

If you can't trust
your family ...

The Betrayal
Kimberley
CHAMBERS

NO.1 SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

Kimberley Chambers

The Betrayer

Аннотация

If you can't trust your family...A family at war. A mother who comes out fighting...Maureen Hutton's life has never been easy. Married to an alcoholic and stuck on a council estate in East London, she scrimps and saves to bring up her three children alone. Murder, the underworld, drug addiction – over four decades, Maureen sticks by her blood through thick and thin. But then the unforgivable happens. Maureen is told a terrible secret which threatens to rip her family apart. She can't say anything. She is too frightened of causing a bloodbath. The only thing Maureen can do is to get rid of the betrayer, before it is too late.

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CHAMBERS**

The Betrayer

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Dedication

*In memory of
Mathew Hoxby
1973–2008*

Epigraph

Goodnight you moonlight ladies,
Rock-a-bye sweet baby James.
Deep greens and blues are the colours I choose.
Won't you let me go down in my dreams
And rock-a-bye Sweet Baby James.

James Taylor

1970

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[PROLOGUE](#)

July 2006

‘I’m very sorry, Mrs Hutton, but we are talking weeks here, rather than months.’

Walking away from the hospital, I feel calmness within. My cancer has returned and being told I’m riddled with it was exactly what I’d expected. Unless you’ve had the dreaded disease, you wouldn’t know where I was coming from. Tiredness, lack of appetite, an inability to do the simple things that you once found so easy. The signs are plentiful. To put it bluntly, you just know when you’re dying.

As I sit on the bus, I gaze out of the window. Deep in thought, I watch the world go by. As strange as it may seem, I notice silly things. Mothers doing school runs in their luxury four-wheel drives, children as young as ten chatting away happily on mobile phones. Smiley, happy people, who wouldn't know hardship if it smacked them in the face.

Not wanting to become bitter, I turn away from the window and think about my own life. I take my pad and pen out of my bag and begin to make notes. Unlike most sufferers of cancer, I'm not that bothered about dying. Part of me would even go as far as saying that in some ways leaving this life will be a relief.

Happy people don't want to die. They are the lucky ones who are blessed with good times. I was happy once, but not now. For people like me, death spells an end to all of the suffering. I don't mean to sound like a manic depressive, but I've had years full of stress and turmoil and I can't take any more. I've had enough with a capital E.

I had a terrible upbringing. I'm an only child, and my father left home when I was three years old. I don't remember him and have never set eyes on him since. My mother was a dear soul, but died when I was ten, a victim of the same bastard disease that has now got hold of me.

My aunt kindly offered me a home and then gave me a dog's life. Living with a violent alcoholic, I was regularly beaten senseless. She treated me as her slave and I had to beg for my dinner, like a dog on all fours. At sixteen, desperate to escape

her, I married the first bloke I laid eyes on. Tommy Hutton was his name. He was twenty-one, and in my eyes cool, brash and handsome. I thought he was my saviour; how bloody wrong was I?

Approaching my stop, I gingerly get off the bus and start the short walk home. I unlock my front door and put the kettle on. I'm tired, but determined not to sleep. There are questions I need answering, things I need to plan, stuff I need to tell. So many secrets and so many lies. To rest in peace, I need to tell and know the truth. Picking up my pen and paper, I talk out loud as I try to remember the past.

I don't know how to start. Will I read this to anyone? Or even show them? I choose my first line with care.

My name is Maureen Hutton and this is my story ...

ONE

1975

'FUCKIN' HELL, TOMMO, he ain't moving.'

White as a sheet, Tommy Hutton bent down to try and wake his victim. 'Wake up Smiffy, please wake up,' he said, as he frantically prodded and shook him.

Tibbsy, Benno and Dave Taylor stood rooted to the spot. Along with Tommy they were members of a notorious local gang known as the Stepney Crew.

Tonight they had organised a big off with a rival firm from Bethnal Green. Top four versus top four. Both gangs were determined to be crowned Kings of the East End; both thought

they were the business. Tommy Hutton, AKA Tommo, had formed the gang: therefore he was their undisputed leader. Terry Smith, AKA Smiffy, had started the other firm and he was their top boy.

Tonight, however, things had gone very wrong. Determined not to be outdone by Smiffy, who had recently threatened him with an air gun, Tommy had decided to steal his old man's fishing knife. He'd been keen to frighten Smiffy, cut him, scar him, show him who was boss. He certainly hadn't meant to stick the knife straight through him.

Taking charge of matters, Tibbsy picked up the weapon. 'We'd better get out of 'ere lads. The cunt's dead, I'm telling yer. You take the knife, Tommo, get rid of it.'

Tommy shook from head to toe. He couldn't move, his legs weren't doing as they were told. 'What am I gonna do? I didn't mean to kill him,' he sobbed.

Tibbsy grabbed his arm. 'We've gotta go, Tommo, before anybody sees us. Don't fuck about or we'll all be going down.'

Tommy tucked his flared trousers into his socks and urged the others to do the same, fashion was a no-go at times like these. Ashen faced and panic stricken, the four lads ran for their lives.

Less than a mile away, Maureen was totally unaware of her son's dilemma.

'See yer on Saturday then, if I don't see yer before, Sarn. It starts at seven, so don't be bloody late.'

Maureen Hutton smiled as she shut the front door. It was her

thirty-second birthday on Saturday and she was having a party to celebrate.

House parties were a regular occurrence on the Ocean Estate in Stepney. All skint as arseholes, she and her neighbours got together every Saturday night for some cheap booze and a knees-up. Maureen had numerous good mates who lived near by. Some were single mums who had it hard like herself, but her best friends Sandra and Brenda, they both had husbands. Neither she nor her friends dwelled on their poverty. Like most cockneys, they made the best out of what little they had. Every now and then they'd take it in turns to watch one another's kids so they could have a night at the bingo. Apart from their Saturday night parties, bingo was their only other source of entertainment.

Maureen put the kettle on and made herself a brew. Her life had always been hard, but lately she'd been content. Her husband Tommy had left her years ago. A gambler and a piss-head, she was far better off without him. Sometimes he'd turn up like a bad penny, but he never hung about for long. A quick pop in to say hello to the kids or the occasional visit to his mother was about all he was good for. Alcohol was far more important to him than his family.

His mother, Ethel, was a legend in her own manor. At fifty-six she was a coarse, boisterous woman and as famous in the East End as Ronnie and Reggie. She swore like a navy, drank like a fish, regularly went out on the thieve, and could tell a story to match the best of them. Hard as nails, she was. In the war

she would wash down the dead bodies and help patch up the casualties. When the war ended, she set herself up in business with her friend, Gladys, and together they would perform illegal abortions. A tin bucket, a syringe and a bar of washing soap was the method they used. They were no experts, but were always careful to keep the end of the syringe in the bucket. One slip of the hand and the air bubbles could be fatal. Ethel had come up with the idea herself. She'd used the same method on the kids to wash out their worms. Many a time she'd shove a syringe of lukewarm water up their harrises and smile as their screams echoed from Stepney to Soho.

Maureen glanced at the clock. Her son, Tommy, was well late tonight and she'd skin the little bastard when he got home. Thankfully, her other two were safely tucked up in bed. Tommy was her eldest child – she was seventeen when she had him and he'd been a little bastard from the moment he'd let out his first cry. He was fourteen now, a cocky, streetwise little bleeder who was forever getting himself into trouble. Tall, dark and cheeky, he was popular with the girls, but even they found him a handful. He rarely went to school, was always fighting and she knew full well that he went out thieving with his pals and his gran.

Susan, her twelve-year-old daughter, was another worry. Sullen and obnoxious, she had a plain face, a plump body and a spiteful streak in her. She was unpopular at school, with very few friends, and even the kids on the street steered well clear of her.

Thankfully, her youngest son, James, was no trouble at all.

Sweet, kind and funny, he was everything that Maureen had ever wanted in a child. She hadn't known what to call him when she was carrying him. She had plenty of girls' names, but no boys'. Her friend, Brenda, had chosen his name. A massive fan of the singer James Taylor, Bren had played his album till the grooves wore white. Maureen herself had fallen in love with the track 'Sweet Baby James' and, at Brenda's insistence, agreed that if her unborn was a boy, she'd name him James.

The title of the song suited her son perfectly and Maureen was over the moon when her mother-in-law thieved her a record player along with the album. For hours she'd play that record to James when he was a baby. She'd sing the words as she rocked him to sleep, her special boy with his own special song. Trouble was, as the years went by, he became known as Jimmy Boy. Tommy had started the trend by insisting that James made him sound like a poof. Maureen had been pissed off at first by his change of identity, but as time went by she'd accepted it. A name's just a name and he'd always be James to her.

All her neighbours had been shocked by her last pregnancy – she had been split up from her Tommy for years when she'd fallen. A drunken night of passion for old time's sake had been her excuse. Little did they know what had really happened!

Maureen's reminiscing was ended by the sound of the front door opening and the arrival of her eldest son. 'Tommy, I'm gonna marmalise you, get your arse in 'ere, yer little bastard,' she shouted at the top of her voice.

Ignoring her, Tommy Hutton ran up the stairs as fast as his legs would take him. His clothes were covered in blood and he had to get changed before his mother spotted him.

Just about to chase the cowson up the stairs and drag him back down by his hair, Maureen had a change of heart. He shared his bedroom with James and if she ran upstairs like a raging bull, she'd be bound to wake him up. Maureen lit the gas and put the kettle on to boil. She needed to calm down and a cup of Rosy was usually the answer. Tomorrow she'd have the little bastard's guts for garters. Yawning, she made her brew and took it into the living room. Just lately she'd taken to sleeping downstairs on the old sofa. The house only had two bedrooms. The boys shared one and her and Susan the other. Ethel lived slap-bang opposite in a nice little one-bedroom flat.

Over the last few months, her daughter had become a nightmare to share a bed with. She'd nick the blanket then wriggle like an eel all night, and Maureen had a feeling that the little cow was doing it on purpose. Worn out by her lack of shut-eye, she had no alternative other than to move out of her own bedroom.

Tommy lay in bed wide awake. Now he'd pulled himself together, he felt a right prick for crying in front of his pals. He was meant to be the leader of the gang, not some fucking mug. After they'd legged it, him and the lads had headed to the park to sort out an alibi, and a plan, and as luck would have it, they'd bumped into Lenny Simpson. Seeing the blood on Tommy's

clothes, and the state of the four of them, Lenny guessed that some major shit had hit the fan and had fired awkward questions at them. Stuck for answers, they'd had no choice other than to spill their guts to him. He was sound, Lenny, and if he couldn't help them, no one could.

'I'll be your alibi. I'll say you were round at mine all night. We had a few beers and were playing David Bowie records. I've got all his stuff, every album, so if anyone asks, we were boozing while listening to Bowie, right? If you stick to the same story as me, you'll be all right, boys.'

Tommy hugged Lenny and repeatedly thanked him. Lenny had his own reasons to want to help out. Smiffy, the piece of shit in question, had terrorised his younger brother for the past three years. Lenny had been planning on disposing of the scumbag himself, but didn't quite have the bottle to go through with it. Tommo had done him and his family a massive favour.

The other thing they'd discussed were the other lads in Smiffy's gang. They'd all scarpered in separate directions when it had got a bit naughty. Tommy had chased Smiffy for at least five minutes before he'd caught him and, apart from his own crew, there'd been no one else about.

'There's no way the Bethnal Green boys'll grass,' Tibbsy said confidently.

'All they'll do, if anything, is come after us for revenge. They definitely won't involve the pigs,' Benno insisted.

Tommy looked at Dave Taylor. 'What do you think?'

Taylor shrugged. ‘Dunno. Our top four boys have done their top four, case closed. You can never say never, but I’ll doubt they’ll grass.’

Tibbsy called an end to the meeting. ‘Look we can’t stay out ‘ere all night, it’s too suspicious. Let’s all go our separate ways and when we get home, we must act normal.’

Tommy stood up. ‘I can hardly act normal, can I? I’m covered in Smiffy’s blood. What am I meant to say to me mum?’

Tibbsy put an arm around his pal. ‘Just leg it up the stairs before your mother sees yer. You need to wash the knife so none of our fingerprints are on it. Bag up all your stuff, wait till your mother’s asleep, creep out and dump it.’

As he lay awake in bed, Tommy thought over his pal’s advice. He’d bagged the gear up, washed the knife, but was far too scared to leave the house. Say someone saw him? Say his mother caught him or the pigs were lurking near by?

Seeing his brother stir gave Tommy his solution. He’d lifted James out of the window a couple of months back to run a couple of errands for him. The boy had shit himself and he didn’t really want to get him involved again, but what choice did he have? He couldn’t go himself, it was far too dodgy.

Tommy was an expert at climbing out of his bedroom window. There was an old coal bunker below and as long as you positioned yourself right, the drop was a piece of cake. What he’d have to do was climb down first with the gear, then climb back up and lift James down. Umning and aahing with his conscience, he made

his choice.

‘Jimmy boy, wake up.’

James sat up and rubbed his little eyes. ‘Whatta matter Tommy?’

Tommy put his finger to his lips. ‘Get dressed, Jimmy, I need yer to do sumink for me.’

James obediently did as he was told. He loved his big brother very much. Tommy was his hero and he’d do anything he could to make him happy.

TWO

JAMES WAS PETRIFIED as he stood in the back garden and lifted up the bag. Gladys, his gran’s friend, lived in nearby Whitehorse Lane and his brother had given him strict instructions to creep around her back alley and hide it in the bushes at the rear of her garden. He hated going out alone in the dark – he was frightened of the bogeyman that his mum had always told him about. Even at the tender age of five, he knew not to ask Tommy too many questions. He wasn’t silly, he knew the bag must have something very important inside, but he knew better than to be nosy. Taking a peek was totally out of the question. As he reached his destination, he began to cry. He wanted his mum and his nice warm bed. Realising that the bag was far too heavy to shove into the big bushes, he hid it at the bottom of them and quickly ran away.

Tommy must have smoked ten fags as he nervously waited for his little brother to return. Smiffy wouldn’t be the only cunt dead

if James was caught outside, his mother would make sure that Tommy was buried in the grave next to him.

Hearing a noise from behind, Tommy felt relief flood through his veins as he spotted James. ‘You OK, Jimmyboy?’ he whispered. ‘Did you do exactly what I told yer to?’

James nodded. ‘I did what yer said, Tommy.’

Tommy smiled as he helped the frozen child onto the coal bunker. Trying to get him back in the window was a damn sight harder than trying to get him out. After a bit of a struggle, he shut the bedroom window and hugged James tightly. Kneeling down, he took a couple of five-pence coins out from under the mattress and handed them to him.

‘You, Jimmy boy, are the best bruvver in the world. Take this money and buy yourself loads of sweeties. But remember, this is our little secret and you must never tell anyone about tonight, not ever.’

James nodded. He perfectly understood what his brother was saying. Living in Stepney, you learned the dos and don’ts from a very early age. James hid the two shiny coins in his sock drawer, crawled into bed and fell straight to sleep. His nightmare began almost immediately. The bogeyman had kidnapped him and had hidden him in the alleyway behind Gladys’s house.

Still hyped up, Tommy lay awake for hours. He wondered if Smiffy had been found yet, or maybe he wasn’t even dead and had woken up and gone home. The incident had happened around the back of the old garages, just off the Mile End Road. It was a

pretty remote area of a night, and chances were, if he was brown bread, he wouldn't be found till morning.

Tommy sighed. He'd have to move the bag that James had hidden at some point, although it should be OK for now. It was well away from the scene of the crime, and there was no reason on earth why the pigs should search old Gladys's street. Even if Smiffy was dead, with no suspects, the case would die down within weeks and then he and the lads could retrieve the bag of evidence and burn the bastard to cinders. Satisfied he'd be in the clear, especially with Lenny's alibi, Tommy finally got some much-needed shut-eye.

Maureen was up at six the next morning. By eight o'clock she'd done all the washing and ironing and everything was put away neatly in the airing cupboard. Just about to start vaccing, she heard the door open.

'You got that fuckin' kettle on yet, birthday girl?'

Maureen smiled as Ethel let herself in and sat down. Her mother-in-law had her own key and came and went as she pleased. Rooting through her shopping bag, Ethel pulled out two tins of Spam, a tin of corned beef, a box of chocolates and a leg of lamb.

Maureen smiled. Ethel's little gifts came in more than handy. In fact, without her help, she sometimes wondered how she'd manage to feed the kids.

Ethel stood up. 'I'm off down the waste now to meet up with Glad. Do yer need anything off the market?'

‘You can get us some pickles, Mum,’ Maureen said. She always called Ethel ‘Mum’. It was the done thing in the East End to refer to the in-laws as you would your own parents.

Tommy opened his eyes and leaped out of bed. Yesterday seemed like a bad dream and he wished that it was. He usually loved Saturdays – he and the rest of the gang normally hung about down Roman Road market. The Roman was a buzzy old place on a Saturday and there were always a few bob to be earned. On a good day, they would treat themselves to pie and mash from Kelly’s. On a bad one, they’d share a bag of chips or two. Today he couldn’t face going to the market; neither did he feel hungry. Nervously, he slung on his clothes and ran down the stairs.

‘Oi, yer liberty-takin’ little fucker,’ Maureen shouted. Chasing him up the path, she grabbed his arm. ‘Where were you last night? Yer didn’t get home till half past one. How many times have I told yer, midnight at the latest.’

Tommy looked at her sheepishly. ‘Sorry, Mum. I was round at Lenny Simpson’s. We were listening to David Bowie records and having a few beers.’

Maureen looked at him in amazement. She could always tell when he was lying. ‘Since when have you been into David fucking Bowie? Listen, I don’t care if David turns up round Lenny Simpson’s to sing to yer in person, you get your arse back ’ere by midnight in future, do you hear me?’

Tommy nodded. ‘I’m sorry, Mum.’

Maureen tutted as she watched him sprint down the road. He’d

be the death of her, that boy. He drank like a fish and the way he was going he'd have no liver left by the time he was twenty-one. The selfish little bastard hadn't even wished her happy birthday.

James woke up, got dressed and fished in his drawer for his new-found wealth. It was his mum's birthday today and he wanted to creep out and buy her the best present ever.

Maureen was busy preparing for her party that evening. She had dozens of eggs, plenty of cheese and, with Ethel's leg of lamb, Spam and corned beef, she could really push the boat out for once.

James quietly let himself back in. 'Happy birthday, Mummy.'

Maureen had tears in her eyes as her youngest handed her a card, a small cake and a beautiful potted plant. 'Oh James, you little darling, you've made mummy cry now. Where did you get these from? Where did yer get the money, love?'

James had already prepared himself for this particular question. 'I saved all my pennies that Nanny gave me for ages and ages,' he said confidently.

Maureen picked him up and smothered him in kisses. 'You are a very special boy, James, and your mummy loves you very much.'

James wriggled out of her arms. 'I'm going to play on my space hopper now.'

Susan stood at the kitchen door with a sullen expression firmly intact. 'I'm starvin'. Can I 'ave some breakfast?'

James turned to his sister. 'It's Mummy's birthday today.'

Susan scowled at him. ‘So what?’

James squeezed past his nasty sister and ran into the garden. He’d had just enough money left to buy himself a gobstopper and he wanted to suck it in peace and savour every moment.

Tommy sprinted to his pal’s house in record time. Tibbsy shot straight out the door and the two of them ran round to Benno’s. Dave Taylor was already there, but no one said a word about the previous evening until they had reached the serenity of the park. Searching through the bushes, Tibbsy pulled out a bottle of sherry. His nan, bless her soul, was senile and he’d chored it from her house and stashed it a couple of days ago.

‘Don’t think bad of me,’ he said, as he unscrewed the lid. ‘Me nan don’t even drink, someone must ’ave bought it for her.’

All four lads took it in turns to swig from the bottle. None of them had slept well, and their nerves were shot to pieces.

Tibbsy stood up. ‘Right, what we gonna do? Has anyone heard anything yet?’

The other three shook their heads. ‘Me muvver had the telly on – there was nothing on the local news,’ Benno said.

Tommo took another large gulp from the sherry bottle. ‘What we should do is send someone down that way. Maybe Smiffy was just unconscious. He might not be dead.’

Dave Taylor shrugged his shoulders. ‘We’ve never seen a dead person before, so none of us would know what one looked like.’

Tibbsy shook his head. ‘I’m telling yer now, the cunt was dead. Someone must ’ave found him by now, and I bet yer it’s swarming

with police down there.'

'Who can we send down there to 'ave a nose?' Tommy asked. 'We don't wanna involve any of the other lads that weren't with us last night. It's a good job we kept the meet a secret, and never told any of 'em.'

Tibbsy agreed. Sometimes their gang consisted of about twelve but last night's pre-arranged encounter was top boys only.

'If we're not gonna tell anyone else, the only one we can ask to go down there is Lenny Simpson.'

Tibbsy slapped Benno on the back. 'Good thinking, Batman. We'll finish this booze, then we'll go and find him.'

Lenny Simpson was at home looking after his younger brother when the lads knocked. 'I'll go and check it out for yer, lads. I'm gonna have to take Matty with me though, there's no one else to look after him.'

Lenny Simpson was one of the put-upon people of this world. His mother sold her body to fund her drug habit, and his two sisters were selfish and a complete waste of space. Lenny's younger brother, Matthew, was fifteen and mentally retarded. It had been him that Smiffy had taunted and terrorised for years. Lenny looked after Matty almost twenty-four seven, and if it wasn't for him, the poor little sod would have been stuck in care years ago.

'Right, what's the plan then?' Tibbsy asked, as Lenny appeared with his little bro.

Lenny grabbed Matty's hand. He had a terrible habit of

running into the road. 'I'll go down there with Matty. You and the lads go to the park and I'll meet yer back at the shelter.'

Tommo searched through his pockets and ordered his gang to do the same. Counting up the money, he handed it to Lenny. 'Get us some cider, Old Man Tatler won't serve us. Whatever's left over, you can spend on sweets for Matty.'

Lenny went into the shop, handed the lads their booze and said goodbye. He couldn't wait to find out what had happened to his brother's tormentor. With a bit of luck Smiffy was brown bread and would rot in hell.

Tommy and the boys sat anxiously in the shelter, drinking and chain-smoking. The hour they waited for Lenny to come back seemed more like an eternity, and as they spotted him and Matty in the distance, they sprinted towards them. Tibbsy was the fastest runner and reached them first.

'Well?' he asked expectantly.

Lenny Simpson loved a bit of excitement. If it hadn't been for having to take care of Matty, he would have been a gang member himself. Plonking himself on the grass, he relayed the full story.

'Smiffy was found at 'alf six this morning, apparently. Old Mother Kelly said he was as stiff as a board. It's swarming with Old Bill down there and they've even shut off part of the Mile End Road. I saw Graham Roberts, he said the Old Bill had been round his asking lots of questions. He reckons they're doing loads of house-to-house enquiries. There's tons of people hanging about, but the police 'ave put tape round. Everyone down

there reckons that Smiffy had so many enemies, they'll never find the killer.'

'Wee wee, Lenny. Wee wee.'

Lenny glanced at his brother. He'd already got his cock out and was pissing on the grass.

'Don't piss 'ere Matty. Be a good boy and go over there by that tree.'

Cock in hand, Matty shuffled away.

Overcome by shock that he was actually a murderer, Tommy sank to his knees.

'Move over Tommo, you're kneeling in piss,' Tibbsy said, laughing.

Tommy ignored his pal and put his head in his hands. Fuck the piss, that was the least of his problems. He was a killer, he'd wiped out someone's life and he didn't have a clue what to do about it.

Lenny put an arm around him. 'You'll be OK, Tommo, just stick to the story. Mine, records, beer, Bowie. Me mum and sisters weren't about and I've clued Matty up on what to say.'

Tommy looked at Matty who was waddling towards him with his cock in his hand. That imbecile's gonna be a lot of fucking use, he thought inwardly.

Dave Taylor downed the last of the cider and chucked the empty bottle. 'I'm starving, who's up for some chips?'

Tommy shot him a look of hatred. 'I don't believe you, Taylor. I'm looking at life and all you can think about is your gut.'

Taylor shrugged. 'It was just a suggestion.'

Tommy stood up. These pricks were doing his head in and he needed to be alone. He forced himself to be polite. 'I'm off now, lads. It's me mum's birthday and she's having a party, she needs me to give her a hand with some stuff.'

The crew nodded.

'See yer, Tommo. If we hear anything we'll let yer know,' Tibbsy said.

Tommy dug his hands deep into his pockets and trudged away. He couldn't believe what had happened. He wasn't that bothered about Smiffy – he hated the cunt, always had. It was himself he was worried about. Say the police found some evidence? Or the Bethnal Green wankers grassed him up?

Tommy's instincts told him he was in shit street. Filled with worry, he took a slow walk home.

THREE

'SUSAN, WHAT YER doing? Three times I've asked yer to help me with these sandwiches. Now move your fucking arse.'

Susan lolloped into the kitchen, picked up the knife and lunged at the bread as though she'd had an argument with it. She hated doing favours for anyone and on the odd occasion she was forced to, she made her feelings known.

Seeing the mess that her daughter was making, Maureen grabbed the knife and ordered her to go and get changed. 'And make sure you 'ave a wash, yer dirty little cow.'

Tommy sat on the back step and lit up a fag. It was only

recently that his mum had allowed him to smoke indoors. She wasn't happy about it, but had told him he was old enough to make his own choices. 'If you're gonna do it behind me back, you may as well do it in front of me,' she said.

Tommy's ears pricked up as he heard his gran arrive. Her voice was like a foghorn and you couldn't miss it. 'There's been another bloody murder down the road, Maur,' she exclaimed. 'You know Mary Smith, dontcha? Her lad, Terry, was found this morning. Apparently, the poor little bastard had been laying there, brown bread for hours.'

Maureen was preparing the pickles and nearly dropped the Tupperware dish in shock. She knew Mary Smith very well. She was a regular at the bingo hall and they'd often sit together and have a chinwag.

'Gordon Bennett! I can't believe it, Mum. It's terrible, she's such a nice woman, is Mary. She idolised her Terry, was forever talking about him. What must the poor woman be going through?'

Ethel shook her head. 'Poor fucker. I dunno what this bleedin' world's coming to. There was none of this in my day – yer could leave your fuckin' door open then, yer know. If yer left it open now, some bastard would rob yer and murder yer in your bed.'

Maureen agreed with her. 'I feel so sorry for Mary. I'll have to pop round to her house in the next couple of days and offer my condolences.'

Unable to listen to any more, Tommy felt physically sick

as he jumped next door's fence and clambered into their back alleyway. Crouching down by the bushes, he held his head in his hands. He never had a clue that his mum and Smiffy's mum knew one another. Learning they were friends was like a smack in the face to him. What the fuck was he meant to do now? If he was rumbled, his mother would skin him alive. Wishing more than anything he could turn back the clock, he sat deep in thought. He had to force himself to go back home, get changed, and join in with the birthday party. If he didn't, it would look odd and he didn't want anything to look suspicious.

DC Perryman and PC Rogers had been sent to investigate a black bag that had been found by a dog walker. The bag had been spotted amongst some bushes in an alleyway that backed onto the Ocean Estate. DC Perryman had been desperate for promotion for a very long time and couldn't hide his delight at the contents.

'Look at this, Rogers. Bingo!' he said, as he looked at the blood-stained windfall.

The party was in full swing by the time Tommy arrived back home.

'Where yer been, yer crafty little bastard?' Maureen wanted to know.

'I'm sorry, Mum. I popped round me mate's and ...'

Cutting him dead, Maureen shoved him towards the stairs. 'You look like a tramp and I will not have you showing me up on my birthday. There's hot water in the immersion, get upstairs and get washed and changed.'

Maureen's anger at her eldest diminished as James flung himself at her. 'Uncle Kenny's here, Mum. He's over there with Nanny.'

Feeling flustered, Maureen dashed into the kitchen to pour herself a drink. She was having one of her funny turns again.

Kenny was her husband Tommy's younger brother, Ethel's other son. He and his wife, Wendy, had done well for themselves. A scrap-metal dealer, Kenny had recently brought a posh house in Essex, much to Ethel's annoyance. 'What's a matter with bleedin' Stepney? Not good enough for him any more? That's her doing, Lady fuckin' Penelope,' she moaned. Wendy came from Upminster and her parents were quite well-to-do. Ethel had disliked her from day one.

'Look what Uncle Kenny brought me,' James said, as he ran into the kitchen and thrust a toy police car at her.

Maureen looked at his happy face. The poor little sod didn't get many toys; they couldn't afford them, as a rule. 'Go and put it in your bedroom and you can play with it tomorrow. It'll get broken if yer leave it laying around tonight.'

James did as he was told. On reaching the bedroom, he was surprised to see Tommy there. 'Why are you lying down?'

Tommy sat up. 'I'm fine, just tired, that's all.'

'Do you like my present? Uncle Kenny brought it for me. He's brought you summink, and Susan.'

Tommy smiled. Ruffling his brother's hair, he stood up. 'I'll race yer downstairs, Jimmy boy.'

The Old Bill shop was brimming with excitement. Bloodstained clothes, a murder weapon and a dead body found. Even Benny out of *Crossroads* could have put two and two together and come up with four for this one. The icing on the cake came five minutes later when a letter from the school was discovered in the back pocket of the trousers. Addressed to a Mrs Hutton, it was a letter asking why her son, Tommy, had not been attending school. DC Perryman picked up the envelope and danced around the station. Like a cat that had got the cream, he eagerly awaited his promotion.

Back at the party, Ethel encouraged James to stand in the middle of the circle. He was dancing to 'Simple Simon' and knew all the actions and words, bless him.

Ethel nudged Maureen. Normally she loved nothing more than to watch James perform his party piece, but tonight she seemed uninterested.

'I'm sorry, Mum. I'm just keeping me eye on the other two. Tommy's been acting strange all night. I'm sure he's pissed and I've just seen Susan clump Sylvie's little girl.'

'Who the fuck is Sylvie?'

Maureen pointed her out. 'She's new round 'ere. Comes from Hackney, she does, and has just moved into the flats round by Old Man Tatler's. I caught Susan picking on her little 'un the other day as well. Pushed her off the swing in the park, she did.'

Ethel tutted. 'Vindictive little fucker, that daughter of yours. I'd brainwash her if she was mine. 'Ere, get us another drink,

Maur, I'm empty again.'

Maureen stood up. She was desperate for a top-up herself.

Clocking Wendy studying her, Ethel put her hand up her skirt and adjusted herself. 'Cutting me ha'penny in half, these bleedin' knickers,' she shouted.

'Do you have to do that, Mum?'

Ethel stared at Kenny with a devilish look in her eye. 'It's my crotch, I'll do what I fuckin' well like with it.'

'Time to go,' Wendy said, nudging him. She'd only come in the first place because he'd promised her a new fur coat.

Kenny sighed. 'We're gonna make a move now, Mum. Wendy's not feeling too well, she's got a touch of flu.'

'Flu! Fuckin' flu! More like miserableitis or stuck-up-cunt disease, yer mean,' Ethel cackled.

Kissing her on the cheek, Kenny ignored his mother's nasty comments and headed off to find Maureen. 'Happy birthday,' he said, handing her two tenners. 'I've gotta go now, Maur. Wendy's not well. Treat yourself to something nice, eh?'

Maureen angrily chucked the money back at him. She wasn't a bloody charity case. 'Look Kenny, you don't have to make up for yer brother being an arsehole. Please don't insult me, I don't want yer money.'

Looking sheepish, Kenny pocketed the money, said goodbye and grabbed Wendy's hand. The quicker he made an exit, the better.

* * *

As the police van drove towards the Ocean Estate, various orders were given out. All the officers present were more than aware of the Hutton clan. They'd had many run-ins with them over the years. The old man was a waster, a two-bit thief and a drunk, the eldest two of the three kids were shoplifters and bullies, even the gran was a well-known fence and on their wanted list. All the Old Bill were excited about the outcome of this particular arrest. To nick a Hutton for something big was fantastic news, kind of payback for all the years they'd run riot.

Back at Maureen's, the celebration was in full swing and everyone was doing the Hokey Cokey.

With the help of a few alcoholic beverages, Maureen was now the life and soul of the party. Standing in a circle with Sandra and Brenda either side of her, she was enjoying herself immensely. James and a couple of the other kids were in the middle of the circle and Maureen's heart was filled with emotion as she watched her youngest having a ball. Her other two were nowhere to be seen, but that was nothing unusual. Susan had never joined in with anything family-oriented in her life and Tommy felt he was far too old and too cool to be dancing with his mum.

Maureen bent down and tickled James's waist. 'Bend your knees, James, and shout, "Ra, ra, ra!"'

James giggled. He loved the party songs and knew most of the actions off by heart.

As the Hokey Cokey came to an end, a drunken Sandra

decided it was time for a speech. ‘You see this woman ’ere,’ she said loudly. ‘This woman ’ere is the bestest friend I could ever wish for. I love ’er to death, we all love ’er to death and I think we should sing to her.’

* * *

Realising there was a party going on, the police decided to park away from the house. The last thing they wanted was to be seen and give young Tommy time to do a runner. Creeping towards the front door, they awaited their orders from their superior.

‘Right, lads. Go, go, go.’

Sandra was standing on a chair, waving her arms about as if she was conducting an orchestra. All eyes were focused on Maureen.

Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday, dear Maureen,
Happy—

They never got to chant the last line. The police entering the house spelled the end of the singalong. Maureen Hutton’s birthday party was well and truly over.

FOUR

‘THOMAS ARTHUR HUTTON, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Terence John Smith. You do not have to say anything, but anything you do say may be put into writing

and given in evidence ...’

The party fell into a shocked silence as a screaming Tommy was dragged from the room.

Ethel was the first to find her voice. She hated the filth with a passion. As she leaped off the armchair, she laid into the coppers with her fists.

Maureen, who had initially felt her legs buckle underneath her, pulled herself together and followed suit. ‘Leave my boy alone, you no-good bastards,’ she screamed as she chased them into the hallway.

‘He’s only a kid, get your dirty hands off him,’ Sandra yelled, desperate to stick up for her pal.

One of the coppers pushed Sandra out of the way and sent her flying. A free-for-all followed as Sandra’s husband, Pete, went apeshit. Like true cockneys, most of the other guests quickly joined in. The fracas went on for a good ten minutes or so and there were four other arrests made, which included Ethel. The spirited old gran had smacked one officer in the teeth and kicked another in the bollocks.

Finally, some kind of order resumed and an extremely pissed-off DC Perryman re-entered the living room. ‘Tommy needs an adult to accompany him down to the station. The four in the van are no use to him – any other offers?’ he asked sarcastically.

Cuddling a hysterical James, Maureen immediately stood up. ‘I’m his mother. I’ll go with him.’

‘Let me come too, Mum, I wanna see Tommy. Please,

Mummy, please,' James sobbed.

With the police waiting impatiently, Maureen had very little time to soothe her youngest. Assuring him that everything was gonna be OK, she handed him to Sandra. 'Look after him and keep an eye on Susan for me, mate.'

Sandra nodded. None of the women would leave the house until Maureen returned. They were her friends and would tidy the place up and be there for her when she got home. 'Good luck, Maur. There's bound to be some cock-up. Your Tommy might be a little sod, but he's no fucking killer.'

Maureen wasn't allowed to travel with her son on the journey. The police had called in reinforcements and she was shoved into a car on her own. She didn't know where Ethel or the others were, so maybe they were with Tommy. Everything had happened so quickly, she'd had little time to think about the actual accusation. It couldn't be true. The Old Bill must have been desperate to pull someone in and, knowing her Tommy was a local tear-away, had picked on him. Maybe they thought her son was in the know. Being so streetwise, they probably thought that he'd heard a whisper and would grass up the real killer.

* * *

Sandra ordered Susan to put James to bed and then go to bed herself. She needed to discuss the situation with the others and didn't want to say too much in front of the kids. James was too young to really take in what they were talking about, but Susan

had ears like a bat.

Most of the neighbours had gone now. The men had been sent home with the older kids and the other little 'uns were up in the bedroom with Susan and James. There were now just four of them left and they all considered themselves to be Maureen's best friends. Sandra had been insistent that they didn't discuss stuff with anyone they didn't know that well, or trust. Chatting amongst themselves, all the girls were positive that there had been some kind of mix-up. They all knew Mary Smith. Like themselves, she'd had it tough and was one of the old school. None of their kids, including Terry or Tommy, were angels, but none of them were cold-blooded killers. There had to be some mistake.

Tommy sat in the interview room next to his mum, feeling confident. 'I've already told yer, I was round at Lenny Simpson's all night. I was with Michael Tibbs, Ben Thompson and Dave Taylor. We had a few beers and were listening to David Bowie records. If yer don't believe me, go and ask 'em,' he said cockily.

Sitting next to her son, Maureen squeezed his clammy hand. Her Tommy might be a fucker, but he certainly wasn't capable of what he was being accused of. The pigs had a bloody liberty, trying to put the blame on her son.

Maureen stood up; she'd had enough of this shit for one night. If it wasn't bad enough that the bastards had ruined her birthday party, they now seemed content on keeping them there till the cows came home. 'Look, you ain't got nothing on him, so why

the fuck won't you let us go home?'

DC Perryman smiled at his colleague. He'd given Hutton twenty minutes to stew, wonder and make up stories. Now it was time to show him the real evidence and watch the little bastard crumble.

As the bag of evidence was shown, Maureen's heart sank, and she let go of Tommy's hand. Her son's clothes she recognised immediately. He didn't have that many and the ones he did have, she'd had to scrimp and save for. For months he'd driven her mad for a pair of flares and here they were, ripped and covered in blood. She stared at the knife – she didn't recognise that, but he could have got it from anywhere.

'The clothes aren't mine. Tell 'em Mum. Tell 'em they ain't mine,' Tommy said frantically.

Maureen couldn't speak. Her voice had disappeared and her mouth wouldn't open.

As DC Perryman put the school letter on the table, Tommy broke down in tears. 'I didn't do it. It wasn't me, I swear I didn't do it,' he sobbed.

DS Arnold tried a different tactic from his colleague. He was always a big believer in the nice and soft approach. 'Look, son, we know the blood is Terry's and we know the clothes are yours. All we need to know now is what really happened. Was it a fight that went wrong? An argument that got out of hand? You aren't doing yourself any favours, Tommy, by not telling us. We've got you bang to rights and if you help yourself, the judge will be

much more lenient with you.'

Maureen thumped him on the arm. She'd always brought her kids up to tell the truth. 'Cat got your tongue, has it? Answer the fucking man,' she screamed.

Ignoring the duty solicitor's advice, a petrified Tommy spilled his guts. He told them about both of the gangs and his long-term feud with Terry. He said that he'd stolen the fishing knife from his dad, but had acted in self-defence. The police were keen to know if any of the other lads were present. Tommy was no grass and had no intention of dobbing in his mates. 'I was on me own when I chased Smiffy. The other lads had all gone off in different directions to chase the others,' he stated.

DS Arnold smiled. At least they were getting somewhere now. Perryman was a prick and a bully, that's why he'd never been promoted.

'Just one more question, Tommy. Did the other lads know that you'd committed murder? Did you tell them what had happened?'

Tommy wiped his tears on the cuff of his shirt. 'I didn't know he was dead meself. I thought he was just injured and would get up and go home. I told the other lads what had happened and they just thought he was hurt, the same as me. I never meant to kill him, it was an accident. I swear on me life, I didn't mean it.'

DS Arnold stood up. He could tell the kid was telling the truth. The likes of the Huttons were not his kind of people, but that didn't stop him feeling sorry for them. He'd only been working in

the East End for the past year and the poverty-stricken area had been a real eye-opener for him. He'd spent most of his working years in much nicer places and the way the people acted in this neck of the woods had been a pleasant shock to him. They were rough and ready, all right, and would lie through their teeth to avoid prosecution. But once they had them bang to rights, they never grassed their mates but took the rap themselves.

'We'll leave you to it for a few minutes. I'll get you both a cup of tea.'

Leaving the room, Arnold dragged Perryman with him. He could sense the mother was deeply stunned and guessed she'd appreciate a few quiet minutes alone with her child.

As the door closed on them, Maureen burst into tears. 'Why, son, why? How could you do such a thing? Mary's my friend. How can I ever face her again?'

'I'm sorry, Mum,' Tommy sobbed. 'I swear it was an accident. Smiffy tried to shoot me with an air gun a couple of weeks ago. I didn't mean to hurt him, I just wanted to frighten him.'

Maureen stood up. Wiping away her tears, her mood quickly changed to anger. 'You stupid little fucker. Years you'll get for this, fucking years. And as for stealing the knife off your father, I bet yer didn't. I bet the silly bastard gave it to you. Don't lie to me, Tommy, I want the fucking truth.'

'I swear, Mum, he never gave it to me. I nicked it when I went round to see him a couple of weeks ago.'

Lifting her hand, Maureen clumped him around the head.

'You're a fucking idiot, Tommy. All my life I've tried my best for you and this is how you repay me. It's not only your life you've fucked up, but mine too. And what about Susan and James? They'll suffer for this as well. You're just like your father, a fucking asshole. I've done my utmost to keep you on the straight and narrow and all you do is kick me in the teeth. Maybe it's my fault, perhaps I've been too lenient with yer, but I'll tell you summink, you've broken my heart and I'll never forgive yer for this. This time, you've gone one step too far, son.'

As the two Old Bill returned, Maureen walked towards the door. 'I take it you're keeping him here tonight?'

The DS put the teas on the table and nodded.

'Well, I'm off home. You can lock him up and throw away the key for all I care. I have another son indoors, a decent one that needs me. My priorities lie with him now, not this fucking waster.'

Head held high, Maureen marched out of the interview room.

'Please don't leave me, I'm scared, Mum. Come back, please come back.'

As Maureen heard Tommy screaming for her, part of her wanted to hug him and assure him everything was gonna be all right. Wiping away her tears, she carried on walking. Sometimes in life you had to be cruel to be kind. Tommy had made his own choices and now he had to face the consequences. She couldn't be there for him while he was banged up, so best she cut the apron strings now.

Pete, Sandra's old man, was charged with assaulting a police officer. The other three, including Ethel, had been let go with a caution. The police had originally planned to charge Ethel with assault as well, but due to her big mouth spouting non-stop and lack of cell space, they chose to let her go. After all, they had bigger fish to fry.

Ethel gave the Old Bill a barrage of abuse as she walked out of the station. She'd wanted to stay and wait for Tommy and Maureen, but wasn't allowed. The police told her she'd have too long a wait. They also said that if she wasn't off their premises in five minutes flat, they'd have no alternative other than to rearrest her. 'Fucking arseholes,' Ethel muttered, as she trudged down the road.

Sandra, Brenda and the other girls had made the house look as clean as a whistle. They had taken down the cards and banners, put the food away and cleared up any traces of the party. 'It's best she's not reminded of it,' Brenda insisted.

When Ethel arrived she had no update on Tommy's arrest, and no idea where Maureen was. Sandra made her a cup of tea and told her the little they knew. Ethel, being Ethel, was still furious about her own arrest. 'Fucking load of cunts. What a fucking liberty,' she kept repeating.

Maureen's heart was beating nineteen to the dozen as she neared her house. What the hell was she meant to tell everyone? It was such a close-knit community; everybody knew everybody. Mary Smith might live in Bethnal Green, but it was only down

the road and she was still part of their community. The East End wasn't perfect, it was littered with thieves, wide boys and scoundrels, but there was one unwritten rule: 'You don't shit on your own doorstep.'

Taking a deep breath, Maureen put her key in the lock. It was time to face the music.

Sandra was the first to greet her. 'Well? Where's Tommy?' she asked expectantly, as Ethel and the others stood behind her.

Maureen could barely look at them. 'Get me a drink, summink strong. I need to sit down.'

James had lain awake for hours. He was so worried about his big brother. Why had the police taken him away? And when was he coming back? Hearing his mum return, he crept onto the landing. He needed to earwig and find out what was going on.

Maureen gulped the whole glass of brandy and put her head in her hands. Ethel guessed what had happened and decided to help her daughter-in-law out. 'Don't bother trying to explain, we can guess. The little bastard's guilty? He killed Terry Smith?'

Between sobs, Maureen somehow managed to speak. 'Yes, Mum. Our Tommy's a murderer, he's admitted to it.'

Sandra, Brenda and the other girls all glanced at one another. No one said a word.

James frantically ran back to his room. His brother was the best, he couldn't be a murderer. The policemen must have made a mistake. Remembering the new toy his uncle Kenny had brought him, he pulled it out from under the bed. He'd always had a thing

about police cars. 'I'm gonna be a policeman one day when I'm a big boy,' he'd told everyone. Well, not any more – he hated them now. They'd taken away his beloved brother.

James opened the bedroom window, 'I hate you, you pig bastards,' he shouted, as the car smashed on the coal bunker below.

Shivering, James climbed into bed and sobbed himself to sleep.

FIVE

THE NEXT SIX months were probably the worst in Maureen's life. She'd fully expected her Tommy to be charged with manslaughter and receive a lesser sentence, but it wasn't to be. The authorities had decided to make an example of him. The jury had found him guilty of murder and he'd received fifteen years for his crime. As the judge announced the sentence, Maureen felt her legs go from under her.

'Noooo! It was an accident. Tell 'em, Mum, tell 'em,' were the words she heard her son scream as her friends helped carry her out of the court.

Once a respected pillar of the community, Maureen felt this was no longer the case. Everywhere she went she heard the whispers, noticed the stares, and even the rag-and-bone man now gave her a wide berth. No one had actually blamed her face to face and even Mary Smith had squeezed her hand outside the court and offered her words of comfort. Maureen had felt terrible about this. She had expected the murdered lad's mum to come

at her like a rabid dog, but Mary hadn't blamed her at all. Mary's friends and family most certainly did. Maureen could see the hatred in their eyes. It was as though they were silently trying to tell her that if she had been a better parent, none of this would have happened.

Her mother-in-law and her own friends had been fantastic. They were always popping round to check she was all right and she was never left alone for long. Maureen's social life had flown right out of the window from the day that Tommy was arrested. She could never face going to the bingo hall again. Mary and her friends had used it for years and Maureen couldn't face the gossip and the shame. She'd even stopped joining in with the regular Saturday-night parties. How could she dance, drink and be happy, when her son had wiped out a young boy's life? The odd cup of tea with a friend or a quick pop up the shops was all she could manage these days. She seemed to have lost her sparkle, her sense of humour, and the lack of activity suited her down to the ground. Maureen's thoughts were disturbed by her daughter's whining voice.

'Mum, I'm bored sitting upstairs. Can I go outside and play? I'm sorry for what I said the other day, and I promise I'll never say it again.'

Maureen shot her daughter a disdainful look. Susan had been grounded for the last two days and had been sent to her room in disgrace. The headmistress of her daughter's school had contacted Maureen and asked her to pop in. Apparently,

Susan had been threatening some of the kids there. She'd been demanding their dinner money, while bragging about Tommy.

'You either pay up, or when my bruvver gets out, I'll make sure you're next on his hit list,' she'd boasted cockily.

One of the teachers had witnessed Susan demanding money from fellow pupils on numerous occasions. When questioned, two of the kids had broken down. This was why the headmistress was now involved and Maureen was bloody well furious.

'You can go out, Susan, for two hours. But, I swear, girl, if I ever hear that you've been bragging about your bruvver again, I will personally fucking doughboy yer. Do you understand me?'

Susan nodded and walked away.

Maureen made herself a brew and went upstairs to see James. Her poor baby was a shadow of his former self and she was so worried about him. James had idolised Tommy and had followed him about like a lost puppy. Now his brother was no longer about, James spent most of his time alone in his room. Maureen's heart went out to him as she opened the bedroom door. He was kneeling on the carpet playing with a toy truck, his face a picture of sadness.

'Are you all right, darling?' she asked.

'Yes, Mummy,' James said quietly.

Maureen sat on the bed and handed him a white paper bag. 'I bought you a present from the baker's. It's a gingerbread man, your favourite.'

James took the bag and sat on the bed next to her. He wasn't

hungry, but nibbled his present out of politeness. ‘Mummy, when you go and see Tommy again, please let me come with you. I’ll be a good boy, I promise.’

Maureen held him close to her. Tommy was in Feltham Borstal and it was miles away, a poxy journey. With money being tight, she’d only been there the once herself. ‘Where Tommy’s staying is not a very nice place, James. I’ll take you there when you’re a bit older.’

James threw himself against her chest and sobbed. Lifting his head, he looked her in the eyes and pleaded with her. ‘Please take me to see him, Mummy. I don’t care if it’s not nice. Please, Mum, can I go?’

Maureen looked into his angelic little eyes and didn’t have the heart to say no. She didn’t want James to visit a bloody borstal, but what could she do? ‘OK, I’ll arrange a visit and take you, but first you must eat all that gingerbread man and promise me that you’re not gonna sit in your bedroom all the time from now on. *Mr Benn’s* on telly in a minute, let’s watch it together, eh?’

James smothered her with kisses. ‘When can we go, Mum? Can we go tomorrow?’ he asked excitedly.

Maureen cupped his precious face. He looked happier now than she’d seen him in months. ‘You musn’t be impatient, James. Mummy has to organise some money and book the visit. I’ll try and sort something out tomorrow, see if I can scrape together the train fare for this weekend.’

James picked up his gingerbread man and tucked into it. He

was so excited, he couldn't wait to see his big brother. Surely once Tommy saw him, he'd want to come back home. And then they'd be happy again, like they were before.

Susan was filled with excitement as she watched Jeanette Dickenson walk into the sweet shop. Grinning, she urged her friend Tracey to follow her and hide behind the furniture shop. Susan couldn't stand Jeanette Dickenson. Jeanette had everything in life that she didn't. Her mum was slim and modern, her dad had a good job. She had a brand new Chopper bike, a cute little puppy called Simba, and she always had loads of money for sweets and stuff.

Peeping around the wall, Susan saw Jeanette coming towards her with her usual bag of goodies. Nudging Tracey to follow her lead, she leaped out from behind the wall and grabbed Jeanette by her stupid ponytail. 'Give us your sweets and your money,' she demanded.

Jeanette's eyes filled with tears. She'd had run-ins with Susan Hutton in the past and was petrified of her. 'I can't, the sweets are for my little brothers and the money is my mum's change.'

Tracey was desperate to impress her new friend. Spotting the puppy, she aimed a kick at its head.

The dog's yelp was enough to make Jeanette change her mind. 'Just take it,' she said, handing over the bag and her mother's change.

Susan released her grip on Jeanette's hair and pointed a finger in her face.

‘If you say one word to yer mum or dad, I’m gonna do the same to your dog as what my bruvver did to Terry Smith.’

Jeanette shook with fear as she picked up poor Simba. ‘I promise I won’t say a word. I’ll pretend to mum that I lost the pound note she gave me.’

‘Best yer get yourself home then,’ Tracey said, giving her a sly kick in the ankle as a farewell present.

Arm in arm, Susan and Tracey ran down the road laughing their heads off. Satisfied with their five minutes’ work, they sat on a wall and counted their earnings. Fifty-two pence, two Curly Wurlys, a Mars bar, two Sherbet Fountains and a big bag of penny sweets.

Susan smiled at her friend. ‘Go back to the shop, buy some bubble gum and get some change so we can split the money.’

Susan stuffed her face with penny sweets as she watched Tracey run off up the road. Up until a couple of months ago, she hadn’t a friend in the world.

Tracey Davis and her family had recently been moved from Canning Town to Stepney. Tracey’s brother, Andrew, had apparently mugged an old pensioner in Newham and the old dear had later died of head injuries. There had been a lot of ill-feeling in the area about the incident and Tracey and her family were rehoused by the council on the Ocean Estate in Stepney. Her brother, Andrew, was now in prison paying for his crime. On sharing secrets about their brothers, Tracey and Susan had an immediate bond. Both shared vindictive personalities and,

having palled up, were a match made in heaven.

Tracey was out of breath as she ran back to her mate. 'That's your half and that's mine,' she rasped, as she counted out the money.

Susan giggled. 'Let's have a bet. First one to eat a Curly Wurly gets the packet of bubble gum.'

Tracey laughed as she counted down. 'Three, two, one – go.'

Mouths full, the race was on.

Unaware that his sister was making money out of his name, Tommy Hutton trudged out onto the playing fields with the other lads. He smiled at his pal, Freddie, as Finchy gave them their orders.

'Right lads. No kicking, spitting, biting, punching or slide tackling from behind. Got it?'

Twenty-two heads nodded and the whistle was blown. Today's game of footie was a proper match for once. Usually they just trained or had a game amongst themselves, but this was different, it was one wing against another.

Tommy already had his orders. He was to scythe down the Paki kid, Ranjit Patel. Apparently, Patel had set fire to his family home, killing his kid sister and grandmother. Tommy got his chance within minutes, seeing his prey lying on the ground, he pretended to go for the ball, but instead kicked the sicko full in the mouth, loosening two of his front teeth. Tommy was immediately shown the red card.

'It was an accident, sir. I went for the ball.'

Finchy was having none of it. 'You're off, Hutton. Go and sit down on the grass and I'll deal with you later.'

Tommy smiled to himself as he sat alone watching the game. He'd hated Feltham when he'd first arrived. In fact, he'd made a right prick of himself, crying himself to sleep night after night. Things had changed after about six weeks. He'd got his head together, found his inner strength, and hit it off with Freddie Adams.

In the early days of being caged, Tommy had kept himself to himself. He'd spoken to some of the lads, but not at length. A couple of them were all right, but a lot of them were thickos. Bored with his own company, he searched his wing for someone on his wavelength. He couldn't find anyone but, as luck would have it, Freddie then turned up.

For the first couple of days, Tommy eyed the new boy suspiciously. Freddie was a typical jack the lad. He had a way with people, knew how to work them, had them eating out of his hand. Tommy found himself alone with Freddie for the first time about a week later. They clicked immediately and were best buddies within the hour.

Freddie was in for murder as well, but had gone one better than Tommy. He'd nicked his brother's gun and shot his victim straight through the head. Obviously, he lied in court. He said he was just threatening the lad and the gun had gone off accidentally. The judge had fallen for Freddie's baby face and boyish charm, and had given him a rather lenient twelve years.

‘I was lucky really, I sort of acted simple. I think the jury thought I was a bit backward and by the time the case ended, even the judge felt sorry for me,’ Freddie boasted.

Tommy was fascinated by his new-found friend. Freddie was a year younger than himself, but acted far older and wiser. He came from Manor Park and his older brother and uncle were armed robbers, so maybe that’s where he got it from.

Tommy’s attentions were turned back to the present as he noticed the commotion on the football pitch. Seeing Freddie had gotten his marching orders, Tommy smiled as he walked towards him. Freddie’s intended target had been Kevin Wallis, who was a complete weirdo and by all accounts a nonce-case. Rumour had it, he was locked up for fiddling with a six year old.

‘I was daydreaming. I didn’t see yer do him,’ Tommy said, as his pal flopped on the grass next to him.

‘I elbowed the cunt as I went up for a corner. I did that good a job, I think I nearly took his eye out.’

Tommy laughed. ‘Whaddya think our punishment will be this time?’

Freddie shrugged. ‘Don’t know, don’t care. We’ll be all right, Finchy knows we only do the wrong ’uns.’

At the end of the game, both Tommy and Freddie were summoned into Finchy’s office.

‘Look lads, I won’t go to the guv’nor, but that’s the second week in a row two lads have received medical treatment on your behalf. I have to punish you, so it’s no TV for either of you for

a week, starting from tonight. Now go and get showered, then back to your cells, both of you.'

Tommy and Freddie were in high spirits as they got showered and changed. Their punishment was a piece of piss. Freddie's cell was right next door to Tommy's, and they'd learnt how to communicate by tapping on the wall. They had their own code and were able to have some basic conversations.

'Right, I'll see yer at dinner,' Freddie said, as they reached their cells.

'What we gonna do if we can't watch telly?' Tommy asked.

'We can have a nice little chat. We need to talk and plan our future.'

Tommy shook his head. 'We're gonna be locked up for years. What's the fuckin' point?'

Freddie grabbed Tommy by the shoulders. 'Look at me, Tom. We might be boys now, but when we get out we'll be men. We have to be ready for it.'

Tommy smiled. As usual, his pal was right.

SIX

ETHEL HUTTON STOOD outside the hardware store in Dagenham Heathway and eyed the contents suspiciously. A stout woman, Ethel had an old-fashioned dress sense, grey curly hair, and due to her bloody hard life, looked far older than her fifty-six years.

Ethel had been thieving for years – case of bloody having to. She never chored locally. A, she'd never take from her own, and

B, she was far too well known in the East End even to attempt it.

Dragging her shopping trolley behind her, Ethel entered the store. Tools always sold well and she needed to have a good day today. Her Maureen was taking James to visit Tommy and she'd promised to give them the train fare.

There were a few people standing at the counter and the man who was serving was far too busy to be noticing her. Filling her trolley with anything expensive and saleable, Ethel was just about to exit the store when she heard shouting.

'Oi, stop, thief!'

Unaware that a second member of staff, posing as a customer, had been watching her, Ethel had no other choice than to leave her trolley and leg it. Running up Heathway Hill, she didn't see the dodgy paving stone. Seconds later, Ethel was lying face down on the ground, writhing with pain.

'Gertcha, cowson,' she said to the shop worker, as she clutched her ankle.

The police arrived within minutes.

James pushed the pouffe towards the window. It was heavy, but he could just about manage to move it without any help. Standing on top of it, he pressed his face against the glass. The old woman who used to live next door had recently died and now there were new neighbours moving in. James was hoping there'd be a boy his age for him to play with.

'Your sore throat seems miraculously better. Don't be so bleeding nosy, come away from that window,' Maureen ordered,

as she handed him a tray with his egg and chips.

He'd jibbed off school earlier, saying he was ill, and she was sure he was playing a fast one.

James smiled as he dipped his bread in the yolk. 'Do you think there'll be some boys I can play with, Mummy?'

Maureen shook her head. 'Afraid not son. I spoke to 'em earlier. They've got a little girl, same age as you.'

'Aw, I wanted a boy to play with. I don't like girls.'

Maureen ruffled his head. 'You will do when you're older. At least I hope you will.'

Hearing his favourite programme about to start, James forgot about the neighbours and concentrated on *Mr Benn*. The man in the bowler hat was a legend and today he was a cowboy.

Leaving him to watch his hero, Maureen smiled and left the room.

Ethel avoided arrest by lying and pretending to have a broken ankle. She seemed truthful and in so much agony that the police called an ambulance and decided not to prosecute her. She'd told them it was a one-off. 'I swear, I've never nicked anything in me life,' she insisted. 'I only did it 'cause me poor daughter-in-law needed the money for train tickets to visit me grandson.'

'Where's your grandson living, then?' one of the officers asked.

'Norfolk. He's retarded and they've put him in one of them homes – you know, a funny farm.'

The two officers had a quick chat among themselves. They'd

retrieved the shopping trolley, the store had its goods back, so there was no harm done.

‘Poor old cow,’ the young copper said to the older one.

After hearing that she was being let off, Ethel waved at the two Old Bill from the back of the ambulance. As soon as the doors were shut, she cackled with laughter and did a wanker sign at them.

Arriving at the hospital, Ethel gave the doctors a false name. She refused to go into a cubicle, saying that her leg now felt better and she’d rather sit in the waiting room in a wheelchair.

‘I’m claustrophobic. I’ll wait ’ere for me x-ray,’ she lied.

As soon as the coast was clear, Ethel half ran and half hobbled out the door. She didn’t have a clue where she was or how to get home. Asking a passer-by, she learned that she was in Romford.

‘Romford. Fucking Romford,’ she muttered as she trudged towards a bus stop.

After a lot of wrong directions, Ethel finally got a 103 back to Dagenham East station. She knew her way home from there. The district line took her straight through to Stepney Green.

As she sat on the train, Ethel wondered how she was going to tell Maureen that she didn’t have the money for the train tickets. The poor cow had booked the visit and was going up there in less than forty-eight hours. With her shopping trolley confiscated, there was no way that Ethel could get the cash before then. Not only that, having a near escape and falling arse over tit had slightly unnerved her. She’d have to give it at least a week

before she felt confident enough to go out on the rob again.

Maureen was sitting on the carpet, playing dominoes with James, when Ethel let herself in.

‘What a bleedin’ day I’ve had. Nearly got arrested, and I’ve been stuck at a fuckin’ hospital in the middle of nowhere.’

James listened to his nan’s antics with interest. He had never forgiven the police force for arresting Tommy.

‘You should have hit them, Nanny, and kicked them.’

‘Stay here and watch telly, James,’ Maureen ordered, as she shoved Ethel towards the kitchen. She’d had one son go off the rails and was now determined to keep the other wrapped in cotton wool.

Hearing her trip to Feltham was now in serious jeopardy, Maureen put her head in her hands.

‘What am I gonna tell the boys? I spoke to Tommy yesterday, he sounds so much brighter. As for James, his heart’s gonna be broken.’

Ethel stood up. ‘I’ll tell yer what we’re gonna do. Get yer coat, and we’ll go and find that no-good bastard son of mine. He never gives you a fuckin’ penny, yet he’s always got money to spend in the pub.’

Maureen hated her husband and despised asking him for anything. Tonight was different though. She was that desperate, she’d have gladly asked Jack the Ripper to fund her journey, if it meant she could get to see her son.

‘Put your parka on over your jamas, James. Quickly put your

shoes on, we're going to see Daddy.'

Usually, Maureen would rather go without food for a week than have herself or her family walking the streets looking like tramps, but this was an emergency. Anywhere else in the world they might have looked a funny sight traipsing down the road. Ethel's back and ankle were playing up and she was walking like Quasimodo. Maureen had her curlers in and James looked like an orphan in his pyjamas, navy anorak and scuffed black shoes, but no one took a blind bit of notice of them as they headed towards the pub. The East End had a culture of its own.

Tommy senior was an easy chap to find. If he was skint, he was at his bedsit in Whitechapel. If he had money, he was either in the Horn of Plenty, or the nearest betting shop. Today, Tommy had had one of his better days. He'd won a score this morning on traps one and six. Now he had his arm around Shaking Sheila, and was in the process of worming his way back to hers for a quick leg-over.

Sheila had been a real beauty in her heyday. That was before the alcohol had ravaged her face and body. She now woke up like she had St Vitus's dance every morning and it took her at least six drinks to stop the shakes, hence the nickname.

Tommy wasn't in the habit of being fussy. She had big tits, and he wasn't exactly Warren Beatty himself. Buying another round, he decided to go in for the kill. Grabbing her arse, he stuck his tongue straight down the back of her throat. Paralytic and virtually unable to stand, Sheila grabbed him and responded

as if her life depended on it.

Ethel spotted her son immediately. ‘There he is with some dirty stinking whore,’ she said, as she dragged his family towards him.

Maureen didn’t give a shit that he was mauling some rough old bird. He repelled her and as long as he never laid another finger on her, he could maul whoever he wanted.

Seeing his mum approach, Tommy withdrew his tongue from Shaking Sheila’s throat.

‘Whassa matter?’ he slurred.

Ethel held open the palm of one hand and pointed at Maureen and James with the other. ‘Your wife and son need money to go and visit your Tommy in Feltham. I’ve tried to help ’em, but I can’t this time.’

Tommy shrugged his slouched shoulders. ‘Whaddya want me to do? I ain’t got no money.’

Squinting through one eye, Sheila suddenly realised that the cute little boy must be Tommy’s son.

‘Is that your daddy?’ she slurred.

Frightened of the woman with the big boobies, James nodded and quickly moved away from her.

When sober, Sheila hated children. They were a bloody nuisance. When drunk, she loved every hair on their little heads.

Ethel made Tommy empty the pockets of his dirty trousers. ‘One pound, ten pence. Is that all you’ve got? You might be my son, but you make me fucking sick, Tommy Hutton. Pissed up

in 'ere, day in, day out, and not a penny towards your family's upkeep.'

'Issall gone,' Tommy slurred.

Sick of the mad woman who kept pestering him, James moved to the other side of the pub and sat at a table. Sheila, who was desperate to get away from the family argument, decided to play chase with him.

'Where you gone, little boy?' she shouted, as she staggered his way.

Seeing her lunge towards him, James leaped off the chair and ran back towards his mum. Hearing a commotion, he looked behind him just in time to see Sheila fall into the table and land flat on her back.

'Can we go now, Mummy?' he said, tugging Maureen's arm. His dad hadn't even spoken to him and he didn't want the mad woman to chase him again.

Having kept her trap shut until now, Maureen looked at the one pound ten pence in her hand and felt her blood boil. Slipping James the coin, she ripped the pound note up in shreds, dropped it in Tommy's pint and then promptly poured the contents over his drunken head.

'You fucking arsehole,' she said viciously. 'Come on, we're going.'

Grabbing Ethel with one hand and dragging James by the other, she marched out of the pub, head held high.

An hour later, back home with a brandy in her hand, it was

Ethel who started laughing first.

‘Did you see his face when you poured the beer over his head? I didn’t know if he was gonna cry or lick it up off the bar.’

Maureen knocked back the contents of her glass and forced a smile. She was still worried about the visit, but had an idea. It was the last resort, really. Maureen didn’t have a phone indoors, but Ethel had one and allowed her to use it if she needed to.

‘Mum, do you think Kenny would lend us the money for the train fare? I can pay him back within a month.’

‘Course he would,’ Ethel said immediately.

Unlike Tommy, her youngest boy was extremely wealthy and a credit to her. He and his wife Wendy had no children, but Kenny loved kids, and Ethel was positive he’d be only too pleased to help his family out. He wouldn’t see Tommy have no visitors, that was for sure.

‘I’m surprised I never thought of Kenny. Run over to mine and ring him,’ Ethel insisted.

‘No. I don’t like to,’ Maureen said sharply. ‘You do it, Mum. Ask him for me.’

‘You’re a funny girl, Maureen. He don’t bleedin’ bite, yer know,’ Ethel said, as she picked up her bag.

Five minutes later, Ethel was back with good news. ‘You ain’t even gotta get a train, Maur. He’s driving yer down there in his new car. He said he’ll probably bring Wendy for the ride. He also said that he’s gonna get you a phone installed, he said you should have one now so that Tommy can ring yer.’

Maureen was horrified. She always felt inadequate around Kenny and Wendy. Their lives were so different from hers and she felt extremely uncomfortable in their company.

‘I don’t wanna go in the car. I’d much rather go by train.’

Ethel poured them both another brandy. ‘Don’t be so bleedin’ stupid. You’ll enjoy going by car, and James’ll love it.’

Hearing his name mentioned, James wandered into the kitchen. Ethel grabbed him and sat him on her lap. ‘Uncle Kenny’s gonna take you to see your bruvver in his brand new car.’

James bounced up and down excitedly. He loved cars, they were his obsession. ‘What car has uncle Kenny got?’

Ethel lifted him off her knee. Her bloody ankle was playing up again. ‘He’s got a Jaguar.’

James’s eyes lit up. ‘Really? And he’s gonna take me to see Tommy in it?’

Maureen looked at her son’s happy face. He deserved a treat, her baby, and if it meant suffering Wendy and Kenny for the day, then so be it. At least they would get to see Tommy and the visit would still go ahead. Maureen downed her drink in one and topped her glass up again. She rarely drank in the week, but today had been stressful, to say the least.

She smiled at Ethel. ‘Come with us on Saturday to see Tommy. Even if we can’t get you in on the visit, just come for the ride.’

‘Whaddya want me there for?’

Maureen squeezed her hand. The drink had made her go all sentimental. ‘Cause I bloody well love yer, and sometimes I don’t

know what I'd do without yer.'

Normally Ethel was as tough as old boots, but Maureen's words struck a nerve. Unusually for her, her eyes welled up. 'Of course I'll come, yer silly cow.'

Hearing Susan come in, Maureen shouted for her to come into the kitchen.

'Tired. Going to bed,' came the reply.

'That is one horrible little fucker, needs a good fawpenny one, she does,' Ethel said bluntly.

By ten o'clock, both Ethel and Maureen felt tipsy. After a long, tough day, James had provided them with some light entertainment and had been singing, dancing and telling jokes.

Feeling worn out, James plonked himself on his mum's lap. 'Mum, you know that mad lady in the pub? Did you see her fall over?'

'I didn't see anything. Who you talking about?' Maureen asked him.

'The mad lady who was with Daddy. When you weren't looking she chased me and fell on the floor.'

Maureen looked at Ethel and they both burst out laughing. Holding her sides, Ethel had trouble getting her words out.

'Did the mad woman get back up, James?' she chortled.

James shook his head. 'No, she was still lying on the floor when we came home.'

James stood up. He'd never seen his mum and nan laugh so much. Joining in the fun, he leaped up and down excitedly. Apart

from Tommy, his mum and his nan were his world, and making them happy filled him with glee.

SEVEN

WENDY HUTTON SAT in the front of her husband's car with a face like a slapped arse. She couldn't stand her Kenny's family, and was unable to think of a worse way to spend her weekend than being stuck in a confined space with them. In Wendy's mind, the Huttons were the ultimate dregs of society. She hated sharing their surname and couldn't believe that Kenny had come from such a repulsive family. At first, she'd flatly refused to go on the journey.

'If you think I'm giving up my Saturday to visit a murderer and be stuck with your uncouth family, you can think again,' she told Kenny.

Kenny had bargained with her. 'Please come, Wendy. I know they're common, but they are my flesh and blood. We'll drop them off, then me and you will go for lunch. Go on, come with us, and then on Sunday I'll take you out to look for that sports car you so badly want.'

Reluctantly, Wendy had agreed to accompany him. Kenny liked a quiet life. He adored his wife, loved his family, and wished that everyone would just get along for his sake. He knew his wife could be above herself at times. She'd come from a well-to-do family and was unable to help the way she was. He was sure that she loved him, though, because he hadn't had money when she married him. He'd always be indebted to Wendy and her family,

as it was her dad who had set him up in the scrap-metal game and lent him the money to start his first business.

Kenny knew the reason for Wendy's bad moods. They'd had a lot of problems in the past, which had left his wife feeling bitter and blaming him. For ages they'd unsuccessfully tried for a baby. Finally, they'd gone for tests and were told the problem lay with him. The doctors said that they were unlikely to conceive naturally, because of his low sperm count, but not to give up trying.

Wendy had never seemed the same towards him since that day. Feeling a failure, Kenny had thrown himself into work. His business had thrived and he tried to compensate his wife in other ways. A big house, foreign holidays, cars, clothes and jewellery. Wendy wanted for nothing, but still she wasn't happy. The one thing she really wanted was the one thing he couldn't give her.

'Pull over by them bushes, son. I'm bursting for a slash.'

Ethel annoyed Kenny. She knew that Wendy hated that kind of talk and he was sure his mother purposely tried to wind her up.

'Can't you wait a minute, Mum? I'll find a garage or something. They'll have a proper toilet there.'

Ethel nudged Maureen. She loved winding Wendy up. The stuck-up cow gave her son a dog's life.

'No, I can't bleedin' wait. You know I've got a weak bladder. Pull over quick, before I piss meself on the seat.'

Kenny quickly pulled over. Maybe it was a mistake to bring Wendy with him. He hadn't realised his mum was coming. If

he'd known, he wouldn't have brought his wife.

James screamed with laughter. 'Quick, look at Nanny. Look, quick!'

Wendy glanced out of the window and was disgusted at the sight of Ethel's fat arse. Stony faced, she glared at her husband. 'Never again. I mean it, Kenny.'

Maureen and James couldn't stop laughing. 'We saw your bum, Nanny,' James informed Ethel as she returned to the car.

'Ain't you got no decorum, mother?' Kenny said, awkwardly.

'No, I ain't. Now shut up and fuckin' drive.'

Ethel winked at Maureen. She hadn't even wanted a wee and she'd flashed her arse on purpose, just for Wendy's benefit.

Freddie and Tommy were in high spirits as they waited for their visitors to arrive. Tommy couldn't wait to see his little brother. Freddie was just as excited, because his mum was coming with his auntie Pauline. Tommy was positive that James hadn't said anything about sneaking out in the night and hiding the black bag for him. If he had blabbed, his mother would have gone apeshit and disowned him for good. His mum idolised James, and she certainly wouldn't be visiting him if she thought he'd involved his kid brother in a murder charge.

Kenny pulled the Jag into the car park. Jumping out, he opened the back door for his family.

'Me and Wendy are gonna grab a bite to eat, so I'll meet you back here in a couple of hours. You'll probably be hungry yourselves by then. Shall I bring back some sandwiches?'

‘We’re fine, Kenny. Thanks ever so much for bringing us,’ Maureen said, gratefully.

‘You might be fine, I’m bleedin’ starving,’ Ethel said. ‘I’ll have summink and none of that fancy shit. James’ll be hungry as well, so get us both a bit of grub.’

Kenny nodded, sent his regards to Tommy and quickly got back in the car. Wendy had a face on her like a bulldog chewing a wasp and he knew he was in for an earful.

Maureen was surprised to see how happy and well her son looked. On her previous visit, he’d been tearful and had looked depressed and ill. Today, he looked like a different boy. James wouldn’t leave his brother alone. He clambered onto his lap, refused to budge, and wouldn’t let anyone else get a word in edgeways. Maureen had tried to explain on the journey down there that Tommy wouldn’t be coming home with them, but James was having none of it.

‘You must come home, Tommy. You can’t stay here, I won’t let you,’ he told his brother.

Tommy laughed and ruffled James’s hair. He didn’t have the heart to tell him that he wouldn’t be allowed home for Christ knows how long.

Ethel made Tommy roar with laughter at the story of her near arrest.

Maureen tutted. ‘Watch what you say in front of James, Mum.’

Ethel didn’t take a blind bit of notice. ‘The two Old Bill were soppo cunts, wet behind the ears,’ she continued.

Maureen stood up and grabbed her by the arm. 'Come on, let's go and get a cup of tea. It'll give James some time on his own with Tommy. Explain that you're not coming home to him,' Maureen mouthed, as she dragged Ethel away.

Tommy lifted James off his lap and sat him on the seat next to him. 'I take it you never said anything about that night when you hid the bag for me?'

James shook his head. 'You said it was our secret, Tommy.'

Tommy lifted his brother's chin towards him. 'It is. You must never tell anyone about that, not ever, Jimmy boy.'

James nodded. He understood perfectly. 'Are yer gonna come home with us, Tommy?'

Tommy shook his head. 'I can't, Jimmy, I've been a naughty boy. I had a fight with someone and now I've gotta be punished. That's why I've gotta stay here.'

'Can yer come home soon, though?'

Tommy sighed. He wished his mother had done the explaining. He wasn't much good at this type of thing.

'It won't be soon, mate. I'd love to come home with yer today, but I'm not allowed.'

James sat silently for a minute or so. He wanted to ask something, but wasn't sure how to. 'Did yer kill someone, Tommy? Everyone at school said yer did.'

Tommy shrugged. 'I did, but I didn't mean to. I swear to yer, Jimmy boy, it was an accident.'

Seeing tears in his older brother's eyes, James grabbed his

hand. 'Don't be upset. I believe yer and I won't tell anyone. I don't think uncle Kenny knows, so it'll be another one of our secrets.'

Tommy nodded. He was relieved that his mum and nan were walking towards him. He felt all soppy and emotional explaining things to his brother. Freddie was only two tables away and he didn't want to make a prat of himself in front of him.

'Thanks, Mum,' he said, as she handed him the plastic cup and a Kit-Kat.

Maureen smiled when Tommy pointed out his best mate, Freddie, and spoke fondly about their antics. The day he'd been arrested and admitted to murder, she'd sworn that she was going to wash her hands of him for good, but her decision hadn't lasted long, and two days later, she'd been begging to see him again. She knew he was a fucker, but he was her son and she loved him. She'd never be able to totally forgive him for what he'd done, but deep down, she knew he wasn't a bad lad. If anyone, it was her Susan that was rotten to the core, not Tommy.

As the bell signalled the end of visiting time, James began to cry. He clung to his brother like a jellyfish and refused to let him go. 'If Tommy can't come home with us, can't I stay 'ere with him?' he sobbed as he was finally prised away.

Tommy tried his utmost to not get upset himself and somehow managed it.

'Bye Mum, see yer, Nan. Love yer, Jimmy boy,' he shouted as his family left the building.

Kenny was waiting in the car park as promised. Wendy had

been a complete bitch to him over lunch. ‘Your family are absolutely disgusting. I look at them and sometimes I’m glad that all you could fire was blanks,’ she’d said, nastily.

Kenny had nibbled his ploughman’s and said nothing. It was his own fault – he should never have brought her in the first place. He tried so hard to make the family thing work, but it was never going to. Taking Wendy out with his mob was like taking the Queen Mother out with Alf Garnett for the day.

‘How did it go?’ he asked, handing out the sandwiches.

‘Good as gold. Doing his bird like a man,’ Ethel said proudly.

Overcome by tiredness, James cried himself to sleep within ten minutes of the journey home. Wendy sat silently while her husband and dysfunctional family discussed the visit.

‘He got a bit emotional when James got upset. Other than that, he was OK. He’s met a mate in there, Freddie. We saw the kid and he looked a nice lad. His mum and aunt were visiting him, they seemed decent people as well,’ Maureen said.

Wendy nearly burst out laughing at her sister-in-law’s description of the other boy’s family. How did she have the front to say that they seemed decent? Neither Maureen nor Ethel would be able to recognise the word decent if it fell out the sky and smacked them on the head. She could hardly believe her ears when Maureen said, ‘I know our Tommy’s been done for murder, but he ain’t a bad lad, yer know.’

Getting the family back to Stepney seemed to take for ever. As they drove off the shit-hole estate, Wendy poked her husband

nastily in the ribs.

‘I know I’ve said it before, Kenny, but don’t you ever expect me to suffer your family again. Your mother is a disgusting old woman, your sister-in-law is pathetic and your nephew happens to be a cold-blooded killer.’

Kenny tried to smooth things over. ‘Look, I know all their faults. They’re hard work, I admit that, but they mean well. And what about James? He’s a fantastic kid. Who wouldn’t be proud of a son like him?’

Wendy shot him a look and pursed her lips. The youngest wasn’t a bad little boy, but stood no chance. Kenny might have broken the mould, but there was no hope for the rest of them, James included. ‘Believe me, Kenny. That child’s future is already mapped out. He’ll either live in poverty or choose a life of crime. He’ll end up like the rest of them, you mark my words.’

EIGHT

INSTEAD OF CHEERING James up, the trip to see Tommy seemed to have the opposite effect on him and he spent the next few days moping about the house. Maureen was worried and annoyed with herself. He wasn’t even eating properly and she wondered if taking him to the borstal had been a stupid thing to do. Maybe he was too young for such visits, and in future she should wait until he was old enough to fully understand what was going on.

‘I’m going out now, Mum,’ Susan said, nicking a biscuit out of the tin.

‘Don’t you want any dinner?’ Maureen asked.

‘Nah. I’m having some round Tracey’s house.’

Susan smiled as she left the house. She’d bullied some money out of the kids at school earlier and Tracey and her had gorged themselves on pie and chips. Susan skipped happily down the road. She was becoming an expert at lying and her dopey mother believed every whopper she told.

Tommy lay stretched out on his bunk. Hearing the four knocks on the wall, he gave two knocks back. Tuesday was games night, and he and Freddie couldn’t wait. Whether it was pool, table tennis, board or card games, they relished the challenge and were determined to be the best at everything.

Tonight they were more excited than usual. There was a new face on the block and they were desperate to meet him. Leroy Wright was notorious in the borstal system. A Jamaican from Brixton, the kid was a legend with a reputation to die for. He’d been locked up since he was twelve for mutilating an Indian shopkeeper. Since then he’d been shunted around the country and been slung out of five different borstals. Apparently, he had taken over each one, given the screws hell and run the places as though he owned them. Tommy and Freddie had heard he was due at Feltham over a week ago.

‘We run this place, and we ain’t letting no new boy take over. We’ve gotta put a stop to him,’ Freddie said.

Tommy reluctantly agreed. He didn’t like the sound of the newcomer one little bit, but he wasn’t about to voice his doubts.

Freddie was brighter than him and what he said went. After all, he was lucky to have been chosen as his best pal in the first place.

James grabbed his pogo-stick and bounced up and down along the garden path. His nan had gotten him his new toy a few weeks ago and he'd spent hours amusing himself on it.

'Hello, I'm Maria. What's your name?'

Shocked that he had a spectator, James swung around to see where the voice was coming from. Unfortunately, he lost his balance, the stick flew out from under him and he landed flat on his face.

'Are you OK?' asked the friendly voice.

Picking himself up, James felt a right wally as he spotted the new girl from next door looking at him.

'Course I'm all right,' he said, as gruffly as he could. He wasn't really. His knee was pouring with blood and he'd smacked his head on the path, but he wasn't letting on. As James hobbled towards her, he felt himself go all funny inside. She was beautiful, like a princess. He looked at her enchanting face, took in her long dark ringlets, and was kind of lost for words.

'Whaddya want?'

Maria smiled. She had the sort of smile that lit up the garden. 'Do you wanna be friends? What's your name?'

Momentarily, James felt short of breath. 'Me name's James, but me bruvver calls me Jimmy boy and yes, I'd love to be your friend.'

'Wait there,' Maria said. 'I'm gonna ask my mum if I can come

in your garden and play with you.’

James nodded dumbly. He was thunderstruck.

Tommy potted his ball without even properly looking at it. He couldn’t concentrate, as he knew very shortly things were about to go off. He’d noticed Leroy when he’d first walked in earlier. A tall boy, he was quite good looking, had dreadlocks and, as you moved closer, an evil look in his eye. Word had it that in the past, within days of his arrival at a borstal, he would trample on the top boys and take over as the daddy.

Tommy glanced at his friend. Freddie didn’t seem to have a care in the world but, personally, he was crapping himself. They were the top boys here and by the look on Leroy’s face, the ones he’d shortly be gunning for. Freddie was an extremely perceptive lad. Noticing the two screws leaving the room to sort out a small fracas outside, he pulled a sock out of his pocket and slid it to Tommy.

‘Stick some balls in there, shove it down yer bollocks and we’re leaving.’

Tommy nodded and did as he was told.

Susan and Tracey stood outside the run-down, filthy old house, awaiting their latest victim. Silly Billy Barnard went to band practice on a Tuesday. His family was skint, so they knew he’d have no money. They just wanted to torment him, terrorise him, like they usually did. Seeing his fat figure waddling their way, they ran towards him. Tracey was the first to reach him. Desperate to impress her friend, she grabbed his thick rimmed

glasses and threw them in a nearby bush.

‘Please can I have my glasses back? I can’t see properly. Please don’t hurt me.’ Billy was a softie and couldn’t help his tears.

Susan smiled at Billy’s anguish. She scared the absolute living daylight out of him and she knew it. Each time she confronted him she’d force him to do a little task. These had included pulling his trousers down and showing his willy, crawling along the pavement while meowing like a cat, and digging up his neighbour’s plants and eating them. Today, she wanted to teach him the art of movement.

‘Dance,’ she said, laughing at him.

‘I can’t dance. I don’t know how to,’ Billy stammered.

Tracey aimed a kick at his ankle. ‘Do as you’re told. Now, fucking dance.’

Billy tried to jig up and down to the best of his ability. Both girls were now in hysterics and their uncontrollable laughter made him cry all the more.

‘Can I go home now?’ he sobbed.

Susan could barely speak for laughing. ‘You can’t go home until you’ve done the teapot.’

‘What’s that?’ Billy whimpered.

Susan put her left hand on her hip and positioned her right in the shape of a spout.

Billy understood now. Desperate to get home, he copied his tormentor and stood for five minutes rocking side to side. The girls were enjoying themselves so much that they didn’t notice

Old Mother Kelly and her sister walking towards them.

‘Leave him alone, yer wicked little cows,’ screamed the sisters.

As Susan and Tracey legged it into the distance, they could hear Old Mother Kelly cursing them. ‘God’s watching down on you, you know. What goes around comes around and he’s bound to have a plan for evil little girls like you.’

On reaching the corner shop, Susan and Tracey stopped for a breather. Seeing Old Mother Kelly waving her fist at them, both girls lifted their skirts and flashed their bums. Giggling, they continued their journey.

Maureen and Ethel were amused as they sat watching James devour his fish fingers and chips. All of a sudden he had the appetite of a horse and between every mouthful was telling them something else about Maria.

‘She’s not like other girls, yer know. She can run as fast as me and she can climb trees.’

Maureen smiled. ‘Why don’t you invite her in for her tea tomorrow, James? We’d love to meet her and I’ll check it’s OK with her mum.’

James put his empty plate on the table and jumped up and down excitedly. ‘Can I, Mum? Can I ask her now?’

Ethel grabbed both his hands. ‘Don’t ask her yet. You’ve gotta play it cool, yer don’t wanna act too keen.’

James was bemused. ‘What do yer mean, Nanny?’

Ethel winked at him. ‘You’ll know exactly what I mean in a few years’ time, won’t he, Maur? You tell him.’

Maureen decided to carry on with the wind-up. ‘Yer sure will, James. Anyway, it was only last week that you told me you didn’t like girls.’

James giggled. ‘I don’t, but I do like Maria.’

Ethel ruffled his hair. ‘Is she your girlfriend, James? Go on, you can tell yer old Nan.’

James put both hands over his face. His mum and nan were so embarrassing sometimes.

Maureen nudged Ethel as she goaded him. ‘Come on, James, you can tell us. Girls don’t like shy boys, so you’ve gotta be honest.’

James took his hands away from his eyes. He stood up and put his hands on his little hips. ‘OK, I’ll tell yer, but you musn’t tell anyone. I love Maria and one day I’m gonna marry her!’

‘Marriage, eh? Shall I go and buy me outfit now?’ Ethel laughed, ruffling his hair.

About to torment James even further, Maureen was stopped by the furious knocking on the front door.

‘Who the bleedin’ hell’s that? The noisy bastards sound like the Old Bill,’ Ethel joked.

Making her way into the hallway, Maureen was relieved to hear the voices of Old Mother Kelly and her younger sister, Flo.

‘Are you OK? Is something wrong?’ she asked as she clocked their serious expressions.

Old Mother Kelly did all the talking. ‘I’m sorry Maur, but it’s your Susan. She’s been pickin’ on poor Billy Barnard again.

There was her and another girl this time, treating him like a performing monkey, they were. The poor little sod was hysterical by the time we chased 'em away. It's not on Maur, it's bloody wicked. I mean he can't help bein' backward, can he? And he certainly doesn't deserve to be bullied, bless him.'

Maureen's heart sank. The Barnards were a simple bunch, but they wouldn't hurt a fly. 'What exactly was Susan doing to him?' she asked, dreading the answer.

Placing her hands on her oversized waist, Old Mother Kelly pursed her lips. 'Makin' him dance in the middle of the street, she was. She had him rockin' to and fro like a friggin' teapot. Christ knows what would 'ave happened if me and Flo hadn't come along when we did.'

Maureen felt terrible. The Kelly sisters had served their country in the Second World War. Nurses they'd been, and apparently were two of the East End's finest. To try and make excuses for her Susan's behaviour would be an insult to their intelligence.

Unable to look them in the eye, Maureen shook her head. 'Thanks for tellin' me, ladies. It won't happen again, I promise yer that. I'll give that daughter of mine such a fawpenny one when she gets home, she won't sit down for a week. And tomorrow I'll go and see the Barnards. Susan can apologise in person, tell 'em how sorry she is. I'll drag her round there by the hair if I have to.'

Old Mother Kelly nodded. 'Come on then Flo, let's be on our way.'

With a heavy heart, Maureen shut the front door and leaned against it. She'd brought her daughter up to be respectful and kind, so what had gone wrong? To say Susan was a bad apple was putting it mildly. The girl was worse than bad, she was one hundred per cent rotten.

As Tommy and Freddie ran through the corridors, they were filled with a mixture of relief and exhilaration. Not only had they stood their ground with Leroy Wright, they'd frightened the life out of the cunt and done him good and proper.

The fight had been hastily arranged earlier and had taken place in the shower room. It had been all fair and square. Leroy had a mate at Feltham who had been in one of his previous borstals. It was a straight two against two, with a couple of tools included. Tommy had nearly shit himself at first. He'd always been able to handle himself over the years, but that had been with wet-behind-the-ears lads, not the big-league boys.

As Leroy lunged towards him with the lump of wood, Tommy had felt like legging it. Afraid of mugging himself off in front of Freddie, he got a second wind. In a blink of an eyelid, he pulled out the sock containing the pool balls and walloped the motherfucker as hard as he could. As Leroy hit the deck, Tommy clumped him harder and harder. Maybe he was stronger than he'd ever realised. Freddie had done the other lad easily and the feeling Tommy had as he left that shower room would live with him for ever. It was a mixture of happiness, triumph and pure strength.

Finchy saw the two lads running through the corridors. Unbeknown to them, he knew exactly what had gone down and he'd been happy to turn a blind eye to it. Leroy Wright was a screw's worst nightmare. Not only had he clumped a few, but he'd also been the cause of many a riot. Finchy smiled as Tommy and Freddie bolted past him. He could tell by their demeanour that they had been victorious. That thought alone made Finchy an extremely happy man.

Tommy and Freddie tidied themselves up and headed back to the games room. They were finding it difficult to keep the smiles off their faces and were far too excited to carry on playing pool. Sitting in the corner, the two of them spoke quietly.

'You were blinding, Tommy. I thought I'd be doing Leroy and you'd be dealing with his mate. I've gotta hand it to yer. You were summink else.'

Tommy sat back in his chair. He was as proud as a peacock over what he'd achieved. In the past he'd always felt he was second fiddle to Freddie, but not any more. Today he'd proved his worth and now they were equals.

Freddie grabbed his pal's fist in his own and clenched it tightly. 'To us, our friendship and our future.'

Tommy smiled. 'To us.'

NINE

1985 – Ten Years Later

SUSAN ENDED THE call, replaced the receiver and smiled as she flopped on the bed. It was over four years now since she'd

first met her Kev, and he still made her heart race, especially when he was nice to her.

Shutting her eyes, she pictured the night that their paths had crossed. Eighteen she'd been, him twenty-one. It had been a boring Friday night down her local, and on the way home she and Tracey had stopped for their regular doner kebab and chips.

Famished, Susan was too busy shoving rancid pieces of lamb down her throat to notice the two fit blokes enter the shop. Aware of them chatting to Tracey, she plonked herself at a table, carried on eating and took little notice.

'Suze, the boys have invited us to go to a party with them,' Tracey said, nudging her.

Chilli sauce dripping down her chin, Susan glanced around. Locking eyes with the taller one, she suddenly didn't feel hungry any more.

Heart pounding, she tried to sound casual. 'Where is this party then?'

The tall one ignored her, but his mate smiled. 'Whitechapel. It's a mate of ours' twenty-first. Say you'll come, girls. We've got plenty of booze, all we need is the company of some pretty ladies. By the way, I'm Darren and this is Kevin.'

It didn't take much conferring for Susan and Tracey to make up their minds. Chucking their half-eaten takeaway into the nearest bin, they smiled at one another and linked arms. The lads in their local were silly little boys and neither of them could believe their luck.

The party was in full swing when they arrived and it didn't take Susan long to realise that the object of her affections wasn't very interested in her. Darren was all over Tracey like a rash, but every time Susan tried to spark up a conversation with Kevin, he gave her one-word answers and quickly walked away. Watching him chat up other girls made her feel physically sick. She couldn't understand why she was feeling the way she was – it was ridiculous, as she'd barely known him five minutes.

As the party dwindled and the smoochies were put on the record player, Susan felt her mood lift as the bird Kev had been chatting up for the last half-hour left with her mate. Beer in hand, Kevin saw her watching him and walked towards her.

‘Wanna dance?’

Thrilled that he'd finally noticed her, Susan grabbed him around the neck as though her life depended on it. Determined to snare him, it took her five minutes to get his cock erect and ten to get him in the bedroom. As soon as they hit the sack, Susan knew he was her soul mate. Like hers, Kevin's sex drive was insatiable and they were at it like rabbits all night.

When daylight broke, Kevin leaped up and got dressed. ‘Me mum's out tonight. Wanna come round mine for another session?’ he asked casually.

Memorising his address, Susan couldn't wipe the smile off her face. She'd shagged plenty of boys but, for the first time ever, she was hopelessly in love!

Still daydreaming hours later, Susan's thoughts were

interrupted by the slamming of the front door.

‘Anyone in?’ her mother called.

‘I was just dozing off. Do yer always have to wake me up?’ Susan shouted angrily.

Maureen ignored her daughter’s arrogant tone. ‘Just puttin’ the shopping away. I’m off out again now, so yer can doze as much as yer like. Me and yer nan are goin’ up the Roman to choose some paint. We need to decorate the living room before our Tommy comes home.’

Susan didn’t bother answering and was relieved as she heard her mother leave the house. Tommy this, Tommy that – she was fucking sick of it. Her brother was due out in just under a month, and her family didn’t stop going on about it. Even James had little other conversation.

Desperate to get out of the house before the Tommy fan club returned, Susan decided to get ready early. She was really looking forward to tonight. It was Kev’s uncle’s fortieth, and all his family would be there. Determined to look her best, she tried most of her wardrobe on. The stretch white Lycra leggings with the matching top won by a mile. She topped her outfit off with red stilettos and a matching red bag. She then blow-dried her hair upside down to give it some oomph, and plastered it with hair-spray. Applying the bright red lippy, she smiled at her reflection. Unlike the rest of the world, she failed to notice her rolls of fat, bingo wings and corned-beef legs.

‘Kevin, here I come,’ she said, blowing a kiss at the mirror.

Unable to drag Tracey and Darren out early, Susan headed to her local alone. The pub was called The Royal Duchess, but no one referred to it as that. Everybody just called it The Duchess. Apart from Kev's mum, she barely knew the rest of the family and was nervous about meeting them. She ordered a glass of cider and sat on the barstool, deep in thought. Tracey, her best friend, had recently fallen pregnant and overnight had changed into Little Miss Perfect.

'We're doing up the nursery, or me and Darren are shopping for baby clothes,' were the excuses she received when she asked Tracey to go out with her.

'Boring cow,' Susan muttered as she sank her pint and ordered another. Tracey might not be able to drink tonight, but she certainly could.

'You look nice, Suze – yer goin' somewhere special?'

Susan smiled. Fat Caz, the barmaid, was desperate to be her friend and had been sucking up to her for ages. She even gave her free drinks when the guv'nor wasn't looking.

'Yeah. Kev's uncle's fortieth. What about you? Off out after yer shift?' Susan replied, knowing full well that Caz had no friends to go anywhere with.

'Dunno, might go clubbing,' Caz said awkwardly.

Susan smiled. The thought of Fat Caz clubbing amused her immensely. She looked at her watch. The party was being held in the Bancroft Arms and was kicking off at eight. Kev, as usual, had told her to make her own way there. She'd begged him to

come and get her, but he was having none of it.

‘Please Kev, don’t make me walk in on my own. I don’t wanna schlep there in the dark – say someone jumps me?’

Ever the gentleman, Kev had laughed down the phone at her. ‘Fuck off, Suze. You look like a rugby player. Who in their right mind is gonna attack you?’

Smiling at Fat Caz, Susan downed her pint and ordered another. Let Kevin sweat, worry why she was late. He needed to be taught a lesson.

At eight-thirty, Susan decided to make a move. ‘I’m goin’ now, Caz. Get a pen and I’ll give you me number so we can go out one night.’

Elated by the invitation, Caz popped the number in her purse. ‘Bye, mate. I’ll call you in the week,’ she said.

Susan smiled as she walked towards The Bancroft. Caz might be a moose, but with Tracey up the duff, at least she was someone to go out with. Kev often went out with the lads and she was sick of sitting at home. Apart from Tracey, she had no other mates and beggars couldn’t be choosers.

As Susan reached the pub she could hear Tears for Fears singing ‘Everybody Wants to Rule the World’. She took a deep breath and made her grand entrance. Searching for Kev, she spotted him in deep conversation with his mum. She bowled over. ‘Get us a drink then, Kev. Where’s Tracey and Dal? Are they here yet?’

Realising that she was half pissed, Kevin shot her a look.

'They're sitting over by the toilets. Go and sit with 'em, and I'll be over in a minute.'

Annoyed by his cold attitude, Susan ignored him and went up to the bar. 'I'll have a pint of cider. Actually, make that two.'

Seething, she downed one on the spot and marched towards the table with the other. Kev was such a bastard to her at times. She'd gone to all that effort to make herself look glamorous and he hadn't even said she looked nice.

'What's up with yous two?' she asked, as she sat herself down with Tracey and Darren.

Darren rubbed his girlfriend's arm. 'Tracey don't feel too good. The smoke's making her feel sick.'

Susan let out a deep sigh. This was going to be the night from hell, sitting with these two. They had faces like smacked arses, the pair of 'em.

As Wham's, 'Wake Me Up Before You Go Go' hit the speakers, Susan knocked back her drink and stood up, 'Come on 'ave a dance with me, Trace. It might make yer feel better.'

Tracey shook her head. 'You get up, Suze. Me and Darren'll sit 'ere and watch yer.'

Susan shrugged her shoulders and headed towards the bar. Sod dancing, she needed another drink, and pronto. Eyes darting around the pub, she searched for Kevin. Where the bloody hell was he? He'd barely even said hello to her, and he hadn't come over like he said he would.

As the evening wore on, Susan became angrier and more

inebriated. 'I ain't lettin' him treat me like this. I'm goin' to find the cunt,' she told Tracey.

Eyes glazed, she scanned the pub and spotted him. He was standing by the door chatting up two pretty girls. With the familiar pain in her heart that he regularly inflicted upon her, she staggered towards him.

'Whaddya think you're doin'? I'm yer girlfriend and you ain't even spoken to me all night. You've got time to talk to these slappers, though, ain't yer?'

Kevin felt himself blush. Susan was shit-faced and he wasn't about to introduce her as his girlfriend. Talk about showing him up in front of his family. Grabbing Susan by the arm, he dragged her over to where Tracey and Darren were sitting. 'Do me a favour, Dal. When you go home, take this cunt with yer. She's too pissed to walk, so you'll 'ave to put her in a cab. She's a fuckin' embarrassment, she is.'

Realising she'd gone too far, Susan started to grovel. 'I'm sorry, Kev. I was upset because you hadn't sat with me all night. I promise I'll behave meself, I won't show you up, honest.'

Kevin pushed her away. 'You can sit 'ere until Tracey and Dal leave. I'm goin' up Benjy's with me uncle Paul and his mates and you ain't invited. Now just sit still and shut yer trap, and if yer make a cunt out of me any more tonight, I'm gonna rip yer fuckin' head off. Got it?'

Not wanting him to see her upset, Susan ran into the toilets. He had a habit of making her cry and she was sure that he got

a kick out of it.

'I love Kev, he's such a scream. Is he comin' up Benjy's with us?' said a voice from inside the cubicle.

As Susan looked in the mirror, she saw the colour drain from her face.

'Yeah. He told us to leave before him. I think he's gotta get rid of that awful bird first, and he'll meet us up there. Christ knows who she was, but didn't she look a sight in those white leggings?'

Blinded by panic, Susan ran from the pub. She knew the voices in the toilet belonged to the birds Kev had been chatting up. She'd been too busy grovelling to see them go in there, but they were definitely talking about her. She was the only one at the party wearing white leggings. Holding onto the wall, she took deep breaths. She was going to be sick.

Having seen her bolt past, Tracey followed her out. 'Are you OK, Suze?' she asked, rubbing her back.

Susan stuck her fingers down her throat and brought up as much of the cider as she could. She couldn't think straight and she needed to sober herself up.

'Let me go and get Darren and we'll take you home,' Tracey said sympathetically.

Susan shook her head. 'I need to walk, get some fresh air. I'll be fine, honest.'

'I'll ring you tomorrow,' Tracey shouted, as she walked back inside.

As Susan stood on the corner of her estate, she was livid. She'd

always had a feeling that Kevin played around, but how could he be so blatant about it? Unable to face going home, Susan lit up a fag and headed back to The Duchess. Fat Caz would be finishing her shift soon and she desperately needed someone to talk to. She couldn't get the two girls' faces out of her mind. Both were blonde and pretty, but the one with the long hair was stunning – in fact, she looked like Madonna. And as for their conversation, they might as well have stuck a knife in her: 'He's gotta get rid of that awful bird first. I love my Kev, he's such a scream. Christ knows who she was, but didn't she look a sight in those white leggings?' they'd said.

And they were laughing, the fucking slags. Well, she'd give 'em something to laugh about. She was Kev's bird and if four years was about to go up the swanny, she was determined to go out with a bang.

'Suze, you're back! Wasn't the party any good?' Caz beamed, as she approached the bar.

Susan forced a smile. 'Get us a cider and when you're finished, me and you are goin' up Benjy's.'

Unaware that his girlfriend had entered the club, Kevin was enjoying himself immensely. His uncle Paul and his pals had already left. Drunk as skunks, they'd headed off to the nearest curry house and left him with the girls.

'Want another drink, Joanne?'

'Yes, please, I'll have a white wine. Don't bother getting Nat one. She's on the dancefloor with that bloke and she's got two

on the table.’

Susan turned her back and hid in the corner as he approached the bar. She was frothing at the mouth and if that slag left the club with Kev, she’d fucking kill her.

‘Are you all right, Suze?’ a concerned Caz asked.

‘No, I ain’t. Do I fuckin’ look all right? Just let me know when he moves away from the bar.’

As the DJ slowed down the tempo, Joanne was desperately trying to spy on her friend Natalie.

‘Thanks, Kev,’ she said, as he handed her her drink.

Kev laughed. ‘Who yer lookin’ at, yer nosy cow?’

Joanne giggled. ‘Nat split up with her ex over a year ago and she’s never copped off with anyone since. I’m sure she’s snogging that bloke. Come and have a dance with me, Kev, so I can spy on her.’

Kevin grabbed her arm. ‘Come on then, you pest.’

Susan was horrified as she watched them take to the dancefloor. As Kev put his arms around the Madonna lookalike’s waist, her stomach could take no more.

‘Hide my drink inside your jacket – we’re leaving,’ she told Fat Caz.

Filled with anger, Susan marched down the street. ‘I can’t go home. I’m gonna wait in the alley and confront him as he walks past.’

Caz hated trouble of any kind. Her night out had been awful, and she was absolutely starving.

‘Suze, there’s a takeaway over the road. I’m gonna get meself a kebab and chips. Do you want anything?’

Susan shook her head. ‘Fat cunt,’ she muttered as Caz waddled across the road.

As people began to trickle out of the club, Susan kept her eyes peeled. Finally, she spotted him walking towards her. He was alone with the slag, the cheating bastard. Picking up her now empty glass off the ground, she held it firmly in her right hand. She could hear their voices, they were getting closer.

As she leaped from the shadows, she took the pair of them by surprise. ‘That’s my fella, yer fuckin’ slag,’ she screamed, as she cracked the glass over the girl’s head.

As Joanne crashed to the floor, Kevin laid into Susan. ‘Get off of her. You’re a psycho, Susan, a fuckin’ psycho,’ he screamed, as he punched her to the ground.

A group of young lads ran over. ‘Oi, leave her alone.’

‘Stay out of it,’ Kevin yelled as he kicked Susan in the face.

‘Whatever’s happened?’ Natalie screamed, as she saw the blood running down Joanne’s face.

‘The kebab shop have called the Old Bill,’ someone shouted.

Petrified of getting arrested, Kevin grabbed Natalie’s arm. ‘Look after Jo for me. I’m gonna have to make a run for it, I’ve got no choice. Say nothin’ to the Old Bill, I’ll explain later.’

Lifting Susan up, Kevin half dragged her down a side street. ‘Try and run, Suze, try and run,’ he screamed.

Across the road, Fat Caz stood frozen to the spot. She’d been

too busy stuffing her face to see what had started the fight, but she'd seen Kevin beat up Susan.

As Kevin dragged Susan out of sight, Caz knew she had to do more to help her. Remembering that Susan had earlier given her her phone number, Caz searched through her purse and ran back into the shop.

'Give me the phone, quick. He's abducted her and I need to ring her mum.'

Aware of the sirens getting louder, Kevin helped Susan through the back gardens and into a different street. He was fully aware of what led where, as he'd often been involved in bouts of burglary in this neck of the woods. He tried the handle of someone's shed and was relieved to find it open.

'Get in there, Suze, go on, lie down. We're safe here.'

As Kevin handed her a fag, he lit the match and was appalled by what he had done to her face. She was caked in blood and looked like she'd gone ten rounds with Henry Cooper. Susan looked worse than she actually felt and was more bothered about Kevin's infidelity than her injuries.

'Why, Kev? Why did yer cheat on me? Surely the sex ain't as good with her as it is with me? How long yer been seeing her?'

As Kevin held her close, he began to laugh. 'You stupid girl, Suze. I haven't cheated on yer. Joanne, the girl you glassed, is my fuckin' cousin.'

Susan felt nothing but relief as she clung to him. 'I'm so sorry, Kev. Please don't finish with me. I'll never tell anyone that it was

you that beat me up. I love you, Kev, I really do. You won't leave me, will yer?'

As Kevin put his tongue in her mouth, all he could taste was her blood. Pulling away, he smiled at her. 'I'm not sure if we're meant to be after this, Suze. I'm gonna need time to think about it, girl.'

Desperate for him to love her again, Susan unzipped his trousers, unleashed his cock, and took him gently into her bruised mouth.

TEN

TOMMY HUTTON LAY sprawled across his bunk with a big smile plastered across his face. Tonight was his last night being detained at Her Majesty's pleasure. From tomorrow he was a free man, his debt to society well and truly paid up.

Unable to sleep, Tommy thought over his ten years inside. When he'd first arrived at Feltham, he was no more than a tearful, frightened kid. Meeting Freddie had been the turning point. Wise beyond his years, his pal had filled his head with knowledge and had taught him how to fulfil his potential. From the day he'd done over Leroy Wright in the shower room, he'd never looked back. He and Freddie had run Feltham from that moment onwards. Neither of them were bullies, but they were the leaders. They never picked on the run-of-the-mill lads and they even looked out for some of the simpletons, or shy kids who couldn't come to terms with the system. The only lads they gave it to were the ones who deserved it. The freaks, the nonces

and the pure fucking evil were the ones that always got their comeuppance. Then there were the new boys, the chancers, the ones that arrived thinking they were the next Godfather. Within days they'd be given a good hiding. Most of them got the message there and then, but there were an odd few who tried to get their revenge. They were the ones that suffered the worst, their lives made a misery for the rest of their stay.

Both Tommy and Freddie had a good relationship with the screws. They treated them with a certain amount of respect and received a cushy life and plenty of blind eyes in return. The screws liked a quiet life and Tommy and Freddie helped them keep the other lads in order. The situation suited everybody, especially Finchy, who developed a soft spot for the two tough east London boys. On many occasions he spoke up for them to the guv'nor and got them out of sticky situations. He was a good bloke, old Finchy, and Tommy would always hold fond memories of him.

At the time, leaving Feltham had seemed awful. As soon as Tommy turned seventeen, he'd been moved to a proper prison. Saying goodbye to Finchy and the lads had been extremely emotional. He'd made many friends there and they even had a little leaving party for him. Saying goodbye to Freddie was probably the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. He'd been desperate not to make a tit of himself by crying, but he hadn't been able to stop the tears rolling down his cheeks. As luck would have it, Freddie had got all emotional as well.

Tommy had begged the gov'nor at the borstal to have a word with the authorities for him. He was desperate to go to a London prison, so he could see more of his family and friends.

He'd been told at one point that he was going to Kent somewhere and he'd been well poked off about that. His family were still piss poor and, unless he was in London, he'd rarely get a visit.

Freddie had been on Finchy's case to have a word with the gov'nors about getting him into Pentonville. Freddie had an uncle in there, who was aware of Tommy, and would look out for him. Whether it was strings being pulled or just pure bloody luck, that was where he ended up. The journey there was horrendous. It was a really hot day and the van he was shoved into was like a Swedish sauna. The traffic was awful and by the time he reached his destination, Tommy was sweating like a pig.

He was filled with apprehension as he entered his new home. The screws were horrible to him and spoke to him like a piece of shit. He was strip-searched, given his orders and taken to his cell. Walking through the prison, Tommy kept his head down. He'd already come face to face with a couple of the inmates and they were fucking frightening. Great big skinhead types with faces full of hatred and scars. Feltham was full of little boys, the Ville was a different ball game.

Tommy was given a single cell and spent his first night wide awake. By morning he'd made his decision. If anyone gave him any grief, he was gonna clump 'em. Freddie had always told him

that this was the best way to deal with matters and he would take his friend's advice. Big, small, black or white – anyone got in his way, he'd give 'em a dig.

Within two days of his arrival, Tommy had grief. He'd seen some fat, tattooed prick giving him daggers at breakfast. Ignoring him, he finished his grub and walked away. At dinner the fat prick went one better. As Tommy walked past him with his food, the geezer stuck out a leg. With a tray in his hand, Tommy had no way of keeping his balance, and went flying. As laughter rang around the hall, Tommy was determined not to look a mug. He stood up, straightened his shoulders, and brushed himself down. Grabbing the fat prick's tray, he smashed it over his head with such force that it took his breath away. Tommy smiled when he noticed his tormentor was not only bleeding, but also had shepherd's pie dripping off his big fat head.

'Leave me alone, you fat cunt,' he said, as he walked away to cheers.

The tattooed one was about to respond, but was stopped in his tracks by the screws' intervention.

'You're dead, kid,' he screamed, as he was escorted from the room.

'Yeah, right,' Tommy replied.

Tommy was punished for his part in the fracas and spent a week in solitary. He didn't care – he was just glad that he'd stood his ground. In a one-to-one fight the geezer would have slaughtered him. The fat cunt was probably treble his weight and

could have knocked him out with one punch. Being on his own gave Tommy plenty of time to think. He was a tall lad and, while in Feltham, had shot up to six foot. What he needed now was to fill out a bit, as he was far too skinny to be taken seriously. In Feltham they'd had plenty of exercise, but there were no facilities to lift weights and build up muscle. He knew there was a gym in the Ville and his plan was to use it as much as possible to change his physique.

Within hours of returning to his own wing, Tommy had received many pats on the back. A lot of the older lags had seen a younger version of themselves in him, and Tommy soon learned that the geezer whose head he'd smashed in was a very unpopular inmate called Mark Abrahams, who was nearing the end of a long-term sentence for supplying heroin.

At dinner that evening, Abrahams appeared with a scar across his bonce. Apparently, he'd had a dozen stitches, which had been removed earlier that day. He sat over the other side of the room and not once did he glance across. Tommy was surprised by this. He'd expected some sort of backlash, even if it was just a threat.

He found out later that evening why Abrahams would be giving him no more trouble. There were two magic words in the prison system. 'Bobby Adams' was an inside form of 'abracadabra' to warn off potential troublemakers, and nobody was brave enough to get on his wrong side.

Freddie had never told Tommy much about his uncle. He'd said he was heavy stuff, a proper chap, and was doing a stretch

for robbing a bank, but little else. Tommy was surprised when he first came face to face with Bobby Adams. He'd built a picture in his mind of what Freddie's uncle might look like, but the geezer that stood in front of him was the total opposite of what he'd imagined.

Tall, grey and distinguished, he stood out from every lag in the place. He had an air of authority about him and looked more like a bank manager than someone who robbed the bastard things.

'Bobby Adams, son. Freddie's written to me and told me all about you.'

Tommy shook his thickset hand and smiled. Apart from introducing himself properly, he was at a loss as to what to say.

Bobby noticed his hesitation and took over the conversation. 'You'll have no more trouble from Abrahams. The geezer's a wrong 'un, he's a smack dealer, scum of the earth. He's been warned off you now and he'll be dealt with in due course. Most of these cunts in here are wrong 'uns. About ten per cent are proper, the rest you wouldn't piss on if they were on fire. I'll show you the ropes, teach you who you can trust and who you can't. I've put the word about that you're a pal of my nephew's. You'll be treated with respect from now on, and you'll have no more grief from the lags or screws.'

Feeling more at ease, Tommy opened up, and spoke fondly about Freddie and their time at Feltham. 'We were the daddies in there, Bobby. I swear we ran the fucking joint.'

Bobby laughed at the kid's stories. He was a young 'un but,

like his nephew, the boy had a spark about him. Bobby could spot good potential a mile off. Streetwise kids like Freddie and Tommy could learn more by doing a bit of bird than these clever cunts who opted for university.

Bobby stood up. 'I better go now, kid. Oh, and by the way, well done for cracking Abrahams one. You've earned yourself a lot of respect with some of these lads already.'

Bobby kept an eye on Tommy from that day onwards. At forty-eight, he was too old to spend a great deal of time in Tommy's company, but they often had a good old chat, mainly about Freddie and life in East London. Tommy was hoping that when his pal reached prison age, he'd join him in the Ville. Unfortunately, it wasn't to be, as Freddie got taken to the Scrubs.

Tommy was twenty-one when Bobby Adams was released. Ten years he'd originally got, and he'd served seven and a half.

'Look after yourself, kid. Keep in touch with Freddie and as soon as you get out, we'll meet up.'

Tommy thanked him and said his goodbyes. After years of effort in the gym, his body had now changed completely. Gone was the skinny boy; in his place was a young man full of muscle, and he had no worries about being able to handle himself without Bobby's protection.

Freddie was released a year after his uncle and was doing quite well. He'd visited Tommy on many occasions and was full of stories about the places he frequented and the birds he'd shagged. He'd been working for his cousin, who had a building firm.

Freddie loved his freedom, but despised the job.

‘I’m just waiting for you to get out, ain’t I? As soon as you’ve done yer bird we’ll set ourselves up in business, like we always said we would.’

Tommy lived for Freddie’s visits. The thought of doing something with his life, alongside his best mate, was the thing that kept him going through the last part of his sentence.

Tibbsy, Dave Taylor and Benno had popped up to see him a couple of times. He’d been really looking forward to catching up with his old pals, but after two visits from them, he’d been filled with disappointment. None of them worked or had fuck all interesting to talk about. They all still lived with their parents and spent their lives dossing about, drinking and puffing. Six months ago, they’d last come to visit and Tommy hadn’t written or sent them a visiting order since. He’d moved up a notch from them now, and he weren’t gonna waste his time mixing with tadpoles when there were big fish to swim with.

The only other visitors he had were his family. His mum had aged a lot during his time. She’d had a hard life and the older she got, the more she seemed to be weighed down by it all. His nan was the same old Ethel and even her arthritis hadn’t stopped her going out on the thief. Susan had never visited him once, but he wasn’t bothered, as they’d never liked one another. Out of politeness, he always asked after her, but the replies only confirmed that she was still a nasty piece of work. James was a different story. He was a good lad and very intelligent, which

pleased Tommy immensely. He didn't want his kid brother to end up with nothing, like the majority of his family. He wanted him to make something of himself and free himself from a life of poverty.

Apart from his uncle Kenny, none of his family had made anything of themselves. The worst culprit was his father, who was a drunken, useless asshole. In all the years Tommy had been inside, he'd only received one letter from his old man. That had been about a year ago, when he'd asked if he could come up and see him. Tommy had written back, telling him to fuck off. He could just imagine his father staggering in for a visit – that would have done the reputation he'd built for himself a fucking lot of good.

As dawn broke, Tommy sat up. All night he'd lain awake going over his time, and now he couldn't wait to forget it. Prison might be a learning curve, but it was also a bastard. He'd seen it sap the life out of the strongest of men, but luckily for him, he'd survived the system. He'd had help, made friends, while others hadn't been so lucky.

Hearing the wake-up call, Tommy smiled. In the next couple of hours he'd be a free man. Some people might have thought he had wasted ten years of his life, but not him. He'd listened, learned and remembered. As his cell door opened, Tommy took his last trip to the shower room.

Bumping into Brainless Brian, one of the thicker but nicer screws, Tommy shook his hand.

‘Good luck on the outside, son.’

Tommy smiled at him. ‘I’ll let you into a little secret, shall I, Bri? It’s not luck that’s needed to survive the outside world. All yer need is knowledge.’

‘What do you mean? Education and stuff?’

Looking Brian in the eyes, Tommy winked at him. ‘You’ll have to work that one out for yourself.’

‘I dunno where you’re coming from. Explain what you mean, Tom.’

Roaring with laughter, Tommy walked away.

ELEVEN

MAUREEN PUT THE finishing touches to the icing, stood back and proudly admired her cake. ‘Welcome Home Tommy’ stood out boldly in bright blue writing. She had spent weeks organising her son’s homecoming and couldn’t believe the day had finally arrived. Thanks to her friends and neighbours, who had all kindly chipped in, she had a fantastic selection of food. Turkey, roast ham, beef – for once they had the works.

Ethel had been her usual light-fingered self and had turned up every day that week with a bag full of goodies. The drink was plentiful, thanks to a fifty-pound gift from uncle Kenny. Knowing Maureen would refuse the gift, he’d sent the money via Ethel. He couldn’t make the party, because he and Wendy were on holiday, but he’d sent a lovely card saying that he’d be thinking of them and hoped they had a great night. At the bottom he’d put a PS telling Tommy to ring him and he’d sort him out with a job.

The money Maureen was grateful for, yet it was her son's job offer that made her day. She'd often worried about how Tommy would survive after prison. Would anyone want to employ a lad of twenty-five who had spent over a third of his life in clink?

Over the years the ill feeling surrounding Terry Smith's murder had died down. His mum, Mary, had left the area yonks ago. Unable to deal with her son's death, she'd moved her family away to make a fresh start. A lot of stories about Terry had surfaced since Mary's departure. He'd had an awful reputation and had made many people's lives a misery. Maureen listened, but never commented on the tittle-tattle. Whatever the lad was, he didn't deserve his bad end at the hands of her son. Nevertheless, she still took some comfort from being told over and over again that her Tommy wasn't to blame.

'Terry Smith was bad rubbish, he was due his comeuppance and he got it,' people said more than once. Even Mary's old pals from the bingo hall were now Maureen's friends again. In fact, most of the stories had come from them. Living in Bethnal Green, they'd known young Terry better than most.

Taking a break from her food preparation, Maureen made herself a well-earned brew. Tommy's surprise party had been all her idea. While inside, he'd changed so much that, surprisingly, she'd become proud of him. He was no longer the obnoxious, skinny little runt he'd once been. He was now six foot tall, handsome, polite and built like a brick shithouse.

While he'd been in Feltham, she'd rarely had a chance to visit

him. Kenny had taken her a few times, but the train journey was far too expensive for her to afford on a regular basis. She'd seen much more of him when he'd been moved to the Ville. For the first four years, she'd gone up there once a week. Sometimes she'd go alone, but most of the time either James or Ethel would accompany her.

Her trips to see him had dwindled to once a month after his mate Freddie had been released. Tommy was only allowed one visit a week and, although hurt at first, Maureen fully understood why he'd rather have his mate's company than that of his boring old mum.

Sipping her tea, Maureen smiled. That Freddie Adams was such a nice lad, and he'd certainly had a positive effect on her Tommy.

'You watch me, Mum. When I get out of here I'm gonna make something of meself. I might even go into business with Freddie. We've often spoken about it,' Tommy told her.

Maureen savoured her last drop of tea. Her Tommy wouldn't have to worry about work now his uncle Kenny had offered him a job. He'd be so pleased, she could hardly wait to tell him. Maybe Kenny would take Freddie on as well. Tommy would love that, he'd be chuffed to bits.

Maureen glanced at the clock. It was ten to twelve and Tommy would definitely be out by now. He wasn't coming straight home. Freddie was picking him up and they were going for a beer first. She wasn't disappointed, she totally understood. Boys would

be boys, after all. He'd rung her only yesterday and promised faithfully he'd be home by seven.

'I've got a surprise for yer, so don'tcha let me down, and make sure you bring Freddie with yer,' she told him.

Maureen stood up. She had so much food to prepare that she needed to get her arse in gear. Ethel and the girls were coming this afternoon to give her a hand. Susan had agreed to help as well, although Maureen doubted this, as she was too busy chasing after that no-good bastard who had knocked seven bells out of her. Hours she'd sat up casualty with her. As luck would have it, nothing was broken, but her face was cut to pieces and she was bruised from head to toe.

'Don't you ever have anything to do with him again,' she threatened Susan. 'In fact, I'm takin' you round to his mother's. I'm gonna show her what he's fuckin' done to yer.'

'Please, Mum, no,' Susan screamed. 'It wasn't his fault, I'm the one to blame. Please, Mum, just leave it.'

Maureen shook her head in disbelief. 'If I find out you're still seeing him, I'll dump yer me fuckin' self. And if I ever come face to face with him, God help me.'

Maureen looked at the clock and tutted. The unreliable little mare said she'd be home over an hour ago. Still, she didn't particularly need any help. She wanted it all done by the time anyone else arrived, so her family and friends could just sit, have a drink and enjoy themselves. They'd all done more than enough already, bless 'em. Maureen sang along happily to the radio as

she put the sausage rolls in the oven. Tonight would be her best party ever.

‘Excuse me, son. That’s twice I’ve asked you now. Do you have this in my size or don’t you?’

The pomposity of the man’s voice snapped James out of his daydream. ‘I am so sorry, sir. I will look for you immediately.’

James checked through the shirts in the storeroom and, unfortunately for him, came back with the wrong size.

‘I’ve never known such incompetence. Get me the manager, at once.’

Hearing the commotion, James’s employer, Mr Cohen, rushed to the rescue. ‘You take a break now, James. Make us some coffee and I’ll deal with Mr Branson.’

Harold Cohen immediately located the appropriate shirt and handed it to his customer. Full of schmooze, he then talked him into being measured up for one of his most expensive suits. Smiling as he counted the money, he thanked Mr Branson and shook his hand.

Seeing James hover awkwardly in the doorway of the storeroom, Harold waved him over. James walked towards him. He hoped he wasn’t about to receive a telling-off. ‘I’m so sorry. I was about to ...’ James was stopped mid-sentence by Harold’s loud laughter.

‘You worry too much, James, my boy. Mr Branson is a *schmuck*, an absolute *putz*.’

James smiled. He might not have been Jewish, but he’d

worked for Harold long enough to have picked up a bit of Yiddish. He was no expert, but he knew both *schmuck* and *putz* equalled cock in his own language.

Still laughing, Harold put an arm around his shoulder. ‘Now James, I want you to do me a favour. You’ve been in a bloody trance all day and I’m not telling you off, because I fully understand why. You’re excited about seeing your brother and you can’t wait to get home to that pretty little girlfriend of yours.’

‘She’s not my girlfriend,’ James insisted.

Harold smiled. James might only be his employee, but he knew him better than he knew himself. Maria, the pretty *shikseh*, had stolen the boy’s heart and Harold could sense it a mile off.

‘You get yourself home, James. It’s quiet now, I’ll finish up here. You have a great night, enjoy yourself and you can tell me all about it next weekend. Oh, and by the way, there’s an extra tenner in your wages. Get yourself a cab home and treat the beautiful Maria to something nice.’

Waving away James’s gratitude, Harold smiled as he dashed out of the shop. It was thirty-two years since his father had retired and he’d inherited the tailor’s shop situated on the Bethnal Green end of Roman Road. In all those years, hand on heart, he could honestly say that James was the best employee he’d ever had. He’d worked for him for well over a year now, and although still at school, he did every Saturday and most of the holidays for him.

Harold had lost count of the number of boys he’d employed over the years. At a guess, he’d say it was anything between forty

and fifty. The one thing he was sure of was that none of them could hold a torch to young James. Intelligent, polite, eager to learn and a wonderful salesman, James had everything Harold had been looking for.

At sixty-two years old, he was almost ready for retirement. A father to three gorgeous daughters, James was like the son he'd never had, and would make a wonderful successor. He hadn't said anything to the boy yet. He believed in doing things properly and he would talk to the lad's mum before he spoke to him. Deciding to pay her a visit in the next few weeks, Harold happily greeted his next customer.

Head bobbing up and down like a yo-yo, Susan Hutton had a discreet glance at her watch. Seeing it was 5 p.m., she leaped off the bed.

'Kev, I've gotta go. I'm hours late already and me mum'll go apeshit if I ain't home when our Tommy arrives. Not only that, I promised to help her with the food and stuff.'

Kevin shot her a look of pure hatred. 'Don't fuck me about, Suze. I'm ready to come, just finish me off, will yer?'

Knowing that Kevin had not yet forgiven her for the Joanne episode, Susan lay back on the bed. She owed him big time for smoothing everything over. Eight stitches, his cousin had ended up with but, thanks to Kev, hadn't prosecuted. 'I was attacked from behind, and didn't see a thing,' she told the police.

Willing Kev to hurry up, Susan was relieved when he finally shot his load. Swallowing just as he liked her to, she jumped off

the bed for the second time.

‘Look Kev, I’ve really gotta go now. I’m sorry you can’t come to the party, but yer know how it is. I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?’

Smiling, Kevin handed her her jacket. Susan’s mother hated him; he was banned from the house, and if he wasn’t allowed to attend the party, he was fucked if Susan was going to enjoy it. Obviously, Maureen had no idea that her wonderful daughter had smashed a pint glass over his cousin’s bonce. As usual, he was the bad bastard, the villain of the piece.

‘Forget about tomorrow – you’re dumped,’ he said nastily.

Susan was well annoyed. Twenty minutes she’d just spent sucking his sweaty cock and now he had the cheek to dump her! She’d spent weeks grovelling and pandering to his every whim and she was sick to the back teeth of it.

‘What have I done this time?’

Kevin shrugged. ‘Nothing really, I just fancy a break.’

Sick of his stupid mind games, Susan walked towards the door. Usually, she cried and begged forgiveness, but not any more. She’d had enough and was physically and mentally exhausted by their fucked-up relationship.

‘Go fuck yourself!’ she screamed as she slammed the front door.

Kevin was astonished by her little outburst. Years he’d been with her, fucking years, and the odd clump here and there had always stopped her from answering back in the past. It certainly wasn’t a case of love at first sight. He hadn’t even liked her, and

had only copped off with her because he couldn't pull anyone else.

Kevin would never forget that first night with Susan for as long as he lived. His unusually high sex drive was a standing joke to his mates, but Kevin didn't find it funny, as he'd lost so many birds over it. For some reason, once a night seemed to suit the female sex, whereas he needed it at least half a dozen.

Fucking Susan was the biggest surprise of Kev's life. Not only was she a nymph, but she was a dirty whore as well. Eight hours that first session had lasted and it would have carried on longer had his knob not been so sore. From that night onwards, he hadn't been able to keep away from her. Tracey and Darren had fallen head over heels and him and Susan were kind of thrown together due to their love of filthy, non-stop sex.

He'd tried many times during the course of their relationship to get her out of his head. He'd knocked her about, finished with her, shagged loads of other birds, but nothing seemed to erase her from his mind. Even now, four years later, he was sure he didn't love her. It was hard to explain, but she was like a magnet that kept drawing him towards her.

Flopping back onto his bed, Kev stared at the ceiling and thought about life in general. Tracey and Darren had made a nice comfortable nest for themselves. They had a council flat in Bow and a baby on the way. Kevin envied his friend. He loved kids and couldn't wait to have his own. Maybe it was time for him to stop playing games, accept his fate and settle down with Susan.

He smiled as he got dressed. He'd spend one last night with a prostitute and from tomorrow he was all hers.

TWELVE

ETHEL BURST OUT laughing when she clapped eyes on the banner. 'Welcome Home Tommy' stood out in enormous green letters and Maureen was asking for help to hang it at the front of the house.

Maureen glared at her. 'What's so funny?'

Crying with laughter, Ethel could barely speak. 'How the fuck have yer got the front to put that up? The whole street knows he was done for murder. Fuck me, that new family that have just moved in opposite will think he's a war hero coming back late from the Falklands.'

Maureen bit her tongue. She loved her mother-in-law more than words could say, but the older she got, the more outspoken she became. She looked at her mates.

'What do you think?'

Brenda paused before answering. 'Look, maybe Ethel's right. Even though Terry Smith was a wrong 'un and what happened is long forgotten, he's still got cousins round here, ain't he?'

Sandra agreed. 'I heard his brother Wayne's moved back to the area. Dunno how true it is, but Rosie's husband saw him in the Duchess last Saturday night.'

As James entered the room, he caught the back end of the conversation. Seeing his mum's deflated expression, he put an arm around her.

‘We don’t want no trouble, Mum. Give us it here and I’ll put it up in the front room. I don’t think Tommy would like it outside, anyway. Yer know what he’s like and if Freddie’s coming with him, he might feel a bit of a prick.’

Smiling at her son, Maureen handed him the banner.

Tommy Hutton thanked the little blonde bird, rolled onto his back and took off the johnny. Embarrassed that he’d shot his seed in less than two minutes, he apologised and explained why.

‘Do you want to do it again?’ the girl asked.

He shook his head. ‘Thanks all the same, but I’ve gotta be somewhere.’

Tommy took his time as he got dressed. He didn’t want Freddie taking the piss out of him for being so quick, but on reaching the reception, he was surprised to see that Freddie had vanished. The Spanish-looking bird who had taken the money from them smiled at him.

‘Your friend, he is in room number six with Chantelle.’

Tommy sat on a chair and shut his eyes. With no sleep the previous night and a gut full of food and booze, he already felt knackered. Being set free had been the best feeling in the world. Walking through the gates after serving ten years of his fifteen was an incredibly special moment, one that only a long-termer would ever understand.

The first person he saw as the fresh air hit him was Freddie, sitting on the bonnet of a white Escort van. They’d literally run towards one another as if they were long-lost lovers, before

jumping up and down like nutters.

‘Right, what do yer wanna do?’ Freddie asked, waving a big wad of dough at him.

Tommy was overawed and didn’t know what to suggest. ‘I’m gagging for a beer. After that, you choose,’ he said.

Freddie pulled up at the first boozer they saw. They knocked back a few lagers and spoke endlessly about their time in Feltham. Tommy was the first to change the subject.

‘So, how’s the building game going? With the wad you’re waving about, yer must be doing all right.’

Freddie did a wanker sign. ‘It’s shit, mate. Me cousin’s a prick, he don’t pay that well and I knock me bollocks off for next to nothing. I’ve only stuck with it while I’ve been waiting for you to get out – that, and to keep me mother off me case.’

Tommy nodded sympathetically.

‘What’s this?’ he asked, as Freddie threw a brown envelope on his lap.

Freddie grinned, ‘It’s a little present from me uncle Bobby. I think there’s two hundred quid in there. Bobby’s in Spain for a couple of weeks, but he gave it to me before he went. He said you were to ’ave a good time with it.’

Downing his beer, Tommy smiled. ‘If I’m meant to be enjoying meself, best we get out of this shit-hole then.’

The next stop was a restaurant. The dinners in prison had been fucking awful and Tommy was gagging for a good old-fashioned roast.

As he wiped the gravy off his plate with the remainder of his Yorkshire pudding, Tommy swallowed the last piece and let out a satisfied groan.

‘Freddie, that was fuckin’ handsome. Honestly, it was better than a bunk up.’

Freddie winked at him. ‘Funny you should say that, ’cause I’ve got one of them lined up for yer later. Yer can tell me after you’ve shot yer load if yer still prefer the roast beef.’

Tommy laughed. He’d had no bird in tow when he’d gone away, but having been sexually active from the age of thirteen, he wasn’t going to say no to the offer.

After leaving the restaurant, Freddie wanted to take Tommy to a boozier in East Ham to meet all his pals.

‘Not today, Fred. I need to get me head together, and me mum’s expecting me home at seven. I can’t not turn up, and if we go down your manor, I probably won’t get back in time.’

Freddie fully understood where his mate was coming from. He’d been there himself. Walking out of prison was one thing, getting your head together and the family stuff was another. Instead, they’d done a little pub crawl. Nowhere special, just random pubs they liked the look of.

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