. 'I'm here to help, Tommy. He called me. He's in trouble.'

Ronnie looked at Tommy in disbelief. He'd thought the lad was one of their own. Had he been planted by the Old Bill to befriend his brother? Was he some miniature grass? 'You little shitbag,' Ronnie mumbled.

Tears stinging his eyes, Tommy shoved Ronnie in the chest. He felt so upset Ronnie had turned against him. His heart told him to blurt out the truth to Ronnie. But how could he? Tommy didn't feel like a little boy any more. No way did he want the Darlings finding out what his uncle had done to him. That was shameful. 'It ain't what you think. Tell Danny and your mum thanks for everything. I will never forget you all. You're like family to me.'

When Tommy leapt in the car and it sped off, for the first time in his life, Ronnie Darling was speechless.

Instead of handing Tommy over to the authorities in South London, PC Kendall took him back to Barking police station and gently questioned him there. He had already heard that Ian Taylor had been alive when found, but was in a critical condition and it was touch and go whether he would survive. Apparently, he had lost a lot of blood and had the police not broken the door down when they did, to allow the ambulance men entry, Ian would have been dead within minutes.

'Can you tell us what happened, Tommy?' asked the blonde female officer. She smelled nice and was quite pretty, like his mum, but no way could Tommy open up to her. 'Can I talk to Peter alone?' Tommy asked. PC Kendall had insisted earlier he was to refer to him by his first name. He could tell the lad had experienced a torrid time and wanted him to feel comfortable enough to tell him. He could kind of guess what had happened and his heart went out to the lad. Tommy had always been a good kid.

'Let me speak to Tommy alone,' Kendall urged his colleague.

When DS Bright left the room, Kendall repeated the question.

'Uncle Ian did something bad to me. Really bad.'

'Tonight?'

'No. A few weeks ago, but tonight he was going to do it again. I know he was. He came into my bedroom and Auntie Sandra was visiting her sister again. That's when it happened the last time.'

Though it was only a few months since Kendall had last seen Tommy Boyle, his once bubbly nature had all but disappeared. The boy was still as polite as ever, but his once sparkling eyes were dull and lifeless – hardly surprising, in the circumstances. Kendall softly asked some more questions, then made a decision. 'I need you to be brave, Tommy. I want a doctor to examine you. It might prove to be a bit embarrassing and uncomfortable. You OK with that?'

Tommy shrugged. 'I suppose so. Will I get sent to a bad boy's home, d'ya think? Ya know, like Hazel got sent away?'

Tommy hadn't explained what had happened to him in explicit detail, but it was crystal clear to Kendall. 'I'm still in pain when I do number twos and there's blood on the toilet paper,' Tommy admitted, staring at his hands in shame.

Kendall wanted to hug the boy but knew that, after what had happened to him, it might only upset him all the more. He leaned across the desk. 'I promise you, I will do everything in my power to put that evil bastard away, Tommy. Not you. You were acting in self-defence.'

'I hope he dies,' Tommy said bluntly.

'I don't, boy, for your sake. Better if he lives, then gets his just deserts in prison. But that's between me and you, OK?'

For the first time since PC Kendall had picked him up, Tommy managed a smile. ‘Yeah. I’d like him to be beaten up badly. Thanks for helping me, Peter. I didn’t know who else to call.’

The next twenty-four hours passed in a blur for Tommy. He was subjected to an examination, more interviewing and told his uncle was still alive.

He was then taken to stay with a woman called Maureen who had a clean home in Dagenham. She was kind to him. His bedding smelled fresh and the room was spotless.

It was on 17 March, his thirteenth birthday, that Tommy was told by a magistrate he would be sent to live at a children’s home in Dagenham.

PC Kendall, and Maureen whom he’d stayed with the past few nights, accompanied him. Tommy had been told to speak only when spoken to by the magistrate, but was full of questions when they left the hearing. ‘So, is this a bad boy’s home? Will I have to go back to school? Why can’t I live with the Darlings? Will my uncle be sent to prison?’

Urging Tommy to calm down, PC Kendall answered each question in turn. ‘The home you are going to is the one Maureen thought you would be most suited to. It’s not for children who have been in trouble and it’s mixed, boys and girls. One of Maureen’s friends runs it and Maureen had to pull a lot of strings to get you in there, so you mustn’t let her down, Tommy.’

‘I won’t. I remember my mum going to Dagenham once. I think she took my sisters with her too, but I ain’t never been there.’

‘At a guess, I’d say Dagenham’s only about four miles from where you used to live. Maureen thought it best you didn’t return to Barking because of the Fletchers and what happened with your mum and sister. You need a fresh start.’

‘But I ain’t scared of anyone now. My mate Danny taught me how to box. Why can’t I live with his mum? She wanted me to move in.’

‘I’m afraid that’s not possible, lovey. Danny’s father has been in too much trouble with the police,’ Maureen explained.

Kendall ruffled the lad’s hair and urged him to get in the car. ‘You mustn’t forget what the magistrate told you, Tommy. He gave you a stern warning that if you were to get into any more trouble, things wouldn’t be so simple next time. I know what happened wasn’t your fault, but you can’t go around plunging knives in people. You need to work hard at school and pass your exams, so you can get yourself a decent job when you leave. Your mum, Valerie, was a wonderful lady and that is what she would want you to do.’

‘OK.’

‘As for Ian Taylor, the police questioned him yesterday and he denied the accusations. But, because your medical examination proved certain things, the police will be charging him anyway. He’s been accused of a similar offence in the past, but the charges were dropped and the case never made it to court.’

‘I won’t have to go to court, will I?’

‘You’ll have to give some form of evidence. But hopefully you won’t have to stand in the dock or see your uncle.’

‘I can’t tell strangers what happened. I won’t.’

‘Look, don’t worry about that now. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, and you will have my support and Maureen’s every step of the way.’

Tommy spent the rest of the journey deep in thought. Just three months ago, he had a loving mum, two sisters who constantly squabbled over the record player, a beautiful dog, a man he called Dad and a woman he called Nan.

Now he had none of those things. They were all gone, in the blink of an eye.

Tommy had expected the children’s home to be a stark-looking property set in its own grounds. ‘Is this it?’ he asked, as the car stopped outside a big house on the corner of a street with lots of other houses.

‘Yes. You see those three properties?’ Maureen pointed. ‘Well, the council knocked them all into one to create this home. There are a few others in Dagenham, but this has a pleasant feel to it, Tommy. It’s more laid-back and the staff are nice too. I thought a mixed environment would be better for you than to be surrounded by all boys.’

Tommy was ushered inside the house by Maureen. PC Kendall, who had visited Tommy’s uncle’s home to pack up his clothes and belongings, fetched the suitcase out of the boot.

A plump, short lady and a tall, dark-haired man with a kind face greeted them. The man grinned. ‘Welcome to Maylands, Tommy. A little birdy told us it’s your thirteenth birthday today, so we thought we’d throw you a party later to mark the occasion. Not every day you become a teenager, is it? I’m Ray, by the way, and this here is Connie. We manage Maylands, so any problems – you come straight to one of us.’

A little lad wandered over. ‘I’m Kevin. What’s your name?’ he pried, tugging at Tommy’s sleeve.

Tommy spied a spotty-looking thin girl peering at him from around a doorframe, but she disappeared when he made eye contact with her. ‘Thanks for the offer, but I don’t want no birthday party this year.’ Tommy’s mum had always made a big fuss of his birthday and the thought of celebrating one without her did not appeal to him at all.

‘It’s nothing major, Tommy. We bought a couple of cakes and thought it might be a nice way of introducing you to the other residents. Most of them are at school at present and they all love cake,’ Connie chuckled.

‘I’d rather no one knew it’s my birthday,’ Tommy insisted.

‘No worries, lad. We understand,’ Ray replied. ‘Make our guests a cup of tea, Connie, while I show Tommy around.’

Maylands looked after children between eleven and sixteen years old, and Tommy was told he would be sharing a bedroom with another newcomer. ‘Benny only arrived here last week himself, so we thought it might be nice if you two shared. He’s half-caste. You OK with that?’

‘Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘I was just checking, as Benny had a tough time in the previous home he lived in. He was bullied because of his colour.’

‘How many lads actually live here?’ Tommy enquired.

‘Eleven at present, and nine girls. We like to think of ourselves as one big happy family here, Tommy. We are easy-going to a degree, but have a strict no-bullying policy. You are allowed to come and go as you please, provided you arrive home in time for dinner. That is served at 6 p.m. every day, including Sundays.’

‘So, can I go out on my own at weekends?’ A plan was already forming in Tommy’s mind. He’d find a local boxing gym and join it. He had money saved, mostly what the perve had given him.

‘Seeing as you are now officially classed as a teenager, yes, you can. We have a separate set of rules for the under-thirteens. But we don’t advise you going out alone. Most of the lads stick together, as do the girls.’

‘OK.’

Ray smiled. ‘Want to take a look at the games room?’

Tommy nodded politely. He couldn’t think straight. His head was all over the place.

When PC Kendall and Maureen left, Tommy unpacked his belongings and lay on his new bed. It was rock hard and when he inspected it further, the mattress had a plastic cover over it, which Tommy assumed was in case he pissed himself in the night.

He looked around the room. It was small with two single beds, two tiny chests of drawers, but he was drawn to the posters on the left wall. One was of the West Ham football team, but the others were sketches. One in particular caught his eye. It was a close-up of a dog’s face.

All of a sudden, the door burst open and a lad with a big Afro appeared. ‘You must be Tommy.’

Tommy sat up. ‘And you must be Benny.’

‘Yeah. I am. And believe me, you give me any shit, like my last roommate did, I will punch your fucking lights out.’

‘Why would I give you shit? I don’t even know you.’

‘Because I’m black.’

‘One of my best mates at my old school was black.’

Benny softened and held out his right hand. ‘Nice to meet ya, Tommy.’

‘Likewise.’

‘So, what’s your story?’

‘Whaddya mean?’

‘How did you end up here?’

‘My mum died and then I found out my dad weren’t me real dad. You?’ Tommy asked. Ray had reassured him that all his details would remain confidential and he was only to tell the others what he was comfortable with.

‘My mum didn’t want me living with her no more. She got a new bloke and me and him didn’t get on.’

‘That’s well bad.’

‘So is my mother, the dirty stinking whore.’

‘So, what’s it like in here? Ray and Connie seem all right.’

‘They’re OK. But don’t believe all that bullshit Ray told you on arrival. Did he mention the no-bullying policy?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, that’s bollocks. One of the lads tried to set fire to my hair on the way home from school last week. He is one nasty fucker.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘I ain’t no grass. You’ll find out for yourself soon enough. I’ve only been here a week and I know the rules already. Act sweet in front of Connie and Ray, and what happens outside of the home stays outside of the home. Got that?’

Tommy nodded, then pointed at the sketches on the wall. ‘They yours? I like the dog.’

‘That was my dog, Spike. I drew him myself.’

‘No way! That’s well ace. My dog has gone to live on a farm in Essex, but I’m gonna find out where and visit him soon. If I give you a picture of Rex, would you draw him too?’

‘There ain’t no such thing as a dog going to live on a farm in Essex, Tommy. Not in our world. That’s what we’re told when they kill ’em off.’

Tommy suddenly felt sick. ‘What?’

‘A farm in Essex means your dog was taken to the vet and put down. I know ’cause the same thing happened to my Spike.’

A lone tear rolled down Tommy’s cheek. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

Tommy spent the rest of his birthday with his head under the blankets. He couldn’t get Rex’s trusting face out of his head. He’d loved his smell, his big slobbery kisses, and throwing sticks for him in the park. They’d been mates, best mates, and now he would never see Rex again. He was gone, like everyone else Tommy cared about.

‘You OK, Tommy?’ Ray tapped on the door. ‘I brought you a sandwich and a drink.’

‘I don’t want anything, thanks. But I’m sure I’ll feel better tomorrow,’ Tommy lied. He’d had to get out of meeting the other lads and having dinner tonight. Could not face food or company, so had feigned illness.

‘OK, lad. Give Connie or me a shout if you need anything.’

When Ray’s footsteps drifted away, Tommy propped his pillow up against the wall and punched it repeatedly.

He was no longer that innocent young boy he'd been before his mother died. He was now a streetwise, angry young man.

PART TWO

The course of true love never did run smooth.
William Shakespeare

CHAPTER TEN

Life in a children's home ain't no bed of roses let me tell you, but thankfully I managed to settle in fairly quickly.

The staff were OK, so were most of the lads, and I bonded with three in particular.

I also made an enemy. Wayne Bradley was a real pain in the butt. A nasty, vindictive, violent bully.

By this point, I was no normal teenager, mind. I had issues, plenty of them, and I wasn't prepared to take shit from any bastard. I'd already nearly killed one wrong'un and I'd do it again if pushed too far. I had no fear. Reason being, I had nothing left to lose.

I often thought of my dear friends, the Darlings. But I had made my mind up that I never wanted to see them again. Their kindness would stay with me forever and I would never forget them, Danny in particular. But I needed no reminders of my short time spent in South London, thanks very much. I had new friends now and was determined to start afresh.

Sometimes in life though, all your plans go to pot and fate can be a fucker.

If only I'd known then what I know now.

You'll see where I'm coming from soon enough ...

Summer 1975

‘Behave yourself, lads. No scrapping or drinking alcohol. You’re to be back here by ten on the dot. Don’t let me down now, will you?’ warned Ray.

Tommy Boyle smiled sweetly. ‘We won’t mess up, and thanks again for giving us permission to go. We truly appreciate it, don’t we, lads?’

Standing behind Ray, Benny Crooks did a fingers-down-his-throat gesture.

‘Yeah. Cheers, Ray,’ said Martin Smith (a.k.a. Smiffy).

Knowing the first thing they would do was drink the cider they’d hidden earlier, Dumbo couldn’t help but giggle.

Tommy shook his head in despair as the four of them bowled outside. The monthly teenage disco at the local Catholic club was an extremely important event.

‘What’s that for?’ Dumbo winced, when Tommy slapped him around the head.

Luckily for Benny, his big Afro saved him from any pain Tommy’s right hand might have caused. ‘You’re such an arse licker,’ Benny chuckled.

‘And you two need to grow the fuck up,’ Tommy spat.

When his pal stormed off, Smiffy caught up with him and slung a friendly arm around Tommy’s neck. ‘You know what they’re like. They don’t mean no harm. They’re just immature.’

No way would Tommy ever hurt Benny, Dumbo or Smiffy. The four of them were good buddies, watched one another’s backs. But ever since what had happened to him, Tommy struggled to control his temper at times. He was no little squirt any more either. Since arriving at the children’s home two and a half years ago, Tommy no longer worried he would live the rest of his life as a dwarf. Not only had he shot up in height, his regular boxing training meant he could more than handle himself these days. He was strong, lean and the most feared lad at the home. That hadn’t always been the case, mind. That arsehole Wayne Bradley had led him a dog’s life once upon a time.

‘Here we go,’ Smiffy grinned, lifting the bottles of cider out of the bush. There was a no-alcohol policy at the youth disco. Only soft drinks were sold, but anyone even remotely cool would have a skinful before they arrived.

‘You got the hump with me, Tommy?’

Tommy glugged at the cider, then handed the bottle to Dumbo (a.k.a. Darren Prattley). Dumbo had earned his nickname because his ears were so bloody massive. He was also as thick as two short planks. ‘Nah. I ain’t got the hump, but you need to be more savvy in front of Ray. You and Benny acting like divs will only enlighten him to the fact we’ll be boozing.’

Smiffy lit up a cigarette. The monthly disco had only been going since May but was already a big hit. ‘Tommy’s right. You two need to act more sensible, otherwise you’ll balls this special privilege up for us.’

Benny nodded. ‘Understood.’

Dumbo grinned. ‘Yeah, sorry.’

By the time the lads arrived at the Catholic club, they were in high spirits. Lots of their schoolmates were already there, but the four lads always made a pact to stick together. Most of the kids at Eastbrook Comprehensive were cool towards them. Tommy had carved out a reputation as one of the hardest boys in his year, but because of their upbringing and the stigma attached to living in a children’s home, the boys always felt far more comfortable in one another’s company.

‘You look like one of the Jackson Five with that clobber on,’ Smiffy laughed.

Dressed in a silky orange shirt with a huge collar and beige flared trousers, Benny grinned. ‘Fuck you. I is the bee’s knees. You watch the girls flock my way. I got the moves.’

The lads chuckled as Benny danced to the sultry sound of George McCrae’s ‘Rock Your Baby’. Benny’s dad was from Jamaica and Benny had never met him. Tommy reckoned he must have been

a cool dude though. Benny's mother was an ugly fat cow, so the lad must have inherited his looks, charm and slick moves from elsewhere. He was popular with the girls too. At the last couple of discos he'd ended up snogging at least four.

Seeing Laura Higgins, one of the best-looking girls in his year, staring at him, Tommy turned his back on her. He knew he wasn't a bad-looking lad because he'd been asked out by loads of girls, but he always declined. He had never even kissed a girl, not properly anyway. The thought of getting close to anyone after what that perve had done to him, literally filled him with dread. So he chose to concentrate instead on his boxing and football, and having a laugh with his mates.

Dumbo nudged Tommy. 'Laura Higgins keeps looking at me.'

Rather than inform his pal he had more chance of flying to the moon than copping off with Laura Higgins, Tommy smiled. 'Yep. I think you're in there, pal.'

The rest of the evening passed in a happy blur. Benny stole the show by limbo-dancing to Typically Tropical's 'Barbados', which earned him a snog with two girls. Smiffy pulled a munter who gave him a wank outside. Dumbo got a slap around the face when he pinched Laura Higgins' bum, and Tommy spent most of the evening trying to avoid Laura Higgins and another girl with ginger hair who kept following him around.

'I got that chick's phone number,' Benny grinned as they ambled back towards the home.

'Which one?' Smiffy asked.

'The blonde with the big knockers. Her dad hates blacks, apparently, so I can't pick her up from her house. I'm gonna take her to the pictures next weekend, though. We'll sit in the back row, obviously,' Benny chuckled.

Tommy took the packet of mints out of his pocket and ordered the lads to suck them. The effects of the alcohol had now worn off, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Ray would be waiting for them to arrive home. He always was.

'Shit! Look, I got come all down me strides,' Smiffy announced.

'I'm surprised you even got a hard-on with that monster, let alone managed to come,' Benny chuckled.

'Yeah. She weren't a looker, was she?' Dumbo said. 'But I wish I could have got a wank. All I got was a smack round the clock.'

The jovial banter continued for the rest of the short journey back to Shitlands. They rarely referred to their home as Maylands any more. It was their own private joke.

'I can't believe you didn't ask Laura Higgins to dance at the end. I'd have been in there like a rat up a drainpipe if she'd been drooling over me all night. She's hotter than a fucking gas cooker,' Smiffy announced, playfully grabbing his best pal in a headlock. He and Tommy had been inseparable ever since Tommy had arrived at Maylands. Nobody beforehand had had the balls to stand up to that arsehole Wayne Bradley, but Tommy had. Smiffy had been extremely impressed by Tommy's bravery. Though he'd only been tiny at the time, and as a result he'd lost the fight, Tommy had still given Bradley a run for his money and a shiner of a black eye.

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