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THE TRAP

Standing by your family may be a badge of honor,
but sometimes loyalty can be bloody...

**Kimberley
Chambers's**

Kimberley Chambers

The Trap

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The heir to Martina Cole's crown with a story of murder, the underworld, violence and treachery. The Butlers are the kings of the East End. Vinny and Roy Butler are the apple of their mum's eye and although Queenie knows they can play dirty, when it comes to family they look after business and make her proud. Nothing and no one can bring the Butler's down. But Vinny seems to have crossed the wrong person and his cards are marked. And with the brothers joined at the hip, Roy may just be in the firing line too... One bloody night sets Vinny on the path of desperate vengeance, but will the Butlers emerge stronger than ever, or is the East End code of honour as good as dead? The first book in the Butler family saga. The series continues with Payback, The Wronged and Tainted Love.

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KIMBERLEY CHAMBERS

The Trap

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In memory of all our brave soldiers who have lost their lives in action including my own grandfather "Gunner Thomas Henry Caunter"

If you trap the moment before it's ripe,
The tears of repentance you certainly wipe.
But if once you let the ripe moment go,
You can never wipe off the tears of woe.

William Blake

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Prologue

Autumn 1965

Unable to make himself heard above Sandie Shaw belting out 'Long Live Love', Donald Walker made his way over to the Wurlitzer jukebox and turned down the volume.

'Don't do that! You know I like Sandie,' Mary Walker said, as though she knew the singer personally.

'There's somebody knocking at the door,' Donald informed his wife.

Mary walked over to the door and unbolted it. She was greeted by a sturdy-looking woman standing there in a dark-grey overcoat. At a guess, Mary thought she was probably in her mid fifties, but it was hard to be sure because of the curlers and hairnet on her head. 'Hello. Can I help you?' Mary asked, politely.

'No, but I can help you,' the woman replied, barging her way past Mary and into the premises.

Donald and Mary knew very little about the East End or its natives. They were North Londoners, having lived in Stoke Newington for many years, but this café in Whitechapel had been far too cheap to turn down, which is why they had decided to up sticks and move.

'Hello, I'm Donald and this is my wife, Mary. As you have probably already realized, we are the new owners of the café. We officially open for business tomorrow but would you like a cup of tea or coffee?' Donald asked.

Shaking her head, the woman held out her right hand. 'I'm Freda. Freda Smart. I live just around the corner.'

'And how can you help us?' Mary enquired. She had a feeling that Freda was about to ask for a job, but there was no chance of that as she and Donald had spent every penny they had refurbishing the rundown café and were in no position to employ staff just yet.

'I can help you by telling you why this café has been empty for eighteen long months before you bought it and why you probably got it for peanuts,' Freda spat.

Mary gave her husband a worried glance. This café had been half the cost of any others they had looked at and the only one in their meagre price-range. But this woman seemed unhinged somehow and Mary wondered if she perhaps held a grudge against the previous owner.

'Would you like a glass of water?' Donald asked. He had noticed that the woman's forehead had beads of sweat forming which had now started to drip onto one of his brand-new melamine tables.

'No, don't want nuffink. Just come to let you know the score. No-one else round 'ere will tell you. They're all too bleedin' well frightened of 'em, but I ain't.'

'Frightened of who?' Mary asked, perplexed.

'Frightened of the Butlers. They own that snooker club just around the corner. Old Jack who used to own this café, they killed his son, Peter. Broke his wife Ethel's heart it did and if you don't abide by their rules, they'll rip the heart out of your family too. I saw you move in. You got two little kids, ain't ya? Well, if you just do as I say, you'll be OK. Albie's the dad. He's a piss-head, a proper waster. The mother is the brains of the family. Hard-looking old cow called Queenie. Her sister is Vivvy, she has a mongol son, and Queenie's kids are Vinny, who is the worst out the bunch, Roy, Michael, and young Brenda. When they come in here, look after 'em. Serve 'em before any other customers and don't charge 'em for food or drinks, you get me?'

Seeing the distressed look on his wife's face, Donald was extremely annoyed. Opening their café tomorrow was meant to be one of the best moments of their lives and yet this madwoman was here, upsetting his Mary and threatening to spoil the joyous occasion. 'I can assure you, Freda, that Mary and I will not be giving free drinks or food to anybody and our customers will also be served in

the order they arrive in. Now, if you don't mind, could I please ask you to leave? Mary and I still have lots of work to do before we open tomorrow and we have very little time left to accomplish that task.'

Absolutely furious that her sound advice hadn't been listened to, Freda stood up, stomped towards Donald and poked him in the chest. 'Dig your own grave, what do I care? But, don't say I didn't warn you. The Butlers, remember the name. They catch people in their trap, just like spiders do,' she yelled, as Donald escorted her out of the café.

'Oh my God! What have we done, Donald? And who the hell are the Butlers?' Mary asked, when her husband had locked the door.

Donald took his wife in his arms. At six foot, he towered over Mary's five-foot frame. He was the man of the family and protect her he would. 'Do not worry yourself, my darling. Freda is obviously the mad local scaremonger. And even if that Butler family do come in here, we won't have any problems with them, I can absolutely assure you of that.'

Nestling herself against Donald's broad chest, Mary breathed a sigh of relief. Her husband's instincts were never wrong.

Five minutes later the jukebox was back on and Mary and Donald worked happily side by side. They sang in unison to the Beatles' 'Help', but what they didn't realize was that in the not-too-distant future, they would be needing help themselves. Every word that Freda Smart had spoken happened to be the truth. She wasn't mad, nor was she a scaremonger. She was just a realist who had done her utmost to warn a decent family of the perils of moving to Whitechapel.

CHAPTER ONE

‘There’s two people waiting outside, Daddy. Can we open the door now?’ asked young Nancy Walker.

Urging his eleven-year-old daughter to come away from the window, Donald smiled as Nancy skipped towards him. Nancy was like a miniature version of her mother: petite, blonde, with blue eyes and a cute button nose.

‘How’re we doing for time, Donald?’ Mary shouted out.

Holding his daughter’s hand, Donald led her into the kitchen. ‘We have twenty minutes until our business officially opens, my dear,’ he said, proudly. He had worked two jobs for many years to secure his and Mary’s aim of a better life for themselves and their family. He had even worked at weekends while Mary brought the children up nigh-on singlehandedly, but it had been worth it now they had achieved their dream.

‘Look, Dad. I buttered all that,’ Christopher said, pointing towards a stack of bread.

Donald ruffled the hair of his eight-year-old son. Christopher looked nothing like his mother and sister. He took after his dad with his brown hair and his chocolate-coloured eyes.

‘Can you put that cake in the display cabinet for me, Donald? Oh, and turn the jukebox on as well,’ Mary ordered.

Donald raised his eyebrows to the ceiling at the mention of the jukebox. He had been totally against purchasing such an object. He had finally relented when Mary explained her exact reasons for wanting one. ‘I don’t want ours to be like some grotty old transport café, Donald. I want it to be vibrant and modern. If we buy the jukebox outright, just think of the extra income we will earn with people putting all their pennies in. We don’t want a café full of old-age pensioners, do we? We want to attract a younger crowd that have money to spend, and music is the best attraction of all. That new band, the Rolling Stones, would liven up a graveyard,’ Mary insisted.

Donald sat down on one of the posh plastic shiny red chairs that his wife had fallen in love with. She had an eye for décor, did his Mary, and Donald had to admit she had done a bloody good job. Red and white had been her colour theme and apart from the picture of James Dean that sat proudly on the wall opposite the jukebox, everything was a mixture of those two colours. Thinking how trendy and also how very American it all looked, Donald smiled, stood up, and walked into the kitchen. ‘I can’t wait any longer. Let’s open the door now, shall we?’

‘Can I open it?’ Christopher shouted, grabbing his father’s arm.

‘No, I want to do it,’ Nancy said obstinately, pushing her brother out of the way.

‘Behave yourselves, please. Seeing as your mother designed this and buying a café was all her idea in the first place, it will be her that opens the door to the public.’

Eyes shining with excitement, Mary picked up the scissors. Donald had put a piece of red ribbon across the outside of the door this morning and once that was cut, their wonderful café was open for the whole wide world to see. ‘To happiness and success,’ Mary said.

Queenie Butler stared at her mother’s grave and crouched down next to her sister. ‘We’ve tidied you up, Mum, and we’re off now. Love you. God bless,’ Queenie said, kissing her fingers and placing her right hand against her mother’s headstone.

‘Yep. God bless, sweetheart,’ Vivian added, solemnly.

‘Don’t our flowers look beautiful?’ Queenie commented, linking arms with her sister.

Vivian nodded. ‘Best-looking grave over here by miles. At least we have respect for the dead, unlike some people,’ she said loudly, as Old Mother Taylor walked past.

‘Stop it, Viv,’ Queenie laughed.

‘Well, her old man’s grave is an eyesore. How the hell can she visit him regular and stare at those weeds? It ain’t bleedin’ normal. Lazy old cow,’ Vivian said, loudly.

‘Whatever is your Lenny doing?’ Queenie enquired.

Marching over to her nine-year-old son, Vivian clipped him around the ear. ‘What have I told you about pissing over ’ere, eh? If you wanna do a wee-wee, you ask me and I’ll take you to a toilet. You don’t get your dingle-dangle out in public, understand? It’s naughty.’

‘Sorry, Mummy,’ Lenny said, grinning.

As her nephew skipped on ahead of them, Queenie chuckled. ‘I’m sure he only does it to wind you up, Viv. He laughs every time you have a go at him. Sod all wrong with his brain. Smart as a button, he is.’

Vivian batted her eyelids. Lenny was her only son, she adored him, but it wasn’t easy bringing up a child with disabilities. Lenny had nearly died when she’d given birth to him. She had gone into labour at home and when the doctor finally arrived, he hadn’t been able to get her son out at first. Lenny had been in the breech position and it seemed like an eternity before he finally entered the world. Queenie had been with her throughout, holding her hand while she screamed blue murder and both of them had thought little Lenny was a goner. He lay motionless on the bed for a good few minutes before the doctor managed to find signs of life. The relief she felt when she heard that first cry come from his lips, Vivian would remember till her dying day.

Lenny’s dad was an East End Jack-the-lad called Bill Harris. Bill was working his way up the criminal ladder and had felt humiliated being associated with a son who wasn’t born perfect. It was common knowledge locally that Bill was knocking off the tarty barmaid in the Blind Beggar and when Vivian finally learned of his betrayal, she had packed his clothes in a couple of sacks, marched inside the pub with Queenie alongside her, chucked them at the barmaid, and told her she was welcome to her no-good husband. That was over three years ago now, and Vivian had never clapped eyes on Bill Harris since. Rumour had it that he’d moved to Barking and set up home with his new tart. Viv hoped this wasn’t true, as she would much prefer the bastard to be six feet under and covered by earth.

‘Your Lenny looks more and more like my Michael every day. Wouldn’t Mum have loved him now?’ Queenie said, wistfully.

Vivian nodded. Their poor old mum had died last year and had adored young Lenny. She’d had a stroke and was found dead in her armchair with her knitting on her lap. She was only fifty-seven, no age at all.

‘Shall we pop in and see the boys in the club on the way back?’ Queenie asked. She was dead proud of her two eldest sons for recently setting up their own business. It was officially a snooker club, but it was common knowledge locally that it was really an illegal drinking and gambling den.

Queenie wasn’t daft. She knew Vinny and Roy had pulled off a robbery or two to afford such an establishment, but it didn’t bother her. She wanted her sons to live the good life and if that meant swindling the odd person or company along the way, then so be it.

‘Yeah, why not. They might find Lenny some jobs to do this afternoon which will give me a break. Old Jack’s café re-opens today, you know. Fat Beryl saw one of them jukeboxes being delivered there, so it sounds posh. Let’s be nosy and have a cuppa there first, then we’ll pop in to see the boys.’

‘Oh, I dunno, Viv. Say all Old Jack’s customers are back in there? He was ever so popular, was Jack. My Vinny swears blind he had nothing to do with young Peter’s murder, but I don’t fancy walking into a furnace. Perhaps we should pop in there when it’s been open a couple of weeks? Bound to be packed today.’

‘People are always gonna spread bloody rumours. Your Vinny’s got good morals, you know that. Peter was a pervert, that’s a fact, and if it was Vinny that topped him for touching up that poor child, then he deserves a bleedin’ medal. Let’s walk in there with our heads held high. You are Queenie Butler, no bastard would have the guts to say anything bad to you, would they? Or me, for that matter, and if somebody did get a bit lippy, we’ll just walk round the corner and tell the boys.’

Knowing how feared her two eldest sons were, Queenie couldn’t help but chuckle. ‘Sod it then. Let’s go and be nosy.’

Donald and Mary had been rushed off their feet all morning. Donald was in charge of the cooking in the kitchen and Mary was out at the front taking customers' orders and making teas, coffees, sandwiches and rolls. Even young Nancy and Christopher had worked flat-out. They were in charge of the washing and drying up, with the promise of some extra pocket money.

At the first lull in the day's activities, Donald left the kitchen to join his wife at the counter.

'The interest that jukebox has caused, you would not believe. Everybody who has come in has had a look at it. Told you it would be good for business, didn't I?' Mary said, treating Donald to a smug expression. Her husband could be a domineering man at times, but Mary had learned to stick up for herself over the years. Nancy always sided with her, and Christopher with his father, but overall they were a happy, well-balanced family.

'You most certainly did, my dear. I can't believe how busy we have been, can you? Perhaps it's a bit of a novelty as it's our first day, but if things continue in the same vein, we will have to look at taking on a member of staff, Mary. The kids start their new school next week, remember? And there is no way I would have had time to wash and dry up this morning as well as cook all the food.'

'Let's see how things pan out. Perhaps we can take someone on part-time to help us out in our busiest period?' Mary replied. She and Donald had planned to open from seven in the morning to seven in the evening to begin with.

Donald didn't answer. He was too busy watching the reaction of his seated customers to the two bleached-blond women and dark-haired child who had just walked in. They were being treated like royalty. Because there were no spare tables, at least three different people had leapt up to give them theirs and one man had even offered to buy them their food and drink.

'This has to be members of that Butler family that Mad Freda warned us about,' Donald hissed in his wife's ear.

Mary smiled broadly as the young boy ran over to the jukebox and the two women approached the counter. 'Hello, I'm Mary Walker and this is my husband, Donald. We are the new owners of this establishment,' Mary said, for about the fiftieth time that day.

'Music, Mummy. I wanna dance,' young Lenny shouted at the top of his voice.

'Ere you go, boy,' an old man in a flat cap said, handing Lenny some coins.

Queenie held out her right hand. 'Pleased to meet you. I'm Queenie Butler and this is my sister, Vivian. My sons own the snooker club just around the corner and that young man over there is Lenny, Vivvy's boy.'

The volume on the jukebox wasn't overly loud, but as Lenny started singing and bopping away to the sound of Buddy Holly's 'That'll be the Day', most of the people in the café fawned over him, then clapped in unison.

Mary joined in with the applause.

'Rock and roll mad, he is. Dunno where he gets it from. Nobody else in the bleedin' family likes it,' Vivian informed Mary.

'Right, we'll have two cups of rosy and I'll have one of them scones with thick butter on it,' Queenie said.

'I'll have a scone too and a can of pop and an iced bun for my Lenny,' Vivian added.

Remembering Mad Freda's warning about the Butlers not paying, Mary was relieved when Queenie handed her a pound note, then thanked her as she gave her her change.

Mary followed Donald out into the kitchen. 'Well, that Freda was obviously mad. She said the boy was a mongol and even though you can tell he is a bit backward, he certainly isn't one of those. And even though the women seem a bit rough and ready, they were polite enough and paid for their order.'

Donald kissed his wife on the forehead. 'I told you everything would be fine.' There was no way Donald would worry his Mary, but he really hadn't liked the look of those Butler women. The atmosphere in the café had been normal before they'd walked in and he could tell people were only

offering them their tables, fawning over the child, and generally falling over backwards out of some kind of fear. Donald wasn't stupid. Those Butlers had danger stamped all over them.

Vinny and Roy Butler grinned as they divided up the previous evening's takings.

'Blinding! And another good night was had by all,' Vinny said, as he handed his brother a pile of notes.

Roy chuckled. 'You sticking the other pile back in the kitty?'

'Yep. We gotta speculate to accumulate,' Vinny replied, in a sensible manner.

At twenty, Vinny was two years older than his brother Roy, and between them they were on their way to becoming a force to be reckoned with. A container-load of TVs they had stolen had paid for them to buy the rundown snooker club, and even though it had taken six months to save enough money to refurbish it to their lavish taste, it now looked very classy.

Unlike a lot of young East End wannabes, Vinny and Roy had gone down the clever route of keeping themselves to themselves. Their father Albie was an arsehole. He was also an alcoholic, and watching him make a complete prick of himself over the years had put the boys off ever frequenting pubs.

Neither Vinny nor Roy was a complete teetotaller. Both lads enjoyed the odd Scotch on the rocks here and there, but they only ever drank in front of friends and family, or on their own premises. In their line of business, both lads always liked to have their wits about them. Being clever was part of their image.

One of the reasons Vinny and Roy had decided to buy the club and turn it into the headquarters of their empire was that they hadn't wanted to tread on anybody else's toes. The East End was littered with villains, with the two most frightening families being the Mitchells and the Krays.

The Mitchells were based in Canning Town and were heavily into pub protection. They were a family firm, run by the old man, Harry. He pulled the strings while his three sons, Ronny, Paulie and Eddie, terrorized people into handing over their hard-earned cash.

Then there were the Krays. They were local lads who had made a real name for themselves. They were virtually beyond the reach of the law now. Earlier this year they had escaped conviction for nightclub extortion. They'd even been given an interview on TV after that and hung out with film stars and celebrities.

Vinny didn't know if being that famous was a good thing or not, but he was determined to be feared, well-respected and rich. As a lad, he had idolized both the Mitchells and the Krays for what they had achieved in life and he was hell-bent on topping their glory. Wanting to be the best was part of Vinny's nature.

'Who is it?' Roy shouted, as he heard a knock on the door.

'It's the bleedin' woman who gave birth to the pair of ya,' Queenie yelled.

Vinny grinned as Roy unlocked the metal door and Lenny ran towards him. 'All right, Champ? What you been up to?' Vinny asked, lifting the boy off the ground and swinging him around in the air. Vinny adored his nephew, all the family did.

'Been Nanny's grave, then I went dancing in the café,' Lenny replied, sporting a big grin.

'Dancing in what poxy café?'

'Old Jack's café. It's re-opened today. New people have taken it over and it's got one of them jukeboxes in there. I wouldn't swing him around too much. Three iced cakes the greedy little sod has eaten and he's bound to be Tom Dick at some point,' Vivian explained.

Not wanting sick over his brand-new shirt, Vinny sat Lenny on a chair. 'So, what do you think of the décor, Auntie Viv? You haven't seen the leather chairs and sofas yet, have you?'

Vivian grinned. She loved her nephews. Unlike a lot of young men these days, Vinny and Roy had impeccable manners. They still referred to her as 'Auntie' and probably always would. Viv sat down on one of the burgundy sofas and stroked the quality leather. 'Oh, it's beautiful, boys. Looks like a palace now, eh, Queenie?'

Queenie felt as proud as a peacock as she nodded her head in agreement.

Roy stood up. 'I'll get you and Auntie Viv a glass of sherry,' he said, gesturing for Vinny to follow him.

'What's up?' Vinny asked.

'Why don't we tell her now? Seems as good a time as any,' Roy whispered, when his brother joined him behind the bar.

'Nah. Not in front of Champ,' Vinny replied.

'Well, we gotta tell her soon. I hate seeing Dad take the piss out of her like this. He's such a bastard.'

Vinny nodded in agreement. Breaking the bad news to his mother was not going to be easy, but it had to be done. 'We'll find a way to tell her in the next couple of days. And don't worry about Dad. That treacherous piece of shit will be dealt with, I promise.'

Noticing the dangerous glint in his brother's eyes that he had seen many times before, Roy felt his stomach knotting. 'What do you mean by dealt with? I know he's a prick, Vin, but we can't do anything bad to him, he's still our dad.'

Leaning towards his brother's ear, Vinny spoke loudly and clearly. 'I wouldn't care if he was the King of England. Nobody makes a fool out of our mum and I mean fucking nobody. Our dad will pay for the liberty he has taken. Trust me on that one.'

CHAPTER TWO

Albie Butler lit up a Salem cigarette and sighed blissfully as the nicotine hit the back of his throat. There was nothing more pleasurable than a fag after getting your end away, unless you counted the first drag of the morning.

Judy Preston was a twenty-five-year-old mother of one. Her son Mark had just turned three and instead of marrying her like any decent man would have, Mark's father had dumped Judy on learning she was pregnant.

Judy knew she was gossiped about and frowned upon in the street where she lived. Her neighbours were all older than she was and Judy knew they thought it disgusting that she had given birth out of wedlock. Judy didn't care about their narrow-mindedness. Her mum helped her bring up Mark and nobody would dare say anything to her face for fear of retribution from her brother, Johnny.

Having an older sibling who just happened to be a face certainly had its benefits, and when her relationship with Albie did become common knowledge, Judy knew she would get little grief from his family thanks to who her brother was.

When Judy made another grab for his already over-worked pecker, Albie Butler leapt out of the bed. Judy Preston was by far the prettiest of the half a dozen or so lassies he'd had flings with since marrying Queenie, but the look on Vinny and Roy's faces yesterday evening when he had popped in the snooker club told Albie that they knew he was at it again. If they told Queenie she would chop his bollocks off and feed them to next door's dog and that wasn't a chance Albie was willing to take.

'I'm really sorry, Judy, but I think we're gonna have to call it a day. My boys are onto us and I can't risk her indoors finding out. I love you, you know that, but all good things must come to an end,' Albie said regretfully.

Judy stared at Albie with her mouth wide open. Did he honestly think he could come round for one last bunk-up and then casually dump her like a bag of old rubbish? Because if he did, he had another bloody think coming. Thankful that she had kept the news she had known for the past six weeks to herself, Judy grinned. 'I'm afraid walking away from me isn't an option, Albie. I'm pregnant and it's yours!'

Vinny poured himself a Scotch on the rocks and sat down in his office. Roy had begged him not to rough up their dad and in the end Vinny had reluctantly agreed. Tomorrow, he was taking his family out for lunch and that was when he planned to expose his father's infidelity. His mother was no shrinking violet and Vinny was sure that once she knew what his arsehole of a father had been up to, she would batter him to Bow and back herself.

Smiling at the thought of his mother smashing her frying pan around his father's head, Vinny stared at the picture of her that sat proudly on his desk. She and Vivian were side by side on a sofa holding Brenda. It had been taken over a decade ago when his sister was just a baby. His mother and Viv looked more like twins than sisters, and Vinny couldn't help but notice how much they had aged since. Both still dressed smartly and had beautiful smiles, but the wrinkles they now sported told a story of the hardship they'd endured throughout their lives.

Vinny had been a mummy's boy for as long as he could remember. His dad had been, and still was, a two-bob con merchant and had never really been there for him and his siblings. He earned his beer money by selling cheap imported booze and fags and had never had a proper job in his life. Vinny's mum had. She had two cleaning jobs for years just to put food in her children's mouths and had only given up work last year when Vinny had insisted that he was now wealthy enough to support her.

Remembering how elated his mother had been when she had told both of the petulant rich women she worked for to shove their jobs up their arses, Vinny grinned and stared at the photo of

himself standing in the middle of his two brothers. All three of them had inherited their father's jet-black hair and green eyes, and when stood together, they made a striking-looking trio.

At six foot two, Vinny was taller than Roy and Michael, but only by an inch or so. Both he and Roy wore their hair slicked back with Brylcreem and they often got mistaken for Italians. Vinny found that a big compliment, as he knew that in their expensive suits, accompanied with their swagger, he and Roy could pass for members of the Mafia. Michael wouldn't though. He was a Mod and the only suit he ever wore was a tonic one. Tomorrow was Michael's sixteenth birthday and Vinny and Roy had clubbed together to buy him the moped he had been harping on about for months. His brother had no idea of the surprise coming his way and Vinny couldn't wait to see his face when he got it. Shame his birthday would be spoilt by learning his father was an untrustworthy piece of shit, Vinny thought sadly. It couldn't be helped though. Harboursing the truth from his mother had left Vinny with a guilty taste in his mouth.

Vinny sighed. He had always been under the impression that there was no love lost between his parents. They rarely slept in the same bed. His drunken father usually crashed on the sofa. However, his mum was still bound to feel aggrieved, which was why Vinny had decided to wait until after Michael's birthday lunch to tell her the sordid truth. Michael would still have a top day, whatever happened. At least his moped would soften the blow.

Hearing the doorbell sound, Vinny took the envelope out of the drawer and went downstairs. It cost him eighty quid a month to keep the Old Bill off his back, but it was worth every penny. 'There you go, George,' he said, handing the envelope to the Chief Inspector.

'Any chance of a brandy to warm the cockles? Bleedin' taters it is,' George said.

Vinny led him inside and poured him a drink.

'So, how's it going?' George asked, before knocking it back in one and holding out his glass for an immediate refill.

'So-so. It's like any other business, George. Some weeks are busy, some quiet. It's been dead the past couple, but I suppose it would be with Christmas creeping up on us. People have no spare pennies this time of year, do they?' Vinny said, in his most sincere voice. He wasn't going to inform George that ever since he had started having strippers on at the weekend, the club had been packed to the rafters and he had been raking it in. George Geary loved a pound note and would most certainly want an increase on his bung if he knew that.

George eyed the furniture and décor. There were four snooker tables at the back, which wasn't many considering the joint was meant to be a snooker club. The rest of the place was kitted out with glass tables, burgundy leather chairs and sofas to match. There was a stage, with spotlights above it and big speakers. And in the centre of the club, an expensive-looking chandelier hung proudly from the ceiling. The bar was shiny aluminium and there was every optic known to mankind behind it.

Holding out his glass for yet another refill, George smirked. He knew Vinny was lying. A colleague of his had watched the comings and goings at the club last weekend and had reported back that it was jam-packed.

Nothing escaped George's attention, he had been biding his time like a viper waiting to strike and knew now was as good a time as any. 'We have a big problem, Vinny. The powers above know that you've been illegally serving liquor in here and they now expect me to do something about it.'

Vinny felt the colour drain from his cheeks. If he couldn't continue serving alcohol, he had no business left. 'But I thought you said I'd be fine. What have I been fucking paying you for if you can't square it for me?' he demanded.

'Hold your horses. I've already had a word in a couple of people's shell-likes. It will cost you, but I can definitely get you a liquor licence.'

'How much?' Vinny asked.

'Fifteen hundred quid and a drink on top for me,' George said, even though he had already put five hundred on top of the grand he had been quoted.

‘How much! That’s fucking extortion, George. I haven’t got money like that lying around. I’ve spent virtually every penny I’ve earned so far on doing the place up.’

‘I tried to knock the price down for you, Vinny, but my contact wasn’t having none of it, I’m afraid. Surely it’s better in the long run for you to go legal? And I will drop my fee to fifty pounds a month, rather than eighty.’

‘Why have I still got to pay you if I’m properly licensed?’ Vinny asked.

‘Because you are illegal in other areas, Vinny. I know you have strippers in here and I know that people gamble. You haven’t got an entertainment or gambling licence, have you?’

Vinny leant his elbows on the bar and put his head in his hands. George had him by the short and curlies and Vinny knew it. Trouble was, there was nothing he could do about it, except cough up. ‘Come back next week and I’ll have the dough for ya.’

Albie Butler was sitting in the Blind Beggar, staring at his pint, in a stupefied trance. He was in shit, deep shit, and he didn’t have a clue what to do about it.

‘You all right, Albie?’ shouted out Sid, who was perched on his regular barstool.

Albie didn’t even bother answering. He was anything but bloody all right. Cursing the day he had ever set eyes on Judy Preston, he sank his drink and called over to the barmaid to pour him another. Why hadn’t he used a rubber even though that lying cow had sworn she was taking that new contraceptive pill?

Taking his empty glass back to the bar, Albie returned with a full one. After Judy had informed him she was up the spout, he had spent ages begging her to get rid of it. He had even offered her a nice lump of cash which he had planned to borrow off Vinny or Roy, but the selfish bitch was intent on ruining his life.

Keeping a bit on the side secret was one thing. Keeping a fucking baby who belonged to you secret was another. Vowing to think with his brain in future rather than his pecker, Albie tried to fathom a way out of the difficult situation. Judy’s brother was a handy bastard and at his age, Albie was no match for an up-and-coming wide-boy like Johnny Preston. Vinny and Roy were though. They could more than hold their own against anybody.

Albie sighed worriedly. Judy needed the frighteners put on her to force her to get rid of the child and if admitting his sins to his two eldest sons was the only way to make that happen, then admit his sins he would. They weren’t going to be best pleased, especially Vinny, who had threatened him over his wandering eye in the past. But what choice did Albie have? None.

Finishing his pint, he stood up and nervously made his way towards the snooker club. His boys would have to help him in his hour of need, wouldn’t they? He might have fucked up big time, but he was still their bloody father.

Queenie Butler took the birthday cake out of the oven and grinned at her sister. ‘Well, what do you think?’

‘Ah, it’s beautiful, Queenie. Best cake I’ve seen in years,’ Vivian replied, truthfully.

‘Can I have some?’ little Brenda asked.

‘No, sweetheart. We can’t cut it up until tomorrow, otherwise Michael won’t see the beauty of it,’ Queenie replied.

‘Awww,’ Brenda whined.

Queenie stared at her offspring. Brenda was eleven now and could be an obstinate little mare at times. Unlike the boys who favoured their father with their black hair and chiselled features, Brenda looked more like her side of the family. Her hair was mousy brown, the same as Queenie’s and Viv’s natural colour, and she was a skinny little thing even though she had the appetite of a horse.

‘Please, Mum?’ Brenda tried again.

Vivian laughed. ‘You help me carry the cake to my house so our Michael don’t see it and I’ll give you a nice iced bun. Deal?’

Queenie smiled when Vivian and Brenda left the house. Family was the most important thing in the world and she loved hers with a passion. Albie was a tosspot, she knew that, but he had given her four beautiful children, for which she would always be grateful to him. She didn't love or respect him any more. What woman could love and respect a bone-idle drunk? But he never pestered her for sex these days and even if he did, she would never leave him. He was the father of her children and for that reason alone, she would always see it as her duty to suffer him.

'Oh, I do love being two doors away now, Queenie. It feels like we live together, don't it?' Vivian said, letting herself back in with her own key.

Queenie laughed. It was her Vinny who had secured Vivian the council house next door but one. It had become available a few months back when old Ada had passed away and Vinny had offered the man at the council a backhander to ensure it went to Viv. He had bragged when he had come home that the man was so petrified, he had refused to take the money, but had given Vinny the keys anyway. 'My reputation precedes me once again, Mum,' Vinny had chuckled.

'Is that my little soldier I hear coming down them stairs?' Vivian said, when she heard Lenny's familiar flat-footed walk. He had been tired earlier, so had gone for a lie-down on Queenie's bed.

'Can I watch *Mr Ed*?' Lenny asked excitedly. The programme featuring the talking horse was his current favourite. Before that, it had been *Flipper*.

'Yep, course you can,' Queenie replied. Both she and Vivian now had posh TVs. They had been Christmas presents last year from the boys.

'I love *Mr Ed* too,' Brenda said, following her cousin into the lounge.

Queenie locked eyes with her sister. 'Ain't we lucky with our little lot, eh? I know we've had hard times, but kids don't come no better than ours, you know,' Queenie said contentedly.

Vivian grinned. 'We're blessed, Queenie. Truly blessed.'

After George had left earlier, Vinny had spent the rest of the afternoon shagging his prettiest stripper, Karen. Unlike his brothers, who were both girl-mad, birds didn't bother Vinny as a rule, neither did sex.

Apart from his mother and aunt, Vinny was no big fan of women in general. He found girls his age silly and annoying, so why he had bothered ramming himself inside Karen again, who was already asking him questions such as 'Am I your girlfriend now?' He did not know.

Vinny got out of bed and quickly got dressed. He had only ever had one proper girlfriend in his life and the slag had broken his heart. Fifteen, Vinny had been when he'd first set eyes on Yvonne Summers. She was two years older than him, but the age gap hadn't mattered as he was very mature for his age. To say he had treated Yvonne like a princess was putting it mildly. Even back then, he knew how to earn a bob or two and he was forever taking her to the pictures and buying her nice presents. Had she appreciated his adoration and kindness? No. The whore had two-timed him, then run off with a lad five years his senior. Rumour had it, she'd moved to Leeds.

Vinny had been distraught at the time and didn't know how he would have got over it if it wasn't for his mother. She had held his sobbing body, wiped away his tears and made him feel worthy once again.

'So, am I your girlfriend now?' Karen repeated, desperation in her voice.

The doorbell saved Vinny from insulting her. 'Get dressed and go out the back way. I've got business to deal with,' he said, coldly.

Wondering if George had come back to try to extract even more money, Vinny took the stairs two by two. He flung open the big metal door only to see his father standing there with a sheepish expression on his face. 'What do you want?' Vinny asked, unable to hide the bitterness. He didn't want to let on to his dad he knew about Judy Preston before tomorrow. He wanted to watch him squirm when he announced his infidelity at the restaurant in front of his mother.

Unable to look his son in the eyes, Albie stared at his shoes. 'I've got a bit of a problem and I really need your help,' he mumbled.

‘What do you want? Beer or Scotch?’ Vinny asked, leading him into the club.

‘Scotch please, son.’

Vinny poured two large Scotches on the rocks, then sat down at a nearby table. ‘Fire away then.’

With his hands clasped together, Albie twiddled his thumbs. There was no sign of Roy which was a shame as Roy had a lesser temper on him than Vinny. He also had a more understanding nature.

‘Where’s Roy?’ Albie asked.

‘Gone to collect Michael’s moped.’

Albie stared at his hands. There was no easy way of saying what he had to say, but he wanted to find the right words. ‘I’ve got meself in a bit of a pickle, boy. I know I promised you I would never stray again, but I had this bird come on to me. Only young, she is, and being a weak man, I was flattered if you know what I mean?’

‘Oh, I know what you mean all right. And I know who the tart is. You’ve been shafting Judy Preston, haven’t you? So, what’s happened? Has her brother Johnny found out and now wants to chop that diseased little cock of yours off? You make me sick, Dad, do you know that?’

‘I’m sorry. I know what I did is wrong, but your mum don’t want me in her bed no more. It was just too good an opportunity to turn down. I ain’t getting no younger, boy, and I was just flattered I suppose. I do love your mum though. You know that, don’t you, son?’

Unable to stop himself, Vinny sank the rest of his drink, then brought the glass down so hard against the table, it smashed into a thousand fragments. ‘Do not fucking sit there telling me you love my mum when you stick your cock in anything that moves, and do not ever call me your son again. You are nothing to me. I despise you,’ he snarled, standing up.

Albie looked back down at his feet. ‘How long you known for?’

‘A week or so. Was gonna confront you tomorrow in front of Mum at Michael’s birthday bash. I’m still telling her, so don’t think you’re fucking getting away with this one. I warned you before after I found out about that Maureen bird that if you did it again I would grass you up.’

‘You can’t tell her, boy. I’ll never do it again, I swear on the Bible, but please don’t tell your mother.’

‘You can go to hell, Dad. Unlike you, I’m a man of my word and tell her I shall. She’s bound to kick your sorry arse out, so what you gonna do then? Gonna set up home with your young bit of skirt, are ya?’

Absolutely petrified that his whole world was about to fall apart, Albie stood up and banged his fists against the glass table. ‘You can’t tell her, Vinny. I know I don’t deserve it, but you really need to side with me for once on this. I need your help, boy.’

Vinny chuckled. ‘Why? ‘Cause Johnny Preston is gonna give you a good fawpenny one? Good! Saves me from fucking doing it.’

‘It ain’t Johnny. He knows about me and Judy and he’s OK about it.’

‘Well, what is it then?’ Vinny asked, his lip curling into another snarl.

‘Judy’s in the club and she’s keeping it. I accidentally got her pregnant.’

Vinny leapt up, grabbed his father by the neck in disgust and rammed his body against the wall. ‘You fucking what?’

‘It weren’t my fault. She said she was taking that tablet thingamajig. She lied to me,’ Albie said, panicking.

Unable to stop himself, Vinny did what he had wanted to do for years. He beat his father senseless.

CHAPTER THREE

Bored with doing the washing up and spending their lives confined to the café, young Nancy and Christopher Walker begged their parents to allow them to go out to play.

‘You’re to go no further than a short walk away and you are to be back here by five at the latest,’ their father ordered them.

Missing her friends from Stoke Newington dreadfully, Nancy tagged along reluctantly behind her brother. All day, Christopher had been harping on about the rich men with the posh cars whom he had seen the previous day when he had taken a trip to the sweetshop, but Nancy wasn’t car-mad like her brother. She wouldn’t have been able to tell the difference between a Sunbeam Tiger and an Austin Healey.

‘This is it,’ Christopher said, plonking himself down on a doorstep opposite the snooker club.

‘But there ain’t no rich men here, nor is there many cars,’ Nancy complained.

‘Well, there was yesterday. That Jaguar Sedan is the car that I want when I’m grown-up.’ Christopher pointed to the shiny black car that belonged to Vinny Butler.

Nancy took a strawberry bonbon out of the paper bag and popped it into her mouth. ‘What do you want to be when you grow up, Christopher? I think I would like to be a hairdresser and do famous people’s hair like Twiggy.’

Sucking on a Kola Kube, Christopher wanted to laugh, but didn’t. Twiggy would never have let his sister near her hair, but it was good Nancy had dreams, because he was determined to fulfil his. ‘I’m gonna be a policeman and catch people like Jack the Ripper. He killed loads of women round ’ere, you know.’

‘What’s that man doing, Christopher?’ Nancy asked, bemused.

Christopher had no idea who the Italian-looking man was, but when he punched a nearby wall and then glared at him and Nancy, the boy’s intuition told him it wasn’t safe to be there. He grabbed his sister’s hand. ‘Come on, let’s go back to the café.’

Michael Butler entered his mother’s house wearing his trademark green parka and a big grin on his face. ‘Urgh. What’s that smell?’

‘Lavender bags. Dotted them all over the house, including that stinking bedroom of yours,’ Queenie informed her son.

Michael screwed up his nose and plonked himself on the Dralon sofa. His mother was the most house-proud woman that he knew. Years ago, their lounge had looked like anybody else’s. But since Vinny had been earning good money, it had had a complete transformation. The new floral wallpaper now matched the mustard three-piece suite, and the rest of the room featured dark teak furniture, a posh rug and floor lamps, a modern round coffee table and, his mother’s pride and joy, a glass ornament cabinet which was now full to the brim with expensive pieces of china that Vinny was forever bringing home.

‘So, how was Carnaby Street?’ Vivian asked excitedly. She had never been there herself, but knew it was all the rage at the moment for the youngsters.

‘Yeah, hip. Met a nice bird, and Kev got himself a well ace pair of two-tone shoes. If my brothers give me money for my birthday, I wanna go back up there and get a pair too,’ Michael replied.

Knowing full well that Vinny and Roy had clubbed together to buy Michael his much-wanted moped, Queenie winked at her sister. ‘Don’t know what they are giving you, son, you’ll just have to see what tomorrow brings.’

‘I wish I was going to be sixteen tomorrow. I hate being eleven. It’s so boring,’ Brenda piped up.

‘I wish I could be eleven all over again, sweetheart, and know what I know now. I certainly wouldn’t make the same bleedin’ mistakes again,’ Vivian told her niece.

‘By saying mistakes, she means my dad,’ Lenny said casually.

Michael looked at his mum and aunt. Knowing that a truer statement had never been spoken, all three burst out laughing.

Roy was shocked to see Vinny sitting on the concrete steps of the club looking extremely dishevelled. 'Whatever's happened?' he asked, staring at his brother's ripped blood-splattered shirt.

Vinny took a long drag from his cigarette and flicked the butt onto the kerb. 'I've given Dad a good hiding,' he admitted bluntly.

'What! You fucking promised me that you weren't gonna touch him, Vin. I thought we'd agreed that we was gonna confront him together at the restaurant tomorrow?'

'That's before I knew he'd got his young bit of skirt up the spout,' Vinny spat.

Gobsmacked, Roy sat on the step next to his brother. 'For fuck's sake. Mum's gonna go off her rocker when she finds that out. Where is Dad now?'

'Lying on the floor in the club. Mum can't find out that it was me who done him over. We tell her nothing now, do you hear me?'

Roy nodded. 'What about the bird he's knocked up? I take it she is getting rid of it?'

Vinny stood up. 'Me and you will have to pay her a little visit to help her make her mind up.'

Roy followed Vinny inside the club and bolted the door. 'What about her brother, Johnny? He's meant to be a bit handy, ain't he?'

'There's two of us and one of him, but that's another reason why everything that's happened just stays between me and you now. You say nothing to no-one, not even Michael, because if Johnny Preston does start playing up, we might have to get rid of him.'

'I'm in agony. I think I'm dying. I can't breathe properly,' Albie Butler cried out.

Roy gasped when he saw the state of his father. His face was covered in blood where his nose had caved in and Roy could tell immediately that his right leg was broken below the knee as the bone was poking through his skin. 'Fucking hell, Vin. You shouldn't have done that much damage to him.'

'Help me, Roy. Please help me,' Albie begged.

Ordering his brother to phone an ambulance, Vinny crouched down next to his father. 'You got jumped by four lads outside the club who were after this, OK?' Vinny said, taking the wallet out of his father's pocket and putting it in his own.

In terrible pain, Albie started to cry. 'I know I deserved a clump, but I can't believe you broke my leg. How any lad could do that to his own flesh and blood is beyond me.'

'You just wanna be grateful that I never broke your fucking neck. If the Old Bill question you, you say I heard a commotion, came outside, the boys had already legged it, and I dragged you in here, OK? Then in return, I'll make sure Mum don't find out your dirty little secret.'

'You're not a nice person, Vinny. You are one callous bastard,' Albie spat.

'And you are a dirty old pervert. Now, do we have a deal or not?'

Knowing that he had no option other than to agree with his violent offspring, Albie nodded his battered head.

Queenie was dishing up the sausages and bubble and squeak when Vinny and Roy let themselves into the house. 'What's the matter?' she asked, putting her spatula on the worktop. Both of her sons looked ashen-faced and serious.

'Look, don't panic 'cause he is gonna be OK, but Dad got jumped outside the club by a gang of lads. They took off with his wallet,' Vinny explained.

'Well, I bet there weren't much in that,' Vivian mumbled, unfeelingly. She was no fan of Albie Butler and felt her sister could have done much better.

'Is he OK? Where is he now?' Queenie asked, her face etched with concern.

'At the hospital. The ambulance man said they thought both his legs might be broken,' Roy replied, feeling awkward.

'Gordon Bennett! What is the world coming to if men like your dad are getting mugged? You better take me to him now,' Queenie ordered.

‘Eat your dinner first, Mum, then Roy will take you up there,’ Vinny replied.

‘Ain’t you coming as well?’ Queenie asked, surprised.

Not wanting to be anywhere near his arsehole of a father, Vinny shook his head. ‘Roy’ll look after you, Mum. Someone has to be at the club, don’t they?’

Queenie eyed her eldest child with suspicion, but said nothing. Both Vinny and Roy had virtually blanked Albie during dinner the other day and Queenie wasn’t stupid. She could tell Vinny had fallen out with his father. Now all she had to do was find out why.

Humming along to Petula Clark’s ‘Downtown’, Mary smiled as the woman she and Donald had nicknamed Mad Freda approached the counter. ‘Hello. What can I get you?’ This was the first time Freda had visited the café since the day she had knocked at the door to warn them about the Butler family.

‘Mug of tea and a piece of that fruit cake, please. So, how’s it going?’ Freda enquired.

‘Ever so well, thanks. Donald and I have been run off our feet again today.’

‘Met the Butlers yet?’ Freda asked.

‘Two ladies who came in the other day introduced themselves by that name, but they were lovely, ever so polite,’ Mary replied, desperate to avoid getting involved with tittle-tattle.

‘Huh. Brady and Hindley was probably lovely and polite people too,’ Freda said sarcastically, referring to the couple who had recently been arrested for murdering children on the moors.

Thankful when Freda plonked herself at a table over by the door, Mary called her son over to the counter. Unlike his sister, who had been helping Donald in the kitchen all day, Christopher had done nothing but sit on his backside and read his *Roy of the Rovers* comics.

‘Two burgers and chips,’ Donald shouted out.

‘Get the plates off your dad and take them over to that table next to the jukebox, Christopher,’ Mary ordered her son.

Christopher stood transfixed to the spot with his mouth wide open. The rich-looking man with the posh Jaguar car who he had seen punching the wall earlier had just walked into the café.

Albie Butler felt terribly sorry for himself as he lay flat on the hospital bed with both legs up in traction.

‘Jesus, Albie. Whatever happened, eh?’ Queenie asked, marching into the ward with Vivian behind her.

‘Got jumped by a gang of lads for me wallet,’ Albie mumbled.

‘Why ever did they jump you? Everyone who knows you is aware you ain’t got a pot to piss in,’ Vivian replied, her voice as cold as ice.

Albie glared at his wife’s sister and, instead of calling her a fucking old trout like he wanted to, managed to bite his tongue.

‘I bought you some pyjamas up, and made you a ham sandwich,’ Queenie said, plonking a carrier bag on the bed next to her husband.

‘I can’t get pyjama bottoms over the plaster and I can’t eat nothing. I’m in too much pain. A small bottle of brandy wouldn’t have gone amiss though,’ Albie muttered miserably.

‘Ungrateful old bastard,’ Vivian mumbled under her breath.

‘I’ve just spoken to the doctor. They reckon you’ll be in here for a while, you know,’ Queenie informed her old man.

‘Thanks very much. Cheer me up, why don’t ya?’

‘So, what exactly happened? Have you spoken to the Old Bill yet?’ Queenie asked.

‘Yeah. Not much I could tell ’em. It all happened so quickly, I didn’t get a clear view of any of the lads. Where’s Vinny and Roy?’

‘Roy and Michael are waiting in the corridor. The nurse said we could only come in two at a time, so I’ll send them in next. You had a fall-out with our Vinny and Roy?’

‘No. What makes you ask that?’ Albie asked defensively.

‘Because I’ve sensed a bad atmosphere the past few days. What’s going on, Albie? I ain’t some silly old fool, you know, and I will find out, so you might as well tell me now. What you done to upset them?’

Albie looked at his wife with pure hatred in his eyes. Here he was, with two broken legs and three broken ribs, confined to a stinking hospital bed for Christ knows how long, and instead of concern, all Queenie was worried about was her precious sons. Was it any wonder he strayed at the drop of a hat? I ain’t done anything to upset the boys, OK? Now, please go and get me a bottle of brandy to help me with the pain. Killing me, my ribs are. I would give you the money, but the bastards who attacked me nicked me wallet.’

‘The doctor said you were on strong painkillers. You ain’t meant to drink with them, Albie. You might keel over and die in the night,’ Queenie advised him.

Hoping that her sister’s warning just might come true, Vivian put her hand inside her handbag. ‘Poor sod’s been right through the mill. I’ll treat him to a bottle.’

Knowing full well why Vivian had made such a kind gesture, Queenie had a fake coughing fit, then dashed out of the ward before Albie could realize she was laughing.

Little Christopher Walker was mesmerized by the dark-haired man in the charcoal suit.

‘Stop gawping at people. Go and collect any empty plates and cups,’ Mary hissed in her son’s ear.

Another person who had her beady eyes on Vinny was Freda Smart and when Christopher approached her, she couldn’t help but speak her mind. ‘Should be strung up by the balls, the lot of ’em. Bloody murderers,’ she said in a loud voice.

Vinny smirked. Freda had been extremely friendly with the café’s previous owners and was the only person in the East End who would have the nerve to accuse him of killing Old Jack and Ethel’s son. She was spot-on actually. Fifteen-year-old Peter had had a habit of exposing himself to young girls and had one day made the fatal mistake of touching up a neighbour’s eleven-year-old daughter and forcing her to touch him in an undesirable place. Absolutely fuming, Vinny had decided to rid Whitechapel of such an unsavoury character and a few weeks later Peter was found at the bottom of the Thames.

Vinny turned around in his seat. He loved winding the old battleaxe up. The café wasn’t packed, but Vinny could see the worried expressions on the other diners’ faces. ‘Spouting cock and bull again, are you, Freda? Can’t be long now until they cart you off to that funny farm,’ he said.

‘Sod all wrong with my marbles. I know exactly what yous Butlers are and unlike everyone else round ’ere, I ain’t bleedin’ frightened to tell you either. You can do me in next for all I care,’ Freda yelled, stomping out of the café.

Vinny chuckled and raised his eyebrows to fellow customers. It didn’t bother him that Freda accused him of being a murderer in public. In fact, she was doing him a favour as it just made people fear him more.

With no-one waiting to be served, Mary darted out into the kitchen to fill Donald in on what had just happened.

Aware that the young boy’s eyes were on him once again, Vinny smiled at Christopher. He had already recognized him as the one who had been sitting opposite the snooker club earlier. ‘Can you show me how to use your jukebox?’

Christopher ran over to the Wurlitzer. Vinny put on Roger Miller’s ‘King of the Road’, which happened to remind him of himself, then handed the child half a crown.

Absolutely ecstatic at the unexpected gift, Christopher ran out to the kitchen to show his parents.

‘Who gave you that?’ Donald asked, his face reddening with anger, knowing only too well who it was likely to be.

‘The man in the suit gave it to me because I taught him how to use the jukebox,’ Christopher explained.

‘Can I have some money too, Daddy?’ Nancy asked, tugging her father’s sleeve.

Donald was fuming. He wanted no involvement with this Butler family and he had always forbidden his children to accept money or gifts from strangers. ‘What have I told you about taking money off people, eh?’ he said, dragging Christopher out of the kitchen by his arm.

‘Stop it, Daddy. You’re hurting me,’ Christopher said, bursting into tears.

‘Donald, stop overreacting for goodness’ sake,’ Mary urged him. She didn’t want to upset or make a scene in front of their customers.

Vinny had just dotted his cigarette out and was about to leave when Donald marched up to him with Christopher in tow. ‘Is this the man?’ he asked his son.

The little boy was sobbing. He not only felt embarrassed, he wanted to keep his half a crown. Nodding his head, Christopher stared at his feet in shame.

‘Excuse me, sir. It was very kind of you to give my son this money, but I’m afraid I have brought my children up not to accept gifts off people they do not know, so I insist you take it back.’

Vinny stared Donald in the eyes and immediately disliked him. He could tell he was one of life’s do-gooders. ‘It wasn’t a gift. Your son earned it by showing me how to use the jukebox,’ Vinny replied casually.

‘Well, Christopher won’t be accepting it all the same,’ Donald said, putting the coin on the table and dragging his son away.

About to tell Donald that he should get off his fucking moral high horse, Vinny saw Christopher’s distraught little face glance around and decided not to bother. The old man was obviously a twat, so what was the point of upsetting the kid even more? Slipping the half a crown into his pocket, Vinny nodded politely at Mary, and quietly left the café.

CHAPTER FOUR

Determined that their father being hospitalized wouldn't spoil their younger brother's sixteenth birthday, Vinny and Roy got up with the larks the following morning and walked around to their mother's house, pushing the moped between them.

Both Vinny and Roy had stayed at the club again last night and Roy had just suggested to his brother that they have the upstairs decorated properly so that they could live there permanently.

'I dunno. We've got to pay that conning bastard Geary fifteen hundred quid next week, which will leave the coffers a bit lean, Roy. Not only that, I like to keep a daily eye on Mum and Auntie Viv and make sure Champ is OK. Leave the idea with me and I'll have to think about it.'

Due to the freezing December temperature and the lack of heating in his bedroom, Michael decided to skip having a wash until after he'd had a cup of tea to warm himself up.

Queenie sang 'Happy Birthday', as her son galloped down the stairs.

'Thanks, Mum. Is there any tea in the pot? Bleedin' taters, I am.'

'It's just started snowing, boy. Told you yesterday the sky looked full of snow, didn't I? Bet you're glad you took this week off work, eh?'

Michael nodded. He had left school earlier in the year and was working as a trainee mechanic in a local garage. He loved the job as he loved tinkering with cars and bikes, but the money was crap, and the garage was freezing cold this time of year.

'I'm gonna pop up the hospital and take your father his toothbrush and razor before we go out for lunch. Do you wanna come with me so he can wish you happy birthday?' Queenie asked.

'Yeah, I'll come,' Michael replied without hesitation. Unlike his brothers, he was actually very fond of his father. He often went for a pint with him on Sunday lunchtimes and he was upset that his dad had been set upon by those bloody yobs.

'Many happy returns, bruv,' Roy said, giving Michael a manly hug.

'Is it present time yet?' Queenie asked excitedly.

'Sure is,' Vinny grinned.

Ordering Roy to go and get Vivian so she wouldn't miss out on the fun, Queenie handed Michael a parcel. 'That's from me and your dad. Your brothers picked it, so if you don't like it, blame them,' she chuckled.

Michael was thrilled when he unwrapped the paper and saw the blue Fred Perry polo shirt. 'That's well nice, Mum. I'll wear it today,' he said. Fred Perry shirts were really in for Mods at the moment. His best mate Kev had two of them.

'Happy birthday, Michael,' Lenny said, running into the house with a handmade card in his hand.

Michael hugged his nephew to his chest. 'Cheers, Champ.'

'Right, you ready for mine and Roy's present?' Vinny asked.

'Yep.'

'Follow me then,' Vinny ordered.

Queenie and Vivian followed the boys out the front and clapped their hands with glee when Michael caught his first glimpse of the trendy moped.

'Oh my God! It's a Lambretta! Is it really all mine?' he asked, his eyes shining with excitement.

Vinny threw him the key. 'Yep, it's all yours. Me and Roy have got another surprise for you as well, but you won't find out what that is until we get to the restaurant.'

'Bloody hell! This is the best birthday ever,' Michael exclaimed, throwing his leg over the saddle. He already knew how to ride a moped. Kev had got one over a month ago and had let his friend ride it many a time.

'Be careful because that bleedin' snow's settling,' Vivian yelled, as Michael fired the engine up.

‘So, what other surprise have you got for him?’ Queenie asked Vinny and Roy.

‘A mohair suit. We want him to come and work with us at the club. He’s old enough now,’ Vinny replied casually.

‘But he’s already got a job and you know how he has his heart set on being a fully qualified mechanic,’ Queenie reminded her sons.

‘Yeah, and he’s on shit money and spends half his life covered in grease and making the tea for that prick he works for. That ain’t a job, it’s a piss-take, Mum. From now on, he works with me and Roy.’

Determined to see Vinny again in the hope that he might still give him the half a crown, Christopher Walker bribed his sister with a bag of sweets so she would sit in the doorway opposite the snooker club with him.

‘Dad is gonna go mad if you take money off that man,’ Nancy said, taking her aniseed twist out of her mouth so she could speak properly.

Christopher glared at his sister. He hadn’t wanted to bring her to the club, but his parents were adamant that he could only go out to play if he took Nancy with him. ‘Dad won’t find out, will he? Unless you’re gonna tell him, of course.’ ‘I’ll tell you what. If Vinny gives me the money, I’ll share it with you. But, you must promise me you won’t say a word about us coming here to Mum and Dad,’ Christopher said.

Unlike some of their friends back in Stoke Newington, neither Nancy nor Christopher had ever received much pocket money. They were given the odd penny or two sporadically to get some sweets or a comic and both were desperate to feel the jingle-jangle of coins in their pockets.

Nancy grinned. ‘OK, I promise.’

Judy Preston lived in a one-bedroomed council flat in Forest Gate. Her mum usually popped in most mornings to help her look after her son Mark, and when the doorbell rang, Judy just assumed that her mum had forgotten her key.

At three years old, Mark was into everything and after Judy flung open the front door, she immediately ran into the kitchen to scold her son for chasing and terrorizing the cat. ‘He’s been a little bastard this morning, Mum,’ she shouted out, as she smacked Mark on his bottom.

Hearing no reply, Judy turned around just as the door slammed. Seeing the two men in suits and Crombie coats, she let out a piercing scream.

Vinny grabbed Judy and put his hand over her mouth. ‘Take the little ’un into the lounge while I have a chat with Mummy dearest,’ he ordered his brother.

‘Come on, little fella,’ Roy said, picking up young Mark.

‘Don’t you dare hurt my baby. If you lay one finger on him, my brother will kill you,’ Judy spat, when Vinny moved his hand slightly to enable her to speak.

‘It ain’t your son I’ve got a problem with, it’s you, ya slag. Now, I’m gonna take my hand away from your mouth properly, so we can have a nice little chat. Open it and scream and I shall put my fist straight down the back of your throat, understand?’ Vinny asked, his eyes gleaming dangerously.

Judy nodded. She had now guessed her intruders were Albie’s sons and wasn’t so frightened any more. ‘What do you want? Has your father sent you around to terrorize me?’

Vinny stared at his prey. She wasn’t bad-looking in a common, tarty kind of way and he wondered what the hell she had ever seen in his father. ‘For your information, my old man doesn’t know I’m here. He is currently residing in the London Hospital with three broken ribs and two broken legs. He had a very unfortunate accident, you see.’

Wondering if Vinny was winding her up, Judy shrugged. ‘Nothing to do with me, I’m not seeing him any more.’

‘Sensible girl. But what about the baby? You’ll need money to get rid of it.’

‘I’m not aborting my baby. My Marky would love a little brother or sister to play with and I’d then qualify for a council house with a nice garden. Your dad can go to hell for all I care, but I’m keeping his child.’

Grabbing Judy by her throat, Vinny shoved her roughly against the wall. ‘You ain’t keeping it, you silly whore. I’ll give you a fortnight to get rid and if you don’t, I shall fucking get rid of it for you. Now, do we understand one another?’

Suddenly feeling frightened again, Judy nodded lamely. Vinny had mad eyes and she found him quite scary.

Vinny took his hand away from Judy’s throat, pulled fifty pounds out of his pocket and handed it to her. ‘That should cover your heartbreak, darling,’ he said.

Judy took the money and was relieved when Vinny called his brother.

Roy came out of the lounge with a giggling Mark in his arms and handed Judy her son. ‘Cute kid,’ he said, as he followed Vinny towards the front door.

‘I’ll be back to see you in a fortnight,’ Vinny shouted, glancing back at her.

Judy said nothing. She would keep the fifty pounds and let her brother deal with Vinny and Roy. No one was going to make her get rid of her baby, that was for sure.

When the snow started to come down more heavily, Nancy begged her brother to come home with her.

‘I will in a bit, but let’s just wait another half an hour, eh? Vinny always gets here by midday,’ Christopher explained.

About to demand that they go home that very second, Nancy spotted a posh car driving slowly towards them. ‘Is this him?’ she asked hopefully.

Recognizing the Jag and the number plate, Christopher stood up and urged Nancy to do the same. ‘As soon as he pulls up, I’m going to walk over the road and apologize for Dad’s behaviour. You stay here.’

‘No, I’m coming with you,’ Nancy insisted. There was no way she was going to chance her brother keeping the money for himself.

Vinny and Roy were still chatting about their father’s bit of fluff when they pulled up outside the club. Both agreed that they should carry at least a knife on them for the foreseeable future, just in case there was any comeback from Judy’s brother.

‘Do you think we should pay Johnny a little visit? Explain the situation, like,’ Roy asked.

Vinny shook his head. Even though Judy lived in Forest Gate, Johnny Preston was a South London boy. He had recently started to hang around the Richardsons like an unwanted dog and liked to tell anyone who would care to listen that he was now part of their firm. Vinny knew that this wasn’t the case. Eddie Richardson was in partnership with Mad Frankie Fraser. They were in the gambling business, owned most of the fruit machines and one-armed bandits in pubs and clubs all over London, and Vinny had heard through the grapevine that Mad Frankie Fraser thought that Johnny Preston was nothing more than a two-bob cock. ‘Nah, Roy. South London ain’t our territory, so we’ll bide our time and let silly Johnny come to us,’ Vinny said, sensibly.

‘You might as well wait ’ere while I run in,’ Roy said, changing the subject. They had only stopped at the club to pick up the mohair suit they’d had specially made for Michael in Savile Row.

Vinny picked up his newspaper and seconds later was aware of somebody hovering nearby. Recognizing Christopher, he opened his window. ‘You all right, boy?’ he asked.

‘Yes, thank you. This is my sister, Nancy, and we came to apologize for my dad’s behaviour, sir,’ Christopher said, solemnly.

Vinny grinned, stepped out of the car and ruffled Christopher’s hair. He’d been a bright kid once himself and he could sense that Christopher was hoping to get his hands on the money he had offered him the previous day. ‘No more calling me sir, it’s Vinny to me mates,’ Vinny replied, taking a ten-shilling note out of his wallet and handing it to the boy.

Nancy and Christopher both stared at the note with their mouths wide open.

'Take it, then. It's to share equally between you,' Vinny urged.

Christopher snatched the note and nudged his sister.

'Thank you, Vinny,' Nancy said, feeling suddenly shy.

'Yeah, thank you very much, Vinny,' Christopher added.

Watching the two children run away excitedly, Vinny grinned. That was his good deed done for the day.

Michael's best friend Kevin had a Jamaican dad and an English mum and as the two young men walked into the Rib Room in Belgravia, both were aware of the nudges and whispers from snooty onlookers.

'My brothers will be here in a minute. We're a bit early,' Michael said, awkwardly. He was well aware that the two posh old trouts on the table behind were looking down on Kevin because of his colour.

'Is they talking about me because I a negro?' Kevin asked, imitating a heavy Jamaican accent.

Michael burst out laughing. Kevin had been brought up in Mile End and was as cockney as he was. His dad had gone back to Jamaica when Kevin was just a baby and Michael always joked that the only other black man Kevin had ever met was the coal man when he was covered in soot. 'Can you imagine the crumpet we'll pull when we go out for a spin? We can go up Carnaby Street whenever we want,' Michael suggested.

Kevin grinned. 'I reckon we are gonna have the time of our lives now we can get out and about properly.'

Michael raised his glass and clinked it against Kevin's. He adored his best pal, his family, his job, and now he finally had his beloved Lambretta, life was all but perfect.

'Bleedin' posh round 'ere, ain't it? Talk about how the other half live,' Vivian said to Queenie. She had never been to this part of London before and it was certainly more wealthy-looking than Whitechapel. Where they lived, the air was polluted by the rotting fruit in the market, and women were on their hands and knees scrubbing their doorsteps daily. Vivian couldn't imagine the women of Belgravia even knowing what a scrubbing brush was.

Vinny had chosen the restaurant as a treat not only for his brother, but also with his mum and aunt in mind. The Rib Room had the reputation of selling the best beef in London and Vinny knew how partial his mother and aunt were to a decent piece of steak. 'We're nearly there now. Harrods ain't far from here, you know,' Roy said, pointing in the direction of the famous store.

'I wanna do a wee-wee,' Lenny said, holding the crotch of his trousers.

'I think I'm gonna puke,' Brenda complained, clutching her stomach.

Knowing how travel-sick his little sister had been once before in his car, Vinny pulled over immediately. 'You know where the restaurant is from here, don't you, Roy? Walk down there with Mum, Auntie Viv and the kids while I find somewhere to park.'

'How's she getting on with that girl at school now?' Vivian whispered, as Brenda leapt out of the car and began to retch onto a nearby kerb.

Brenda had started secondary school only a few months ago. In her old school she'd had lots of friends, but in her new one, she had made very few and the only good friend she did have, she'd had a fight with earlier in the week. 'She was glad I let her have today off to come out with us, but she'll be OK. You know what kids are like. They hate one another one minute and are best mates again the next. What about Lenny? You told him he's going back to school after Christmas yet?' Queenie asked.

Vivian shook her head. Lenny had always attended mainstream schools, but the teachers had recently struggled to cope with him. They said he needed to go to a school that would be more equipped to cope with his needs. Vivian had been furious at the time and had given the headmaster what for. She wasn't stupid, she knew her son was different, but she hated hearing other people say it. The local council had come to her rescue when Vinny had gone up there and had a strong word with

them. Lenny would very soon be picked up every morning to be taken to a school in Aldgate that had much smaller numbers in the classrooms, more teachers, and most importantly catered for children with learning disabilities. Now Vivian had got her head around the fact her son would be attending a special school, she was quite pleased. Lenny needed more one-to-one tutoring and she wanted him to be able to read and write properly. She hadn't told him about his new school yet though. She knew what Lenny was like. He would worry and ask her thousands of questions, so she'd decided to tell him only a day or two before he started there.

'Here we are,' Roy said, nodding towards an opulent-looking building.

Queenie and Vivian glanced at one another approvingly. They were both thinking exactly the same thing. Vinny and Roy were certainly going up in the world and long may that continue.

The lunch was a roaring success, but by the time the dessert arrived, Vinny had started to become pissed off. For the past ten minutes all Roy, Michael and Kevin had discussed were girls they'd copped off with or fancied and not only did Vinny think that this was an inappropriate conversation to be having in front of his mum, aunt, Brenda and Lenny, he was also angry as he would rather be talking business. In Vinny's eyes, earning big bucks was and would always be far more important than some dopey slag of a bird. Yvonne Summers had taught him that lesson.

Watching his mum and aunt egg Michael on to tell them more about the girl he had recently dated with the massive boobies, Vinny had a sudden urge to smash his glass against the table.

'Whatever's the matter?' Queenie asked, as young Brenda and Lenny both nigh-on jumped out of their skins.

Roy knew exactly what the matter was, but said nothing. Whenever he met a girl he liked, he always played it down to his brother because he knew he would get the third degree otherwise. Not once had Vinny ever liked a girl he had courted and Roy dreaded the day he met the special one whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, as he knew that it would cause murder. All Vinny was interested in was money, notoriety and violence. Anything with tits and a fanny did not come into that category and Roy could never see Vinny getting married himself. He just wasn't the type.

'You haven't answered me. I asked you what the matter was?' Queenie repeated.

Vinny did his best to disguise his temper. Michael's birthday had cost him a bloody fortune and had he known beforehand that George Geary would swindle him out of fifteen hundred quid for a licence to serve poxy alcohol, he might not have gone so overboard. 'I haven't brought this family to a top-class restaurant so we could spend the day talking about women's body parts. If I wanted porn, I would have gone to Soho. Brenda and Champ don't want to listen to such garbage, do they? Young ears an' all that.'

'We were only having a laugh, Vinny. Nobody said anything bad,' Vivian said sternly. She was shocked by her nephew's uncalled-for outburst, to say the least.

'It's my fault. I started the conversation, so I'll take the blame,' Michael admitted sheepishly.

Looking at his brother's sorrowful expression was enough to snap Vinny out of his temper tantrum. 'No, it's not your fault, it's mine. I overreacted because I'm just dead excited about your other surprise. That is why I wanted to change the direction of the conversation and I'm sorry for snapping at everybody.'

'Ere you go, bruv,' Roy said, handing Michael a large brown bag.

Thinking how lucky his pal was to get so many wonderful presents, Kevin looked over Michael's shoulder as he opened it. 'That's well ace! It's real mohair,' he exclaimed.

Michael couldn't believe his luck. The Lambretta had been his best present ever and on top of that he had now been given an amazing suit.

'That's to wear for work,' Vinny said, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

'Christ, I won't be getting oil and petrol over this. I'll stick with me overalls for work, thanks,' Michael chuckled.

Queenie felt her stomach churn. Vinny had a strange way of dealing with matters at times. Surely offering Michael the job and waiting for his response would have been more appropriate than telling him he had a new job?

‘You ain’t working at that shitty garage no more, Michael. Me and Roy popped down there this morning to inform your boss that you won’t be coming back. He was fine about it. He understood that you needed to move onto bigger and better things,’ Vinny explained.

Lenny and Brenda were happily chatting amongst themselves and had no idea of the importance of the adults’ conversation. Queenie, Vivian and Roy did though. The glances exchanged between the three of them said it all. Kevin had always been wary of Michael’s older brothers, especially Vinny, so not wanting to get involved in a family dispute, he just stared at his hands.

Michael stared at his brother in total disbelief. There was a programme on TV called *Candid Camera* that Bob Monkhouse presented. It set up situations such as the one that he currently found himself in, where a camera was hidden in the premises. Then, all of a sudden a man would pop out of nowhere and reveal that it was all a big joke. ‘Is this some kind of a game? You are winding me up, aren’t you?’ Michael asked, in a voice that didn’t sound very much like his own.

‘Course I ain’t winding you up. You’re sixteen now, Michael. You’re a man, not a boy, and you can’t spend the rest of your life working as a glorified teaboy. That’s why me and Roy decided that the time was right for you to come and work with us at the club. We need an extra pair of hands and you’ll be on loads more money than you’re on now. In time, all three of us will become equal partners.’

‘But I don’t want to work at the club, Vinny. I want to be a mechanic. It’s always been my dream to be a mechanic, ain’t it, Mum?’

Unable to look her youngest son in the eye, Queenie nodded, then turned her attention to Lenny and Brenda. This was nothing to do with her, it was boy’s talk and she didn’t want to get involved in taking sides. She loved all her sons, so how could she?

‘Once you start at the club and you’ve been there a week or two, you’ll love it, Michael. No more freezing your nuts off while lying on a concrete floor,’ Roy joked. He could tell by the look in Vinny’s eyes that he was getting annoyed by Michael’s lack of gratitude and he didn’t want the atmosphere to turn sour.

‘Look, Roy, Vinny, I really appreciate what you’re offering me and all the lovely presents you’ve bought me, but I don’t want to work with you. I love my job in the garage and one day my dream is to own a garage of my own.’

Vinny laughed sarcastically. ‘And my dream was to be the next Jimmy Greaves and bang in goals for Spurs, but it never happened, did it? I’m sorry and all that but me and Roy really need you to come and work with us now. We can’t employ strangers, we don’t trust ’em enough, and as our brother, you owe it to us to link up with the family firm. We’re Butlers, and like it or not, us Butlers stick together. It’s not up for negotiation; it’s your duty, Michael. You start first thing Monday morning.’

CHAPTER FIVE

Nancy Walker lowered her eyes when her teacher introduced her to the rest of the classroom. Everybody was gawping at her, so much so, she felt like one of those strange-looking people who appeared in freak shows.

When Nancy was allocated a desk next to another girl with mousy brown hair, she was relieved when the girl smiled at her.

'It's horrible starting a new school, isn't it? But don't be nervous. You can hang out with me in the playground,' the girl said kindly.

Thrilled that she had already made a new friend, Nancy grinned. 'What's your name?' she whispered.

'Brenda. Brenda Butler.'

Michael listened miserably while Vinny and Roy explained the workings of the club to him. He already missed the smell of oil and petrol and the excitement he felt tinkering about with different makes and models of cars and bikes.

'So the bulk of our profit comes solely from the booze. We buy that for peanuts off a guy called Ted, and in return, Ted gets treated like royalty every time he sets foot in here, which is most weekends,' Vinny explained.

'So, what will I actually be doing then?' Michael asked, his voice devoid of any enthusiasm. He still thought his brothers were bang out of order.

'You'll just be doing the same as me and Vin. All we do of an evening is chat politely to the customers, keep an eye out for trouble, and generally make sure the place is ticking over nicely. My mates Pete and Paul work on the door making sure that only members come in. Don't look so glum, Michael, you'll love it when you get in the swing of it. It's the good life, bruv,' Roy said.

Sick of his brother's lack of enthusiasm and sullen expression, Vinny stood up and grabbed Michael by the lapels of his new mohair suit.

'What you doing, Vin? Leave him be,' Roy ordered, when Vinny pushed Michael roughly towards the wall.

Vinny ignored Roy's advice and gave Michael some home truths. 'You are one ungrateful little cunt, has anybody ever told you that? It is about time you started acting your age and pulling your weight for this family like me and Roy have had to for years. Who do you think supports Mum, Brenda, Auntie Viv and Champ, eh? It ain't our useless fucking father, that's for sure. You owe it to us to chip in and that is what you shall do, so the quicker you put a smile on that miserable fucking face of yours and show a bit of spirit and gratitude, the better.'

When Vinny let go of him, a shocked Michael sat on a nearby sofa and put his head in his hands. Nobody argued with Vinny, including him, so there was no way out of the situation. He knew he was going to hate his new job, but he would just have to grin and bear it. What other choice did he have? 'I'm sorry, Vinny. I'll work hard for you, I promise,' he said, meekly.

Feeling a bit guilty for obviously frightening his younger sibling, Vinny walked over and ruffled his hair like he used to when he was a child. 'We don't need you back here until tonight, so why don't you shoot home, take your suit off and go out on your moped, eh? You've got your test next week, so you need to get some practice.'

Grinning falsely, Michael thanked his brother and left the club.

Mary Walker wasn't having the best of days. She had got two customers' orders wrong, dropped a plate of food and then scalded her hand with boiling-hot water.

'Why don't you have a sit down and I'll bring you over a nice mug of tea?' Shirley offered.

Mary smiled. When Shirley had asked for a job on Friday, the café had been that busy that Donald had asked her to start immediately. Shirley only lived a few minutes' walk from the café,

and therefore knew most of the punters really well. 'OK then. I could do with resting my feet for ten minutes. I shall be a bundle of nerves until they get home, you know,' Mary said, referring to her children's first day at a new school. Christopher hadn't been too bad this morning, but she had overheard Nancy crying in the bathroom, which had worried her terribly. The junior school that Christopher was attending was only five minutes from Nancy's new school and the children had been adamant that they wanted to walk to and from school together. Mary had wanted to take them, but both children said it would make them a target for bullies if they turned up with their mother in tow.

Mary plonked herself down at a nearby table and was just about to start reading the newspaper when Queenie and Vivian Butler walked in with little Lenny.

'Hello, sweetheart. How long you been working here?' Queenie asked Shirley.

Pretending to read the paper, Mary carried on ear-wiggling. It soon became obvious to her that Shirley knew Queenie and Vivian very well. Furious when somebody gave little Lenny money to put in the jukebox because it left her unable to hear the conversation properly, Mary scuttled out the kitchen to tell Donald the latest.

When Judy Preston got a bee in her bonnet, she found it very hard to shift it and the more she thought about Vinny and Roy Butler turning up at her house and barging their way in, the more irate she became. Her brother Johnny had been livid when she had told him and he was going to sort out Vinny and Roy for her. That wasn't enough for Judy though, which is why she had decided to pay Albie a visit in hospital and give him a piece of her mind as well.

'Come on, Mark. Get in your pushchair,' Judy urged her son.

'We going Nanna's house?' Mark asked excitedly.

'No, we are going to see the cowardly tosser who has impregnated me.'

After having lunch in the café, Queenie and Vivian went to visit their mum in nearby Bow Cemetery, then parted company on the way back because Queenie felt it was her duty to visit Albie.

'I would say give the old bastard my regards, but you know I don't mean it,' Vivian said, putting her headscarf on to stop the drizzle getting to her hair.

After telling her sister that if she hadn't have suffered the misfortune of marrying Albie, she wouldn't be visiting the old bastard herself, Queenie waved goodbye, then made her way into the London Hospital. As she reached her husband's ward, she heard his name mentioned and her ears pricked up. Pretending to go through her shopping bag as though she was searching for something, Queenie surreptitiously looked out of the corner of her eye. There was a young blonde girl with a child in a pushchair, asking the nurse for directions to Albie's bed. Wondering who on earth the tart could be, Queenie cautiously followed her into the ward.

As usual, being the miserable old bastard that he was, Albie had the curtains drawn around his bed. Queenie crept up to the neighbouring bed and put her forefinger to her lips to warn the senile old Mr Perry not to say anything. Surely her Albie hadn't found himself a young bit of fluff? Queenie hadn't fancied the dirty, disgusting old drunk for years, so how could anybody else?

Albie had been fast asleep until he felt a violent prodding on his right arm. Expecting it to be Queenie, Albie nearly had a cardiac arrest when he locked eyes with Judy Preston. 'You can't come here! What do you want? My Queenie'll be here soon. You're gonna have to leave,' he said, his face twitching with anxiety.

'Well, you should have thought of that before you got me pregnant, then sent your sons round my house to threaten me in front of Marky,' Judy spat.

Unable to stop her legs from buckling, Queenie took a tumble and fell on top of old Mr Perry.

'Get your hands off me chopper! Nurse, nurse,' the stick-thin fragile ninety-four-year-old wailed, as he put his right hand on his private parts to protect them.

Pulling herself together, Queenie took a couple of deep breaths, picked up her umbrella and flew through Albie's curtain like a bat out of hell. 'You dirty fucking old bastard,' she screamed, as she began to smash her broolly over her cheating husband's head.

Judy stood rooted to the spot. Queenie was a typical, no-nonsense, hard-faced East Ender and just by taking one look at her, Judy knew she would rather fight Vinny and Roy together than her.

‘Get off me, woman. You’re hurting me. I’m sorry. I’m a weak man and I made a silly mistake. It’s you I love,’ Albie swore, covering his already throbbing head with his hands. If he hadn’t had two broken legs, he would have bolted out of the ward as fast as a greyhound coming out of its trap at Walthamstow.

‘A silly mistake! I’ll give you silly mistake, you dirty, disgusting old toad,’ Queenie yelled, continuing her violent assault.

Old Mr Perry clapped his hands on his knees with joy when the nurse pulled back the curtain. He hadn’t had this much excitement for years. ‘Yee-haw,’ he shouted in glee.

‘Whatever’s going on?’ asked the appalled nurse, as she tried to stop Queenie hitting Albie with her umbrella.

Realizing that her son was screaming blue murder and not wanting to be Queenie’s next broolly victim, Judy decided to make her getaway.

Queenie had eyes like a hawk and immediately clocked Judy slyly trying to depart the fracas. ‘And where do you think you’re going? You brazen little hussy. I ain’t even fucking started with you yet,’ Queenie said, chasing Judy up the ward.

‘Yee-haw,’ Mr Perry yelled again.

‘Look, I’m really sorry, but please don’t hit me in front of my son. He’s frightened enough as it is. I know I shouldn’t have got involved with Albie, what with him being a married man and all that, but I swear to you it is all over between us,’ Judy said, with tears in her eyes.

Queenie put her broolly and bag on a nearby chair, then stood with her hands on her hips and studied Judy Preston. She was bit tarty-looking, but was certainly not ugly, and how she could ever fancy Albie, Queenie would never know. ‘Oh, you’re welcome to him, darlin’. I’ve had years of putting up with the drunken, potless bum. But what’s all this about you being pregnant and my sons paying you a visit? And don’t fucking lie to me, ’cause I’ll smash you all around Whitechapel with this broolly if you do.’

Judy lowered her eyes through guilt. She had never once given Queenie a thought when she had been screwing the arse off Albie, but now his wife was standing in front of her, Judy felt terrible about the whole thing. ‘It is true that I’m pregnant and your sons Vinny and Roy did pay me a visit. They ordered me to get rid of my baby and even left me money to pay for an abortion, but I can’t do it. I am willing to bring the child up with the help of my mum and brother. I don’t want your Albie or anything from him. I just want to keep my child and my Marky to have a little brother or sister.’

The thought of Vinny and Roy knowing about their father’s deceit and keeping it secret from her made Queenie feel more sick than Albie’s affair itself. She had never really loved her husband, not in the way she had loved her precious children, and she couldn’t believe her two eldest sons had betrayed her in such a way.

‘Are you OK? Shall I get you some water?’ Judy asked, when Queenie all but fainted onto a nearby chair. The woman looked deathly white and Judy was suddenly scared that she might die on her.

Lip curling into a snarl, Queenie managed to find the strength to stand up again and point her scrawny forefinger in Judy’s face. ‘You can have Albie. When he is discharged from here, he can live with you, but I forbid you to have that baby. I will not have my sons and daughter having no half-brother or -sister. You get rid of that unborn brat, or else. Now fuck off. Go on, fuck off.’

Petrified by the deranged look on Queenie’s face, Judy grabbed the handles of her screaming son’s pushchair, and legged it down the corridor.

Unable to relax all day, Mary Walker was relieved when Nancy and Christopher came home from school with beaming smiles on their faces. ‘Donald, they’re home,’ Mary shouted out.

‘Well, how did you get on?’ Donald asked, wiping his hands on a teatowel.

Both excited about meeting new friends, Christopher and Nancy spoke over one another and neither could be heard properly.

‘One at a time. You first, Nancy,’ Donald ordered.

‘I have a new best friend. Her name is Brenda and she is really nice. My teacher was lovely as well, but she is really fat,’ Nancy explained.

Mary chuckled. ‘Well, I wouldn’t be saying that about your teacher at school, darling. What about you, Christopher? Did you meet any new friends?’

‘Yep. Tommy is my new best mate. He wants to be a policeman just like me,’ Christopher said proudly.

Donald grinned and ruffled his son’s hair. Christopher had only had the fixation about becoming a policeman for the past few weeks. Before that, it was an airline pilot, then prior to that, a racing-car driver.

‘Can me and Christopher go out to play? My friend Brenda only lives five minutes away and Christopher’s friend Tommy lives in the same street. We all want to play hopscotch together,’ Nancy said, her voice brimming with excitement.

‘No, not today. Your mother and I haven’t met these friends of yours yet and we would like to ensure they come from good families before you go off street-raking with them,’ Donald said, in his usual prissy manner.

Her husband generally wore the trousers in their household, but for the second time just lately Mary felt compelled to put her foot down. ‘Don’t be such a stick-in-the-mud, Donald. It’s wonderful the children have made new friends on their first day at school and if they want to go out and play with them while we tidy up in here, then they shall.’

Donald wasn’t used to being undermined. ‘OK, Mary. But, I want them back by five for their tea and if they get themselves into any mischief, be it on your head.’

Vivian was busy scrubbing her doorstep to ensure it looked more pristine than anybody else’s, when she heard a terrible howling noise coming from behind her. Wondering what on earth it was, she stood up and was amazed to see Queenie clinging to the gatepost. ‘Whatever’s wrong?’ Vivian asked, dropping her brush and getting up off her hands and knees.

‘It’s Albie. Something terrible’s happened,’ Queenie sobbed.

Having had it hard for most of their childhood and adult lives, neither Queenie nor Vivian ever really cried. The last time they had done so was when their dear old mum had died but, bar that, Vivian couldn’t ever remember her sister shedding tears since girlhood, other than those of joy, when her children had been born. ‘Oh Queenie. Let’s get you inside. Has Albie died, love?’ Vivian asked, silently praying that he had.

‘I wish the old bastard was dead,’ Queenie spat, as Vivian sat her down on the sofa.

Pouring Queenie a large glass of brandy, Vivian listened in bewilderment when her sister explained exactly what had happened at the hospital.

‘I know it’s hard to swallow, but you’ll be far better off without him, Queenie. After the initial shock of finding out about my Bill’s affair, I’ve never been happier since I slung the old bastard out. You don’t need Albie. He’s a drunken fucking bum and I’m gobsmacked that he even managed to pull himself some young bird. I wouldn’t want him if he was the last man left on earth.’

‘I ain’t worried about fucking Albie. That dirty old goat can rot in hell as far as I’m concerned. It’s my boys lying to me that has cut me to pieces. I’ve no idea if my Michael knew as well, but Vinny and Roy most definitely did. How can they keep something like that from their dear old mum, eh? After everything I’ve done for ’em as well. Broke my fucking heart they have, Viv.’

Vivian put her arms around her distraught sister and held her close to her chest. ‘Your boys adore the ground you walk on, Queenie, and the only reason they would have kept this from you was to save you the hurt. I mean, if they went round and threatened Albie’s little whore then they were obviously dealing with things in their own way. ’Ere, something’s just occurred to me. What’s the

betting that Albie never got jumped on by a gang of youths? I'd put money on it that his injuries are down to your Vinny and Roy, you know.'

For the first time since she had found out the mindblowing news, Queenie managed a smile. She had smelt something fishy about Albie getting jumped from the beginning. 'I reckon you might be right, Viv, and if the boys did break Albie's ribs and legs, I shall thank 'em rather than telling them off. I don't want that tart having the baby though. No way do I want my kids to have to suffer that embarrassment.'

'Don't you worry. Vinny and Roy will make sure that kid goes down the khazi.'

Christopher was bowled over when he learned that Nancy's new friend Brenda just happened to be Vinny Butler's sister. 'Do you think one day your brother will let us see inside his club?' he asked, in a star-struck voice.

Thrilled that she had a new best friend and desperate to impress Nancy and her brother, Brenda nodded. 'I'll take you there now if you like. I pop in there all the time,' she boasted.

'I'd better go home for my tea now. Shall I meet you outside the café and walk to school with you in the morning?' Tommy asked Christopher.

'Yeah, see you tomorrow,' Christopher said to his new pal.

The club was only a couple of minutes away and praying that her brothers were inside so she wouldn't make herself look a fool, Brenda was relieved when Vinny answered the door.

'You OK, sweetheart?' he asked, noticing his sister had a grazed knee and dirty hands.

'I fell over playing hopscotch and I want to wash my hands and knee. Can my friends come in?'

Poking his head around the door, Vinny was surprised to see Nancy and Christopher standing there. He had no idea they even knew his little sister. 'Come on then. One glass of Coke and a bag of crisps each, then you'll have to go. I've got some business to sort out in a bit,' he said. The bent Chief Inspector was popping in to pick up his money for the alcohol licence and Vinny didn't want him to clock the kids inside the club in case he tried to sting him for even more dosh.

'What you doing here, trouble?' Roy said, as Brenda ran towards him and Michael.

'This is my new best friend, Nancy,' Brenda said proudly.

'Hello,' Nancy mumbled.

'Well, ain't you a pretty little thing,' Michael said, winking at her.

'Yep, she'll break some hearts one day, like they all do,' Vinny said, half-joking, half-serious, as he put the Coke and crisps on a table.

'You all right, boy?' Roy asked Christopher. The lad looked as if he was in a trance and was gazing around the club with his mouth wide open.

'That's my brother,' Nancy said, smiling at Michael. She found Roy and Vinny a bit scary, but had immediately taken to Michael because he had such a kind face.

'I really like your club,' Christopher said, looking at Vinny in awe.

'Cheers, boy,' Vinny chuckled.

'You been home from school yet, Bren? Is Mum and Auntie Viv OK?' Roy asked.

'Yeah, I've been home, but Mum was upset and she went to sit in Auntie Viv's house.'

Vinny was immediately alarmed. 'What do you mean, upset? What was wrong with her?'

'Dunno. She was sitting on Auntie Viv's sofa drinking brandy and she looked like she'd been crying.'

'Why didn't you bleedin' well tell me that when you knocked on the door?' Vinny asked, suddenly agitated.

'Don't have a go at her, Vin,' Roy urged. His brother's mouth could run away with him at times.

'Shall I pop round there and make sure everything's OK?' Michael offered. Since Vinny had had a go at him, he was trying to do his best to please.

Vinny and Roy glanced at one another. Both were thinking the same thing. Their mother was a tough old East End bird, she never cried, so she had either found out that Vinny had attacked their father, or she knew about his affair.

‘I’ve gotta wait here for Geary, so you pop round home, Roy. You, Michael, can have the night off.’

‘Do you want me to go home to Mum as well?’ Brenda didn’t understand what the hell was going on.

Vinny handed his sister a pound note. ‘No. You take that, buy your friends some sweets and split the change equally between yous. Don’t go home just yet, Bren.’

When Michael opened the door of the club, ruffled her hair and called her sweetheart, Nancy couldn’t look him in the eyes. For the first time ever she had a crush on somebody, but unfortunately for Nancy, he was five years her senior.

CHAPTER SIX

‘I’m really sorry, Mum. I was going to tell you in front of Dad at Michael’s birthday lunch, but when I found out about the baby, I decided to sort it meself. Please forgive me,’ Vinny said, staring at his expensive black leather shoes in shame. Vinny loved his mother more than anybody else in the world. If it wasn’t for her sound advice, he wouldn’t be the man he was today. ‘Vinny, you do whatever it takes to make something of your life. It’s better to be a somebody than a nobody, son, and if that means stealing and stamping out people along the way, then so be it. Don’t ever knock or ill-treat your own kind though. You look after them,’ his mum had told him on the day he’d left school.

Aware that her son looked distraught, Queenie put her arms around him and gave him a motherly hug. Vinny was genuinely sorry, she knew that, and she was also thrilled when he had admitted to her that it was him who had put his father in hospital. ‘Let’s put all this behind us now. Your father ain’t worth the salt in our tears, boy. And thanks for giving him such a good going-over. You did me proud.’

Thrilled that his beloved mother was no longer angry with him, Vinny hugged her tightly to his chest.

Johnny Preston was parked up in his Triumph Herald approximately fifty yards from Queenie Butler’s house. Johnny loved his new set of wheels. It was a white convertible and a real babe magnet, just like himself.

With his strawberry-blond hair, six-foot frame, and Adonis-like physique, Johnny Preston was a handsome bastard and he knew it.

‘Cor, it’s fucking taters sitting here. Run the engine, so we can warm ourselves up a bit,’ Dave said to Johnny.

Johnny turned to his pal and shook his head in mock disbelief. Dave Phillips was his best mate. They had been as thick as thieves since the age of six and Dave was one of the toughest bastards that Johnny knew. Until it came to the weather, that was. As soon as the temperature fell below five degrees, Dave had a terrible habit of turning into a big girl’s blouse.

‘You’re such a tart, Phillips,’ Johnny said, starting the ignition. He turned up the volume of the radio. The Kinks were one of Johnny’s favourite bands and as he sang along to ‘Tired of Waiting for You’, he thought how very apt the song was. The reason being, he was getting fucking sick of waiting for mummy’s boy Vinny Butler to reappear from Queenie’s house.

Vinny still being tied to his mother’s apron strings was well-known amongst the criminal fraternity in London. As far as Johnny knew, nobody had ever said anything to Vinny’s face, but Johnny was well aware that many people laughed at Vinny’s almost incestuous relationship with her. He had even heard Mad Frankie Fraser joke about it once or twice.

It was because of his desperation to worm his way in with Mad Frankie and, in particular, Eddie Richardson, that Johnny had decided to confront Vinny Butler with only Dave as back-up. Their other pal Graeme was currently banged-up. You had to earn your kudos to be accepted by such people as the Richardsons and Mad Frankie and Johnny knew that to show such bravery as taking on the Butlers would win him a massive mark of respect. At the moment Mad Frankie and Eddie Richardson were keeping him at arm’s length, but Johnny was determined to change his idol’s opinion of him. Now twenty-seven, he had been forced to marry his wife, Deborah, several years ago after putting her in the family way and even though he still fucked anything with a pulse, he adored his two children, Joanna and Johnny Junior. He wanted to enrol them in the best schools and lavish them with untold wealth and he would do anything to make that happen, even if that did mean snuffing out Vinny and Roy Butler nigh-on singlehandedly.

'Here he is now,' Dave said, his voice full of adrenaline. The plan was to give Vinny Butler the pasting of his life and warn him if he or Roy ever went near Judy again, they would both be shot to smithereens.

Johnny punched his steering wheel with frustration. 'Bollocks! The big fucking Mary-Ann is obviously going out on a family outing. What a waste of an afternoon.'

'Can't we just follow 'em and jump Vinny wherever he goes? His brothers ain't with him,' Dave suggested.

'Nah, I don't mind giving him a good hiding in front of his mother and aunt, but we can't touch him in front of that backward nephew,' Johnny replied sensibly.

'Why not?'

'Use your loaf, Dave. If we wanna move in the right circles we can't be involving little 'uns, especially simple ones. It ain't the done thing, mate.'

'What we gonna do now then?' Dave asked.

Johnny released the handbrake and put his foot on the accelerator. 'Call it a day and come back tomorrow. Don't worry, Davey Boy. Vinny Butler will get his comeuppance in the not-too-distant future. Nobody threatens my sister and gets away with it and I mean that with all my fucking heart.'

Albie Butler felt almost suicidal. Not only did he have two broken legs and three broken ribs, he was now homeless, and had a wife and a pregnant ex-girlfriend who both hated him with a passion.

'Hitler in a German tank, parlez vous. Hitler in a German tank, parlez vous. Hitler in a German tank, reading the *Beano* and having a wank. Inky pinky parlez vous,' sang old Mr Perry in the next bed.

Albie put his bruised head in his hands. Old Mr Perry had done nothing but sing war songs all day and if his legs hadn't been in traction, Albie would have leapt out of the bed and throttled him by his scrawny neck.

'Dad.'

Albie looked up and was thrilled to see Roy and Michael standing there. 'Oh, it's so good to see you, boys. That old goat in the next bed has been doing my bleedin' head in all day. You ain't bought your old dad a bottle of brandy by any chance?' Albie said, directing the question towards his youngest son. Unlike that sadistic bastard Vinny, Michael was a good kid and had visited him every day with an alcoholic gift. They say you shouldn't have a favourite son, but Michael had always been Albie's. They had a special bond between them, which Albie had never experienced with Roy or Vinny.

For the first time in his life, Michael looked at his father with hatred in his eyes. Learning his dad had betrayed his mum in such an awful manner had been like having a light switched on in his brain, and he now saw his father just as his brothers did. 'All we've bought you is your clothes from Mum's house. They're in two binliners and we gave them to the nurse. I never thought I would hear myself say this, but you are fucking scum, Dad, and I no longer consider myself to be your son.'

'Yee-haw,' old Mr Perry shouted with glee.

Roy looked at his brother in astonishment. Michael had always been the soft-as-shit pleasant one out of the three of them, yet within two days of working with him and Vinny, he seemed to have grown bollocks and turned from a boy into a man.

'And don't you ever contact us or our mum again,' Roy threatened, waving a finger in the direction of his father's shocked face.

'Don't go, boys. Please don't go,' Albie begged, near to tears.

When Roy and Michael ignored their father's plea and stomped out of the ward, old Mr Perry broke into song again. Vera Lynn's 'We'll Meet Again' was one of his all-time favourites.

Over at the café, Mary and Shirley were singing along to Sonny and Cher's 'I Got You Babe' as they buttered a loaf of bread between them. 'Christ, I totally forgot to ask you how the kids got on at school. No more tears from Nancy, I hope?' Shirley asked.

Mary chuckled. 'Nope, no more tears. Both of them absolutely loved their new schools and they've made friends already. Nancy has met a mate called Brenda and Christopher has palled up with a lad called Tommy.'

'Ah, bless 'em. I wonder if Nancy's mate is my friend Queenie's daughter. Her name is Brenda and she's about the same age as your Nancy.'

Realizing that Shirley was referring to the Butler family, Mary stopped buttering her bread and turned to her employee. 'I'll have to ask Nancy what her friend's surname is. What are they like, that Butler family? Queenie and her sister have been in here a couple of times and they seem nice enough. One of the sons came in as well. My Donald wasn't happy because he gave our Christopher some money. Donald doesn't like the children taking money off strangers, so he made Christopher give it back to him.'

'Queenie and Vivian are diamonds, Mary. Both got lovely houses that are spotlessly clean and their doorsteps are gleaming. Young Brenda's a good kid and so are the three boys. You don't mess with them though, if you know what I mean? Especially the eldest lad, Vinny. He has a bit of a reputation around here for being more than a handful, but he's different again with his mum. Worships the ground Queenie walks on, that boy does.'

A customer who wanted serving ended the conversation and as Mary wrote down the order, she said a silent prayer for Nancy's new friend not to be Brenda Butler. If she was and Donald found out, all hell was sure to break loose.

Under strict instructions from their father, Nancy and Christopher arrived home with their two new friends in tow.

'This is Brenda,' Nancy announced.

'And this is Tommy,' Christopher said, proudly.

The café was virtually empty and seeing as he and Mary now closed at four, Donald ordered the children to sit down at a table.

'I know both your mums are probably cooking for you, but we've some chips left over in the kitchen. Shall I put them on a plate so you can all share them? There's not that many so I doubt it will spoil your dinner,' Mary said.

'Yes please, and can I have a can of cola as well?' Brenda asked cheekily.

Donald took an instant dislike to Brenda. She had been far too brazen asking for a drink for his liking and he didn't want his Nancy copying that type of behaviour. He had brought her up to have impeccable manners.

'I really like your café, Sir. Does that play music?' Tommy asked Donald, pointing at the jukebox.

Donald smiled before answering the boy. Tommy had already won him over by calling him Sir.

'There you go,' Mary said, putting a plate of chips and four cans of cola on the table. She knew why Donald had insisted on meeting their children's friends. He was a very particular man and was bound to interrogate them to ensure they came from decent families.

'So, what does your dad do? Does he have a job?' Donald asked Tommy.

'Yeah, my dad grafts really hard, Sir. He works down the docks.'

'And what about your mother? Does she work too?'

'No, Sir. I have two younger brothers, so my mum stays at home to look after them.'

Mary was a bundle of nerves as Donald turned to Brenda. 'And what about you, Brenda? Does your dad go to work?'

'My dad don't live with us any more. My mum has chucked him out. He was always drunk, but my mum didn't chuck him out because of that. He got another woman pregnant. I'm not meant to know that, but I heard my mum and aunt talking about it in the kitchen last night.'

Absolutely appalled, Donald glanced at his wife.

Mary couldn't look at her husband. 'Oh well, I suppose you'd better hurry up and eat those chips in case your mums are wondering where you are. Me and Donald don't want to get ourselves into trouble for you two being late home,' Mary said, adding a false chuckle.

'I told my mum I was coming here,' Tommy said.

'Yeah, so did I,' Brenda added.

'So, do you have brothers and sisters, Brenda?' Donald asked.

'Yeah, I got three brothers, Vinny, Roy and Michael. Lenny is like a brother as well but he is really my cousin.'

Recognizing the name Vinny, Donald felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. 'And do your brothers work? Or are they still at school?' Donald pried.

'They have got their own business. They own the snooker club just around the corner. Michael used to be a mechanic but Vinny made him give his job up. Everybody knows my brothers. My mum reckons they're more famous than the Kray twins,' Brenda explained proudly.

Having already heard enough, Donald stood up and gestured for his wife to follow him into the kitchen. 'Did you know that our daughter's friend was part of that family of scoundrels?' he asked Mary accusingly.

'No, of course I didn't. I'm not a bloody mind-reader, Donald.'

'Well, I'm afraid the friendship will have to end. I will not have my Nancy involved with such people. You shall tell her tonight that she isn't to be friends with Brenda any more. Our Nancy will soon make other friends,' Donald stated.

'I can't stop them from being friends, Donald. They sit next to one another at bloody school. I really do think you are overreacting a bit. Brenda might be a little rough around the edges, but she seems a nice-enough child. Not all children have been lucky enough to have the upbringing that ours have.'

'I am not overreacting, Mary. I obviously just care about my children's welfare a tad more than you do. Tomorrow, I want you to pay a visit to Nancy's headmaster and demand that she be moved into a different class.'

'I will do no such thing,' Mary said, her eyes blazing with anger.

'Well, if you won't, then I will,' Donald argued.

Mary was absolutely raging now. 'Are you determined to balls things up for us here, Donald? Our new business is a roaring success already. Our children are content and have new friends, yet you still can't be happy. For your information, Shirley was telling me about the Butler family only today. She said Brenda's mum is a lovely lady with a spotlessly clean house. She also spoke highly of the three boys. Obviously, as we already know, Shirley did say that they are a family not to be messed with, which is why you will not stop our Nancy from being friends with Brenda. For some reason, you seem intent on bringing trouble to our door and if you carry on doing so, and ruin our wonderful business that we have worked so hard for, I swear I will divorce you. Now, get off your high horse and leave me to decide what is and isn't best for our children, OK?'

Totally gobsmacked by the way his wife had just spoken to him, Donald decided that he was out of his depth with this particular argument. 'OK, we will do things your way, Mary. But, if that despicable family ever bring trouble to us or our children's lives, it will be me who files for divorce.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Queenie spent the morning of her birthday putting up her Christmas tree and decorations. Vinnie had organised a small party for her at the club later, which had been Lenny's idea.

'What you doing now, Mum?' Brenda asked, when her mother climbed up the stepladder.

'Putting these paper chains across the ceiling to make it look a bit more festive.'

'Mum, you know your birthday party?'

Securing the paper chain with two drawing pins, Queenie stepped down from the ladder. 'Yes.'

'Would it be OK if I invited my friend Nancy?' Brenda asked hopefully.

Queenie smiled. 'Of course you can, angel. You'd best invite her little brother as well though. You can't invite one without the other.'

Over at the club, Vinny had been up since dawn getting things ready for his mum's birthday party. 'About fucking time you showed your face and I hope you've got rid of that slag,' Vinny said as his brother appeared looking dishevelled.

Roy sighed. He didn't often allow birds to stay upstairs in his bed. Once or twice a month, top whack. Yet every time he did so, Vinny would always have something to say about it. Deciding to stand up to his brother for once, Roy glared at him. 'The slag as you so politely called her went home a couple of hours ago. What is your problem, Vin? I'm a single eighteen-year-old fella, so why is it a crime for me to get me nuts in here and there?'

'No-one said it was a crime, Roy, but you knew how important it was to me that we made Mum's birthday special this year. After all the shit she has been through recently, don't you think she deserves to be treated like the Queen?'

'Of course I do.'

'Grab hold of the end of that banner. I want to put it on the wall facing the door,' Vinny said.

'Where's Michael?' Roy asked.

'You tell me. Went to some silly Mod party after we let him leave early last night. He's probably still under the covers with some slag as well.'

'What time is Mum's present arriving?' Roy was desperate to change the subject.

'Twelve on the dot and we need to be there to see her face when she sees it, which is why I needed you to get your arse out of bed early today.'

'Look, I'm sorry. But please, can we just forget about this now, Vin? We don't wanna spoil Mum's party, do we?'

'Yep, let's forget about it, but in future, Roy, business and family before pleasure, eh?'

Roy nodded. 'Of course.'

Johnny Preston was not a happy chappie. Vinny Butler ran the firm, the other brothers were nobodies compared to him, everybody knew that, yet catching Vinny on his own was proving to be a difficult task.

'Can't we just confront Vinny and Roy? We can take the pair of them on,' Dave Phillips suggested.

'Nope. I only deal with the organ grinder. No point involving the monkey. We'll get him on his own, Dave. Patience is a virtue,' Johnny replied as he drove past the club. 'I wonder what's going on in there? There's a bird turned up with balloons now. Perhaps it's his mummy's birthday and the incestuous freak is throwing her a party.'

'He reminds me of that geezer in the film *Psycho*, but I can't remember his name,' Dave added.

Johnny burst out laughing. 'Great call, me ole cocker. Vinny Butler, the East End's answer to Norman Bates.'

Mary was busy wiping down the tables when young Brenda wandered into the café. 'Hello, love. Nancy's upstairs with Christopher. Pop up and see her if you like.'

When Brenda ran up the stairs, Mary went into the kitchen to remind her husband of the conversation they'd had the other day.

'Don't worry. I won't say anything rude to the awful child,' Donald said cuttingly.

'Mum, Dad.' Nancy ran into the kitchen with Christopher and Brenda by her side.

Noticing that her daughter's eyes were shining with excitement, Mary smiled. 'What is it? Do you want to go out to play?'

'No. I've been invited to a party and so has Christopher. It's Brenda's mum's birthday.'

Donald frowned. If it was Queenie Butler's birthday party then her sons were bound to attend and there was no way his daughter and son were mixing with that motley crew. 'You and Christopher are far too young to be attending adult parties, Nancy. I'm sorry, but I will not allow you to go.'

'Oh, please, Dad,' Nancy begged, her lip trembling. She wanted to cry but didn't want to make a show of herself in front of Brenda.

Mary glared at her husband and then turned back to her distraught daughter. 'Where is the party, love? And what time is it? You're too young to be out late at night.'

'It's not at night, Mrs Walker. It's being held this afternoon in my brother's snooker club. My brother says it has to end by teatime because he has to open the club to his punters of an evening,' Brenda explained.

Donald sneered at Brenda's use of the word punters. She sounded like a docker or a navy. Her speech was so unfeminine for a little girl.

'I think it's OK for Nancy and Christopher to go to the party, Donald, as long as they are back here by six, don't you? The snooker club is only around the corner, isn't it?' Mary said, giving her husband the evil eye.

'Yesss! I love parties,' Christopher shouted, clapping his hands with sheer delight.

Nancy was thrilled by her mum's remarks and both girls jumped up and down with glee.

With a face like a smacked arse, Donald glanced at his wife, then his children. 'Do whatever you bloody well like,' he spat.

Queenie and Vivian glanced at one another in amazement as the two delivery men brought a big wooden object inside.

'Aw, Queenie, ain't it grand? It's one of them posh radiograms,' Vivian whispered in her sister's ear.

'But we ain't got no records to play on it,' Queenie whispered back. Her only access to music was the radio she had in the kitchen.

After thanking the delivery men, Roy walked into the lounge with a cardboard box. 'Put one on, Vin,' he ordered his brother.

When the tones of Mrs Mills blasted out of the speakers, Queenie and Vivian looked at one another in delight.

'Oh, ain't it wonderful,' Vivian said, grinning at her sister.

'Bloody amazing,' Queenie replied. No longer did she have to put up with Albie and scrub his skid-marked pants until her hands bled so that when she put them on the washing line the neighbours wouldn't think they were a dirty family. Instead, she had a fabulous radiogram with Mrs Mills' LPs to entertain her and Vivian on these cold winter nights. Queenie stood up, put one arm around Vinny's neck and the other around Roy's. 'Thank you so much, boys. Not just for the radiogram, I mean for everything.'

Queenie Butler felt like the luckiest mum in the world when she walked into the club and saw the effort her wonderful sons had gone to on her behalf. There was a big banner wishing her a happy birthday, balloons, a buffet, a DJ, and most importantly friends and family members. 'Aw, this is wonderful, boys,' Queenie said, grinning at each of her three sons in turn.

Vinny sneered when she rested her gaze on Michael. Instead of being there to help him organize the bash, his youngest brother had only just turned up. 'Don't be thanking him, Mum. Unlike me and Roy, Michael did sod all to help.'

'Oh, don't have a go at him, Vinny. He's only a baby still,' Queenie said, stroking Michael's cheek fondly.

'No, he isn't a baby, Mum, Michael's a big boy now and for not turning up early like he was supposed to this morning, he will have his wages docked.'

Not wanting to get into a spat with his elder brother, Michael gave his mum a birthday hug. 'You look ever so nice today. That suit looks mint.'

Queenie grinned with pride. She and Vivian always liked to think of themselves as the best-dressed women in the East End and today Queenie was wearing her ultra-modern apple-green skirt suit.

'Hi, Michael. Sorry I'm a bit late,' said a pretty girl with long blonde hair.

'This is my girlfriend, Linda, Mum. You didn't mind me inviting her, did you? I really wanted you two to meet.'

When Queenie clapped her hands with glee and started fawning over the girl, Vinny stomped off in a temper. How dare Michael take it upon himself to invite some tart to the party without even asking his permission first. Talk about take a liberty.

Back at the café, Mary was getting more annoyed by the second at her husband's childish behaviour. Donald had barely uttered a word to her since she had allowed the children to go to Brenda's mum's party and the silence was becoming unbearable. 'Two ham, egg and chips, Donald,' she said, walking into the kitchen.

Donald didn't answer. Instead he just took the ham out of the fridge.

'I am getting immensely sick of you acting like a ten-year-old, Donald. Even our children are more mature than you are. Nancy and Christopher have only gone to a little party, for Christ's sake. They will be back by teatime. It's boring and unhealthy for them to be cooped up in here with us all the time.'

'I don't mind them going to normal people's parties, but you know how I feel about that family, yet you still allowed them to go. That Brenda is a horrible child and I hate our Nancy being involved with her.'

Desperate to make things right again between them, Mary put her arms around his waist. 'I know what you mean, love, but we can't wrap the kids in cotton wool. They are old enough now to choose their own friends.'

Donald sighed worriedly. 'More's the pity, my dear. More's the pity.'

Queenie Butler had thoroughly enjoyed her birthday party. She and Vivian usually kept themselves to themselves, but Vinny had invited a few of the neighbours and apart from Sheila Jackson's husband, Kenny, who was drunk and becoming a fucking nuisance, it had been a lovely day.

'Shall we bring the cake out now?' asked Vivian.

Vinny didn't reply. He was too busy watching Kenny Jackson make a tit of himself. Vinny didn't like Kenny one little bit, and had he known Sheila would bring her husband along with her, he wouldn't have invited her in the first place. 'That prick is asking for trouble, Roy,' Vinny hissed.

'Why? What's he done?' Roy asked. Kenny was a local loudmouth who drank in the Blind Beggar. Roy had never liked him either.

'He keeps swearing in front of the kids. He's let a "cunt" fly three times now in front of Mum, and Nancy and Brenda are sitting next to her. Champ is there as well. It ain't right, Roy. I'm gonna have a little word in his shell-like.'

Knowing what his brother's temper was like, Roy urged Vinny not to say anything. 'You don't wanna spoil Mum's birthday, do you? Anyway, we'll be wrapping things up in a bit. It's gone five now. Who invited Kenny? It weren't me.'

‘It’s my fault. I invited Sheila, but ’cause that piss-pot is always in the Blind Beggar on Saturday afternoons, I didn’t dream she’d bring him with her. I wanted to tell him to fuck off when he walked in, but bit me tongue.’

Desperate to stop Vinny from kicking off, Roy urged him to look at Lenny. Their cousin had just ran onto the dancefloor and was standing in the middle, wiggling his hips to the Hollies’ ‘Just One Look’.

About to watch his little cousin, Vinny heard another ‘cunt’ sail out of Kenny Jackson’s gob and decided enough was enough. He flew out of his seat, walked over to where Jackson was sitting and tapped him on the shoulder. ‘Tone your language down a bit, Ken. My little sister and her friend shouldn’t have to hear such words. Neither should my mother and aunt for that matter either. You ain’t in the Blind Beggar with your chums now, you know.’

Kenny Jackson looked at Vinny through glazed eyes. He didn’t like the Butler boys, especially Vinny and Roy. It was fast becoming common knowledge that they were a cocky little pair of bastards who were getting far too big for their boots. Knowing how fast news travelled and how much respect he would gain by standing up to Vinny Butler, Kenny decided to do just that. ‘You got some brass neck, you have. The grapevine is a funny old thing, kid, and everybody knows it was you who put your father in hospital because he was rumping some little dolly bird. Yet, you’ve got the front to tell me not to swear. Don’t make me laugh.’

A few of the women and children screamed when Vinny lifted Kenny up by the scruff of his neck and head-butted him. ‘You don’t know who you’re messing with, you cheeky fucker. And who you calling “kid”?’ Vinny spat, as he bundled Kenny towards the exit.

Sheila wailed hysterically when she saw that her husband’s face was covered in blood.

‘Do something, Roy. Don’t just sit there like a stuffed dummy,’ Queenie yelled.

‘Kenny Jackson asked for that, so don’t you be having a go at your Vinny,’ Vivian told her sister.

Young Nancy couldn’t stop crying when she saw Roy and Michael follow Vinny outside. ‘I’m frightened, Christopher. Can we go home now?’

‘Don’t be scared. No-one ever beats my brothers up because they are the hardest men around here,’ Brenda said proudly to her friend.

As some yelling and shoving started between another two men on the table behind, Christopher grabbed his sister’s hand. ‘Come on. Let’s go.’

Mary and Donald had closed for the day and were just doing their daily tidying-up routine when they heard the frantic banging on the door.

‘Whatever’s the matter?’ Mary asked, when she noticed Nancy’s tear-stained face and Christopher’s ashen one.

‘It’s OK. You’re home now. Just tell Daddy what has happened,’ Donald said, glaring at Mary and hugging his daughter at the same time.

‘There was a fight. The man looked like he was dead, didn’t he, Christopher?’ Nancy sobbed.

Christopher nodded. When he and Nancy left the party, Vinny had been outside beating seven bells out of Kenny Jackson. Roy and Michael were unsuccessfully trying to get Vinny away from the man, and when Christopher and Nancy had glanced at Kenny, he was bleeding profusely and looked like he was dead.

‘Oh Donald. I’m so sorry. You were right and I was wrong,’ Mary said, apologetically.

Donald liked to be proved right. ‘I think you need to find a new best friend at school, darling. That Brenda and her family are far too rough for you to be around.’

‘But I like Brenda. It’s not her fault, is it?’ Nancy said dismally.

Mary decided to back her husband to the hilt. ‘Your dad’s right, love. You can still be friends with Brenda at school, but I don’t want you to see her outside.’

‘But why not?’ Nancy sobbed.

‘Because I just bloody said so. The same goes for you, Christopher. I know you’ve been hanging around near that snooker club because Mad Freda saw you and told me. She only lives a few doors away from it, you see. You are not to go near there any more. I don’t want either of you anywhere near them Butlers, OK?’ Mary said sternly.

Thrilled that his beautiful wife’s brain seemed to be in fine working order once more, Donald smiled at her. ‘Thank you, my darling.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

Queenie put the topside of beef in the oven, then flopped down on the sofa next to Vivian. 'I wish we could find out how Kenny is. He couldn't have grassed Vinny up, else we'd have the police crawling all over us by now. Perhaps he is still out cold? Or, worse still, say he's croaked it,' Queenie said, her lips twitching anxiously.

Realizing her sister was going out of her mind with worry, Vivian got up and poured them both a glass of sherry. 'Of course Kenny ain't dead. The ambulance man said he was still breathing, didn't he?'

After Roy and Michael had managed to drag Vinny off Kenny Jackson, they had moved him away from the snooker club, dumped him in a nearby doorway, and rung an ambulance. Sheila had been told to say nothing and Queenie was sure that providing Kenny survived his ferocious beating, neither he nor Sheila would dare implicate her Vinny. Grasses were despised in London's East End, and treated worse than vermin.

'If Kenny dies and my Vinny goes to prison, it'll be the end of me, Viv. I'd die of a broken heart, I just know I would,' Queenie said dramatically.

'Oh for Christ's sake, stop talking bollocks and drink your sherry, will ya? Vinny's got our dad's temper, that's his bloody problem. Anyway, Kenny Jackson took liberties and Vinny had every right to give him a good fawpenny one.'

'How dare you talk about my Vinny in the same light as that nasty old bastard,' Queenie spat. Their father was dead now, thank God, but before he had kicked the bucket, he'd led their poor mum a dog's life.

'I didn't mean it like that. Your Vinny is nothing like Dad. I just said he had a similar temper,' Vivian explained.

'No he has not! Have you forgotten how Dad used to beat Mum up? My Vinny would never lay a finger on a woman, Viv. He's a gentleman,' Queenie insisted.

Michael stomped in, ending the awkward exchange between the two sisters.

'What's up? Has something happened to do with Kenny Jackson? Vinny ain't been arrested, has he?' Queenie gabbled.

'No. I'm just pissed off because Linda has blown me out. Well, it weren't actually her. It was her dad that did the deed.'

'Why?' Queenie asked.

'Why do you think? Her dress got splashed in claret yesterday, didn't it? Her dad saw it when she got home and hit the roof. I tried to explain to him that what had happened had nothing to do with me, but he wasn't having none of it. He told me that under no circumstances would I be allowed to take Linda out again, then he shut the door in my face.'

'What a fucking liberty! Do you want me to speak to him? Or even better, send Roy or Vinny round to have a word?'

Michael shook his head. 'Nah, not worth it.'

'Oh well. Perhaps it's for the best, love. There's plenty more fish in the sea and you need a girl who will understand your family, don't you? You're in business with your brothers now, so no point you being with someone too naïve who has up-their-arse parents. They won't fit in with us,' Queenie advised.

'And Vinny did say to you that you shouldn't have invited Linda yesterday, didn't he? Perhaps you should keep any future girlfriends away from the club. Business and pleasure should always be kept separate, Michael,' Vivian added.

‘Don’t be blaming me for inviting the girl. I didn’t know my lunatic of a brother was gonna nigh-on kill a man in front of her very eyes, did I? As for the poxy business, I didn’t want to be part of it and still don’t. All I ever wanted was to be a mechanic,’ Michael said, his eyes blazing angrily.

‘Don’t you dare call your brother a lunatic. And where do you think you’re going?’ Queenie shouted, when her son leapt out of his chair and put his parka back on.

‘Out with Kev on me bike. It’s the only time I get any peace and quiet,’ Michael yelled, slamming the front door.

Vivian raised her eyebrows and smiled at her sister. ‘Boys, eh? Who’d have ’em?’

Over at the café, young Christopher Walker was bored out of his brains and in desperate need of excitement. ‘Please come out and play, Nancy? I really want to know if that man is dead or not, don’t you? The police might be at the snooker club and if we walk past we might be able to see them and we can find out exactly what happened to him.’

Nancy immediately shook her head. She had been petrified yesterday when the fight had broken out at Brenda’s mum’s party, and the sight of that poor man lying on the pavement covered in blood would probably stick in her mind for life. ‘No, Christopher! I am never ever going near that club again, and neither should you.’

Christopher put on his coat and ran down the stairs. There was no way his parents would let him play out on his own after what had happened yesterday, so he would have to pretend that he was popping round to see Tommy. Surely he could get away with telling one little white lie, couldn’t he?

‘You can visit Tommy, but I want you back by five. And don’t you dare go near that club again, Christopher,’ Donald warned his son.

Albie Butler was shocked to see the state of Kenny Jackson. Both men frequented the Blind Beggar pub, but rarely drank in the same company. ‘Jesus wept! What happened to you, Ken?’

Ordering Sheila to leave them alone and come back in ten minutes, Kenny couldn’t keep the sneer off his battered face as he turned back to Albie. His injuries included concussion, a fractured wrist, broken nose, and he felt and looked as though he had spent ten rounds in the ring with Henry Cooper. ‘I had a fucking run-in with your psycho of a son, that’s what,’ Kenny wheezed.

Albie felt his pulse start to quicken. He had always been a bit wary of Kenny Jackson. He’d seen him do a bloke with a hammer in the Blind Beggar a few years back, and had always given him a wide berth since then. ‘I’m sorry, Kenny, I really am.’ Albie didn’t have to ask which son had beaten the living daylight out of Kenny.

‘You’re sorry! Is that all you’ve got to say? That boy needs taking down a peg or two, Albie. Everybody knows it was your Vinny who put you in here. I mean, what type of boy does that to his own father, eh? The kid’s a fucking animal to do this to me in front of my wife. Us men don’t involve our women in such spats, you know that.’

Mortified that people knew that his own son was responsible for his broken legs and ribs, Albie bowed his head in shame. ‘I dunno what to say to you, Kenny. There is nothing I can do to help your predicament. The only thing I can suggest is you accept the beating and swallow your pride. Vinny has no respect for me. He has never listened to a word I say.’

Old Mr Perry smirked as he listened to the conversation going on a few feet away from him. He had been so bored cooped up in a hospital bed after his bowel cancer operation, but since Albie had arrived, the pure entertainment had lifted Mr Perry’s spirits no end.

Christopher Walker felt the adrenaline pumping through his veins as he sat down on the step in the doorway opposite the snooker club. Popping a sherbert lemon into his mouth, the boy looked to his right. His mum had said that Mad Freda lived near the club and he wondered which house it was. About to turn back, Christopher noticed the white Triumph Herald convertible parked up. He could vaguely make out the silhouettes of what looked like two men sitting inside the car, and he wondered if they were friends of Vinny’s or undercover policemen.

Taking his sweet out of his mouth to see how much longer he had to suck to reach the sherbet, Christopher thought back to the events of yesterday. When the fight had first broken out, he had been just as scared as his sister. But after he had got back to the safety of his parents' café, Christopher couldn't stop thinking about what he had seen. He had found the whole experience exhilarating, and he now couldn't wait until he was old enough to join the police force, so he could investigate people being beaten up and murdered.

Feeling his heart start to beat faster when the door of the club swung open, Christopher was disappointed to see Roy come out alone. Christopher had never really spoken to Roy like he had Vinny, and even though he was dying to know if the man who had taken a beating had croaked it, he decided to hold his tongue until Vinny appeared.

A couple of minutes after Roy walked around the corner, Christopher heard a car door slam, glanced to his right, and saw the two men get out of the Triumph Herald. When they walked up to the door of the club, and rang the bell, Christopher ducked his head in the hope they wouldn't notice him. Vinny's car was parked outside the door of the club and as long as he stayed crouched down, Christopher guessed the men wouldn't be able to see him. Unfortunately for him though, he had already been spotted. The woman whom he and his parents referred to as Mad Freda had been glued to her window for the past fifteen minutes.

Vinny Butler was alone in the club when the doorbell rang. 'Who is it?' he shouted, his hand on the bolt, ready to open the door.

Having watched the club since seven a.m. that morning, Johnny Preston knew that he had finally got Vinny alone. He had seen Michael arrive and leave earlier, and Roy had left just a few minutes ago. 'It's Judy Preston's brother, Johnny. Can we have a quiet word, please?'

Vinny smirked and checked he had his knife in his pocket. He had been expecting a visit from Johnny Preston ever since paying Judy a visit, but he hadn't quite expected him to turn up on a Sunday afternoon. 'Too scared to come on your own, was you?' Vinny asked sarcastically, when he swung the door open and saw that Johnny had a pal with him.

Johnny immediately felt his hackles start to rise. 'Dave's my partner. He goes everywhere with me, a bit like your brother Roy does with you.'

Vinny stepped outside the club and slammed the metal door. He wasn't stupid. Johnny and his muggy sidekick might be tooled up for all he knew. 'Spit it out then? I ain't got all day,' he said.

Johnny Preston and Dave Phillips glanced at one another. Neither had ever been this close to Vinny Butler before and both were thinking the self-same thing. Vinny was exactly as the rumour mill described him. He looked like he had a bit of Italian in him. His eyes were deadly cold, and his attitude was as cocksure as they came.

Johnny suddenly felt extremely wary, but he'd come this far and there was no going back now. It was only the other evening that he and Dave had been bragging to Mad Frankie Fraser in a South London boozer that he was going to confront Vinny Butler so, like it or not, he now had to do so. 'You owe my sister an apology, Vinny. Who do you think you are, eh? Going round her gaff and threatening her in front of her young son? You're bang out of order and I ain't fucking putting up with it. Judy is keeping her baby and that is final,' Johnny said, sounding much more confident than he actually felt.

Vinny was very good at staring at people for long spells without blinking, and he had never met a man yet in his life who could hold his gaze. When Johnny dropped his eyes, Vinny grabbed him by the neck and smashed his head as hard as he could against the metal door. 'Your slag of a sister will get rid of that kid whether you like it or not. I'll kick it out of her personally, if I have to. Now go crawl back under your rock and tell that whore you're related to that I'll be round next week to check she's un-pregnanted her fucking self.'

When Dave punched Vinny in the side of the head, Christopher Walker stood up to get a better view.

'Silly move, you dumb cunt,' Christopher heard Vinny say. He then saw Vinny repeatedly punch the man in the stomach, with what looked to be a knife.

When Johnny Preston saw his pal lying lifeless on the floor with blood pumping out of his abdomen, he knew it was time for a quick getaway. He ran like the clappers, leapt into his Triumph Herald and sped off as Vinny chased the car, screaming abuse at him.

Vinny could feel his heart beating ferociously as the car disappeared out of sight. It wasn't down to nerves, more annoyance that Preston had got away as he'd wanted to stab that bastard too.

Punching a nearby wall, Vinny quickly looked up and down the road. Thankfully, being a Sunday afternoon there wasn't a soul in sight, so Vinny stepped over Dave Phillips' dead body, picked up the knife he had dropped, jumped in his Jaguar, and was just about to drive off, when he saw young Christopher Walker sitting in the doorway opposite the club. Leaning across the passenger seat to unlock the door, Vinny ordered young Christopher to get in.

Christopher no longer had any adrenaline pumping through his veins as he did what Vinny asked. He had seen too much now, far too much, and he was petrified. When Vinny drove past his parent's café, Christopher started to sob. 'You're not gonna kill me as well, are you? I won't say nothing about what happened, Vinny. I swear I won't.'

With his head all over the place, Vinny pulled into a nearby sidestreet and stopped the car. He took a ten-pound note out of his pocket and handed it to Christopher. 'Take that and there is plenty more where that came from. You saw nothing, understand?'

'Yes. I understand,' the boy said, making a grab for the money and then the door handle.

Vinny leant across Christopher so he couldn't get out of the car. 'You need to dry them tears before you get home, boy, and when you do get home, you gotta act normal. Me and you will be best pals for life if you keep your trap shut about this, OK?'

'OK,' Christopher said, desperately trying to dry his eyes with the sleeve of his duffle coat.

Vinny tilted the child's chin up, and looked him in the eyes. 'This has to stay our little secret. You don't want anything bad to happen to your mum, dad, or sister, do you? Because if you say something, that's exactly what will happen.'

'No, I love my mum, dad and sister.'

'There's a good boy,' Vinny said, ruffling Christopher's hair.

When Vinny finally opened the car door for him, Christopher took off down the street like a rat up a drainpipe. To say he was terrified was putting it mildly.

Freda Smart knelt down next to the man and immediately knew he was dead. It wasn't just the blood that had seeped out of his stomach and decorated the pavement; it was seeing his shocked open-mouthed expression and his eyes rolled back lifelessly in his head.

After yesterday's events with Kenny Jackson, Freda had made a point of standing guard at her window today. Unfortunately for her, her house was on the same side of the road as the snooker club, so she hadn't had a clear view of exactly what had occurred. Even so, she was sure she'd seen and heard enough to put Vinny Butler in prison for life, where he belonged.

Seeing what she thought was the man's hand flinch, Freda screamed and ran towards Herbie Jacob's house. Freda couldn't afford such luxuries as a telephone, but old Herbie had one.

'Whatever's wrong, Freda? You look like you've just seen a ghost,' Herbie said, when he answered his front door.

'I have! There's a man dead on the pavement. Call the police, Herbie. I know who killed him.'

Word travelled fast in Whitechapel, and within minutes of the police turning up, a crowd of fifty or so onlookers had arrived at the scene.

'Was it you who reported the murder?' one of the police officers asked Herbie.

Freda immediately butted in. 'No. It was me. I know who killed him. I was looking out of my window, and I asked Herbie to ring you on my behalf.'

The police officer took Freda to one side. 'If you can tell us what you know now, that would be most helpful. Then, we will need you to come down to the station to make a formal statement for us at some point.'

'Vinny Butler killed the man. The man had a mate with him and I saw him chase the mate down the road. The mate got into a white car and drove off at top speed,' Freda gabbled.

'But, what about the actual murder? Did you see Mr Butler stab the victim with your own eyes?'

'No. My house is on the same side of the road as his club, so my view was blocked. I saw a boy I know standing opposite though. He saw everything and then Vinny made him get inside his car with him. I hope he ain't killed that poor child as well, like he did Jack's son, Peter,' Freda cried.

'If you could just give us the name of the boy involved, we can get our team onto it to make sure he is OK,' the officer said kindly.

'His parents have just opened the café along the road there. It was their son that saw everything. He'd been sitting in the doorway opposite the club for a while beforehand. His name is Christopher. Christopher Walker.'

CHAPTER NINE

Mary Walker clocked her son's pale complexion as soon as he returned home. 'What's up with you? Not been near that club again, have you?'

Seeing his father look at him with suspicion in his eyes, Christopher bowed his head. 'I don't feel well. I got belly ache,' he said, rubbing his stomach in the hope that it would make his lie seem more believable.

'Go upstairs and have a lie-down then, boy. Dinner will be ready in about an hour or so,' Mary told him.

Donald grinned as he finished going over the figures, then in a jovial mood, put his favourite record on the jukebox. Since employing Shirley to help them out, his and Mary's takings had gone up even more. Their wonderful café was on its way to making them a bloody fortune, and Donald couldn't believe their luck. Things were going even better than he had predicted.

Hearing a knock at the door, Mary switched the jukebox off at the mains. 'You answer that, Donald, and if it's someone complaining about the music being too loud, best you apologize. I told you not to turn the volume up, didn't I?'

Donald answered the door and was rather taken aback when he came face to face with a policeman. 'Come in, officer,' he said, guessing that the visit was probably to do with the incident his children had witnessed at the snooker club the previous day.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' Mary asked, politely.

'No, thank you. Is your son, Christopher, at home by any chance?' the officer asked Donald.

'Yes, he is upstairs. I take it this is about yesterday's awful turnout? I hope that poor man is OK. My Christopher thought he was dead, but you know how kids exaggerate,' Donald said, knowingly.

'Actually, it's about the incident that happened today. We have reason to believe that your son was at the scene of the crime and is a key witness to a man's murder.'

Donald shook his head in a pedantic manner. 'No, officer, you have got it all wrong. The incident at the party which my son attended was yesterday, wasn't it, Mary?' he said, looking at his wife for back-up.

'Yes, it was round at the snooker hall yesterday afternoon. My daughter attended the party as well. She is upstairs too, so would you like to speak to both of our children?' Mary asked, feeling anxious. She wasn't that keen on the police involving Nancy and Christopher, but the law was the law.

The officer cleared his throat loudly. 'I'm afraid we have our wires crossed here somewhat. There was a murder not two hours ago outside the snooker club that you referred to, and according to an eye-witness your son saw exactly what happened and then got into the suspect's car. I know nothing about any other incident that may or may not have happened yesterday.'

Donald was livid when he realized his son must have disobeyed his orders. He flung open the door that led to the living quarters. 'Christopher, get down here now,' he yelled.

Feeling rather faint, Mary flopped onto one of the chairs. No wonder the boy had looked so white and near to tears when he'd arrived home.

Christopher was almost paralysed through fear when he came face to face with the police officer.

Donald couldn't help but glare at his son as he sat down next to Mary. Christopher had guilt written all over his deathly-white face.

'Were you sitting in the doorway opposite the snooker club earlier, Christopher?' asked the policeman.

'Yeah I was, but not for long. I went to knock for my mate Tommy, but he wasn't in, so I sat on the step on my way back to eat my sweets.'

‘You must tell the truth, boy,’ Donald ordered, pointing his finger dangerously close to his son’s face.

‘A man was murdered outside the snooker club earlier, Christopher, and the police know you were there when it happened. We have a witness who recognized you. Can you tell us exactly what you saw?’

Christopher racked his brain for the best way to get himself out of the mess he was in. If he had been spotted at the scene, he would have to admit to seeing something, but there was no way he was grassing Vinny up. He was way too scared for his own safety and he didn’t want anything bad to happen to his mum, dad, or sister. ‘I did hear some shouting, then I heard someone running away, but I didn’t see what happened because there was a car parked in front of where I was sitting.’

The officer sighed. He was sure little Christopher was lying. ‘Did you get into anybody’s car?’

‘No. My mum and dad have told me never to get in a stranger’s car. I walked home on my own.’

‘Please don’t be frightened to tell me the truth, Christopher. The man who has committed this murder will be locked up for many years to come, so it will not be possible for him to hurt you.’

‘I did see a man run away, and I think he was the killer, but I didn’t see the murder,’ Christopher wept.

Donald squeezed Mary’s hand. Everything had been going so well for them since moving to Whitechapel. So why did this drama have to bloody well happen?

The officer stood up. Obviously Vinny Butler had already nobbled the child, and it would take one of his superiors to get the truth out of him. He personally had been ordered to go gently on Christopher, which was why he had been sent to the café alone.

‘So, what happens now? Will you need to interview Christopher again?’ Donald asked, as he opened the door and followed the policeman outside.

‘Yes, he will almost definitely have to come down to the station to give a formal statement. In the meantime, perhaps you could have a little chat with him. I have a feeling that Christopher knows more than he is letting on.’

‘Do you mind if I ask who your suspect is?’ Donald enquired. He had already guessed that it was something to do with the Butlers, but was interested to know exactly who was involved.

‘I’m afraid I can’t speculate at the moment, Mr Walker. Us police officers have to abide by our innocent until proven guilty rule, and until somebody is actually charged, it would be very unprofessional of me to give out any names. I will speak to my superior and will be in touch again soon, OK?’

Donald nodded, shut the door and leant against it. Christopher was crying and Mary was cuddling the deceitful child. Unable to stop himself, Donald ran towards his son and clouted him as hard as he could around the ear.

‘Stop it, Donald! He’s upset enough as it is,’ Mary exclaimed.

Grabbing his son roughly by the arm, Donald took his shoe off and swiped it against Christopher’s backside. ‘How dare you defy my orders and hang around that bloody club? Now, get up those stairs and have a re-think about what you actually saw. As upstanding citizens of the community it is our duty to catch criminals, not harbour them. Also, just think of how beneficial it will be to your own career if you do decide to join the police force and they are aware that you helped catch a murderer at such a young age, eh?’

When Christopher ran upstairs sobbing, Mary put her head in her hands. ‘Why did this have to happen to us, Donald? Why?’

Holding his distraught wife in his arms, Donald shook his head sadly. For once, he really did not have an answer.

As usual on a Sunday afternoon, Queenie cooked a roast for all the family.

‘Whatever’s wrong? Has Kenny kicked the bucket?’ she asked worriedly, when Vinny walked in. Just one look at her eldest son’s face told her that something terrible had happened.

‘Vinny,’ Lenny yelled, running out of the lounge and throwing his arms around his big cousin’s waist.

Vinny took a two-bob note out of his pocket and handed it to Lenny. ‘I want you and Brenda to go to the shops and buy yourselves some sweets, Champ.’

‘What’s up?’ Roy asked, shutting the lounge door.

‘Where’s Michael?’ Vinny replied, ignoring his brother’s question.

‘Out on his moped.’

Vinny explained everything that had happened outside the club, then put his head in his hands. He didn’t feel any remorse whatsoever over what he had done, but he didn’t want his mother thinking she had given birth to a cold-blooded killer. ‘I didn’t mean to kill the geezer, but it was two against one, Mum. I had to stick up for myself, didn’t I? They could have been tooled up or anything for all I knew.’

Both Queenie and Vivian put comforting arms around Vinny’s slumped shoulders. ‘You did what you had to do, boy. Nothing more, nothing less,’ Vivian told him.

‘Yep. Vivvy’s right. They turned up looking for a row and unfortunately for them, they got one. I know it’s sad that you accidentally killed the man, but there’s no point crying over spilt milk. What’s done is done, boy. Now apart from that young lad, was there anybody else about?’

‘No. It all happened so quickly, and apart from the kid, the street was desolate. Thank Christ our club is in a quiet sidestreet, eh, Roy?’ Vinny said, staring at his brother.

Roy nodded, but said nothing. Vinny had always been a volatile bastard with a foul temper even when they were kids. Just lately though, Roy could sense his brother’s unpredictability and violent nature getting worse, which worried him greatly. In the past couple of weeks alone, he had put their own father in hospital, smashed the living daylights out of Kenny Jackson, and now he had stabbed some poor sod to death.

Guessing what Roy was thinking, Vinny glared at him. ‘Say something then, if it’s only bollocks. What was I meant to do, eh? Stand there like a lemon and let them do me over? You weren’t there to back me up, was ya?’

Queenie butted in before Roy could retaliate. ‘Arguing between us isn’t gonna solve this, is it? What we need is a watertight alibi in case the police start sniffing round. You were here with me, Vivian, Roy and the kids, OK, Vinny? I’ll word Brenda and Lenny up and worst ways, you give me fifty quid and I’ll give it to Old Ivy next door to say she saw you arrive early as well.’

‘Thanks, Mum,’ Vinny said, his voice full of relief. Old Ivy had given him an alibi once or twice in the past in exchange for cash, and Vinny knew she could be trusted.

‘Well, that’s that then. You both got here at one o’clock. Now, all you’ve got to hope is that child keeps his mouth shut, Vinny. Did you threaten him to do so?’

Vinny nodded his head. He liked children and felt more guilty about threatening Christopher Walker than committing the murder.

‘What exactly did you say to him?’ Vivian asked.

‘Not much. I just made sure he knew that if he opened his trap something bad would happen to his family. I gave him a tenner an’ all.’

Queenie squeezed her son’s hand. ‘Do you want me and Vivian to have a word with him as well? We can catch him on his way to or from school.’

‘No, leave it for now, Mum. The boy looked petrified enough, so let’s just see what happens, eh? It will only be my word against his if he says anything. Johnny Preston definitely ain’t gonna grass me, so I think it’s best we just ride the storm. I mean if you, Viv, Roy, Ivy and the kids all swear blind I was here, what can the Old Bill do?’

When the doorbell rang, Vivian sprang up and spied through the net curtain. ‘It’s the police.’

Queenie shoved Roy out the back door. ‘You need to clue Brenda and Lenny up. Go find ’em, quick.’

When Roy bolted out the back, Queenie took a deep breath and wiped her clammy hands on her apron. She then opened the front door and smiled. ‘Good afternoon, officers. What can I do for you?’

‘Oh my God! I hope that isn’t the police again,’ Mary exclaimed, when she heard a pummelling against the front door of the café.

‘You stay here. I’ll sort it,’ Donald insisted, running down the stairs.

‘Hello, I’m Detective Inspector Stevens. I understand one of my colleagues popped in to see you earlier?’

‘Yes, that is correct. Would you like to come in?’ Donald asked, apprehensively.

‘No. I would actually like you and your son to come along to the police station with me. We have organized an identification parade, and it would be most helpful if your son could pick out the man he saw arguing with the victim.’

‘I’m very sorry, but Christopher is only eight years old and I think it is wholly inappropriate that he be involved in something as nerve-racking as an identification parade. I have just had a very long chat with Christopher myself and I can assure you that he has told you everything he knows. My son has been brought up with morals and he would never lie about something as serious as this.’

D.I. Stevens nodded understandingly. ‘I do see what you mean, but this identification parade will not take very long and I can assure you our suspects will not see or even know that your son is there, Sir.’

Donald sighed. He had always classed himself as a pillar of the community, so how could he say no? ‘Wait there while I speak to Christopher.’

Vinny Butler followed the seven other men into the empty room. He hadn’t been arrested, his alibi was watertight, and when the police had asked him to participate in an identification parade, he had readily agreed. He had to act as though he was innocent, and it would be a sign of guilt if he refused.

Wondering who was behind the blacked-out window, Vinny felt his heart rate quadruple. Asking himself if there had been another witness he hadn’t spotted, Vinny made a mental note to dispose of the knife and the clothes he had been wearing the following morning. After dropping off Christopher earlier, he had hidden them as best as he could, but the clothes needed burning as they were splashed with blood, and the knife needed to be got rid of properly. Roy would have to sort both out for him, in case he himself was being watched.

Vinny glanced at the other men in the line-up. They were all roughly his age, but none was as good-looking or oozed class like he did. When the officer barked orders for all eight men to stand up straight and stare at the blackened window, Vinny, being Vinny, stood tall and more confidently than any other.

Christopher chewed his lip nervously when he was told to study the men one by one. His dad was sitting in the room with him, which was making him feel even more anxious. ‘Nope, it’s definitely none of them who I saw,’ he mumbled, after a couple of minutes.

‘Take your time, Christopher. We have reason to believe that the perpetrator of this terrible crime is amongst these men. You sit here and have a long hard look, while I have a little chat with your dad outside.’

Donald followed the officer out of the room.

‘My colleague said something about your children attending a party at a snooker club yesterday that is owned by Vinny and Roy Butler. Are you two families friends?’

‘Oh, dear God, no! We have only moved into the area recently and my wife and I have barely spoken to the Butler family. My daughter has just started a new school and is in the same class as young Brenda. That is the only reason why she and Christopher got invited to the party.’

‘And what was this incident your son was involved in yesterday? My colleague mentioned that somebody was attacked at the party?’ D.I. Stevens asked. He was well aware of Kenny Jackson being

admitted to the London Hospital, but his wife had insisted he had fallen over drunk, which both she and he knew was a big fat lie.

‘No, as far as I’m aware nobody was attacked, officer. My children ran home scared because they saw a man lying on the floor bleeding nearby the building as they left,’ Donald lied. His Christopher was in too deep as it was, and he wasn’t in the right frame of mind for even more questioning.

‘Does your son know Vinny Butler well, Mr Walker?’

‘No, of course he doesn’t,’ Donald spat.

Furious that he was getting nowhere fast, D.I. Stevens strode back into the room and left Donald standing outside. Whitechapel was becoming a hotbed for gangland families and murders these days and it was his duty to stamp out such scum.

‘Have you recognized anybody now, Christopher?’ he asked, with a hint of sarcasm creeping into his voice.

‘No, Sir. It was none of those men that I saw near the club.’

‘Take a look again at number one, Christopher. Are you damn sure it wasn’t him?’

Number one was Vinny and when Christopher stared at him again, it felt as though Vinny was staring straight back at him. Thinking what scary eyes Vinny had, Christopher remembered the threat to harm his parents and sister and frantically shook his head. ‘It definitely wasn’t him, Sir. If anything, the man I saw looked more like number four.’

CHAPTER TEN

As Christmas beckoned, not for the first time in his life, Vinny truly believed he had got away with murder.

‘Morning, Vin. Mental last night, weren’t it? I bet you wish we weren’t shutting tonight now, don’t you?’ Roy said, putting two mugs of tea on the coffee table. The boys had properly moved into the club earlier this week, and now the upstairs had been re-decorated, it looked much more homely than before.

Vinny shook his head. Friday was usually their busiest night of the week, but it had been his decision to close the club because it was Christmas Eve. ‘Nope. I ain’t got no regrets. We could do with a break ourselves. I’m meeting Geary at lunchtime. How much do you think I should bung him on top of what we pay for this place?’ Vinny asked his brother.

George Geary had been keeping them up to date with developments on the murder of Dave Phillips. Obviously, Vinny hadn’t admitted anything, but it was very comforting to know that the only witness who had come forward was Mad Freda. It was also through Geary that Vinny knew that it had been Christopher Walker behind the blacked-out window at the identification parade, and Vinny had thought it fucking hilarious that the kid had picked out bloke number four rather than him. Vinny had sensibly kept well away from the café, and hadn’t seen Christopher since.

‘Wait and see what info Geary has got for us. If he tells you Jack shit again, just give him fifty on top as a Christmas drink. If he has found out where the Prestons are though, you’d better give one an’ half at least,’ Roy advised.

Vinny nodded. It had been just over a week since Roy had paid Judy Preston a visit to check if she’d had the abortion. There had been no answer, then a neighbour had come out to inform him that Judy had moved out ten days earlier. Vinny had been absolutely furious and, unable to get involved himself just in case Geary had got it wrong and he was being followed, he had sent Michael to visit his arsehole of a father in hospital just to find out where Judy’s mother lived. He had then sent Roy round there only to find out that Mummy had done a runner too. So, Vinny had asked Geary if he could find out their whereabouts. He had also heard through the grapevine from a couple of his South London punters that Johnny Preston had disappeared off the face of the bloody earth, so Vinny wanted Geary to check out that story as well. Seeing as Johnny had run and left his best pal to die in a pool of blood like the coward he was, Vinny was sure that he wouldn’t go mouthing off about the murder. Geary hadn’t yet put two and two together, Vinny was sure of that. If he had, the Chief Inspector would have been on his case for more money like he usually was when he had something on him, and even if he did see the light, Vinny had his answer ready for him.

Roy jumped as the doorbell rang. ‘Who the fuck’s that this time of the morning?’

‘It might be Mum, so answer it, Roy.’

Roy did the honours, then ran back up the stairs. ‘It’s that Karen bird that used to work here. She wants to see you and says it’s urgent.’

Vinny sighed. Karen was the stripper he had slept with a couple of times. She had become a bit obsessed with him after their last night of passion, and had spouted her mouth off to all the other strippers, so Vinny had promptly sacked her. ‘Tell her I ain’t here,’ Vinny ordered his brother.

‘I’ve already told her you are here. I ain’t going back down there, Vin. You shagged her, so she’s your problem,’ Roy chuckled.

With only a towel around his waist to cover his nakedness, Vinny ran down the stairs and flung open the big metal door. ‘If you’ve come to ask for your job back, the answer is no. I told you what would happen if you started blabbing about what had happened between us, didn’t I?’

Ignoring the callous tone in Vinny’s voice, Karen brushed past him and stepped inside the club.

‘What do you think you’re fucking doing?’ Vinny spat.

Karen looked Vinny in the eyes and smirked. 'I'm having a chat with the father of my unborn baby.'

'You what?'

'You heard. I'm pregnant, and it's yours. Congratulations, Vinny.'

Absolutely starving after driving up to Carnaby Street and back, Michael and Kevin bumped their mopeds onto the pavement and parked them outside Mary and Donald's café.

'Wow, this looks well ace compared to when Old Jack had it. You never told me they had a jukebox,' Kevin said, highly impressed.

'I ain't been in here since it re-opened, but my mum has and she said the food's really nice,' Michael informed his pal.

Unaware that Michael was a Butler, Mary took his and Kevin's order. 'Two cheeseburgers and chips, love,' she said to Donald.

'How are the kids? Have you checked on them again?' Donald asked, putting the burgers into the frying pan.

'Nancy's OK, still absorbed in her Enid Blyton book, but Christopher is in bed, Donald. He didn't eat any lunch again either, and he's started to worry the bloody life out of me.'

Donald turned away from the cooker and hugged his wife to his chest. Ever since the two incidents involving the Butler family, both of their children had changed dramatically. Nancy was still friendly with Brenda at school, but even though she seemed happy enough in herself, all she ever seemed to want to do these days was lose herself in books.

Christopher, on the other hand, was not happy in himself. He had lost a hell of a lot of weight in the past couple of weeks, looked pale, was extremely withdrawn, and it was an effort to get him to school in the mornings. Christopher had always been an adventurous boy who loved the outdoors, but not any more. Whatever he had seen outside that club, and the interrogation by the police afterwards, had obviously knocked the stuffing out of the poor child.

'I think perhaps in the new year we should consider selling this café and moving to a different area, Mary. It's too dangerous around here to bring up our children. There are far too many unsavoury characters.'

Mary looked at her husband in horror. Their business was barely a month old, but it was booming, and she had settled well in East London. 'Don't be daft, Donald. I'll speak to Christopher, he'll be fine. As for Nancy, I'm glad she's got into her books rather than raking the streets. You wait until tomorrow when they open all their nice presents. We have never been able to afford to give them much before, have we? Once Santa has been, they'll perk up no end. You mark my words.'

Not sharing his wife's optimism, Donald turned around to flip his burgers.

Because of recent events, George Geary didn't want to pick up his monthly bung from the club any longer. He was too frightened of being spotted there, so insisted that Vinny meet him at the entrance of a park a few miles away.

Vinny sat in the chief inspector's car and listened to what he had to say, while nodding politely. Geary had a habit of trying to dress things up to make it look like he had found out lots more information than he had, so he could suck more money out of his victim. 'So, what you're trying to say, George, is you have no idea where any of the Prestons are? Including Johnny, right?'

'Well yes, but that doesn't mean that I haven't got a few leads on the go,' Geary said, licking his lips in anticipation of what sort of Christmas bonus he might be getting.

'And what about that poor bloke who was murdered? Does your mob still think I had something to do with it? Just because it happened near my club?'

'Well, I would be lying if I said they didn't still see you as a suspect, Vinny, but to be honest they are concentrating more at the moment on finding the bloke who was with Dave Phillips at the time of the attack.'

‘Perhaps you boys in blue have been barking up the wrong tree all along then, George? Don’t you think it’s strange that whoever was with the deceased did a runner? Perhaps that’s your murderer?’ Vinny suggested, handing over a wad of notes.

When Geary began counting the money, Vinny smirked. ‘There’s a fifty on top of your usual as a Christmas drink, George. You find out where those Prestons are for me and there’ll be an even bigger drink in it for you.’

George Geary was not amused. He had put his neck on the line sniffing around for snippets of information to throw Vinny’s way, yet all he was being given for his trouble was a measly fifty quid. He wasn’t stupid. He had spoken to a few of his colleagues over in South London.

When Vinny tried to shake his hand, George snatched it away. ‘Don’t take me for a fool, Butler. Fifty sovs! Is that it? Do you not think I know that Dave Phillips and Johnny Preston were partners in crime, eh? What do you take me for?’

Vinny chuckled. ‘A bent chief inspector.’

‘Don’t fuck with me, Vinny, because I can have you banged-up for murder at the drop of a hat,’ George said, pointing a fat finger in Vinny’s face.

Realizing that his joke had been a bad one, Vinny apologized immediately. He also dug his hand back into his pocket and handed Geary another hundred pounds. ‘Look, I don’t want to fall out with you, George, but I swear I know nothing about the murder of Dave Phillips, OK?’

‘So, why do you want me to find Johnny Preston then?’

Vinny sighed, put on the most innocent expression he could muster, and stared George Geary straight in the eyes. ‘Because my father has impregnated Preston’s sister, Judy, and she has done a fucking runner. Would you not want to know where your future brother or sister would be living?’

Geary put the hundred pounds in his pocket, then held his right hand out to Vinny. ‘I’m sorry, boy. I’ll do my best to find them for you, OK? I’d best go now before my wife wonders where I’ve got to. Merry Christmas.’

Vinny got out of the chief inspector’s car and walked back to his own. Karen’s bombshell earlier had left him in a bit of a daze, and he really didn’t know if he was coming or bloody going.

Thrilled that the jukebox had some songs on it by their favourite band, The Who, Michael and Kevin put on ‘I Can’t Explain’, ‘Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere’, and ‘My Generation’.

‘Excuse me. Do you think you can turn it up a bit?’ Michael asked Mary.

‘I’ll turn it up a touch, but I can’t have it too loud because it’s not fair on the other customers,’ Mary replied, walking over to the jukebox.

‘Bleedin’ racket is giving me a headache. Don’t be turning it up no louder just because the murderer’s brother has asked you to,’ Mad Freda shouted out.

‘Who you calling a murderer? Michael’s brothers are good lads,’ Kevin said, sticking up for his best pal.

‘Who rattled your cage? You little black bastard,’ Freda spat back.

Michael grabbed Kevin by the sleeve of his parka. ‘Come on, mate, let’s go. Everyone knows that Freda is off her head, so there’s no point arguing with a bigoted nutjob. It’s like talking to a brick wall.’

Albie Butler was not in the best of moods. The doctors had told him he could be discharged before Christmas if he had somebody who could care for him until the plaster was taken off his legs. Trouble was, he couldn’t find anyone who could do so. Even his own brother had refused his pleas for help. Bert had made the excuse that his wife was ill.

Knowing that Queenie was his last chance of getting out of the hellhole of a hospital before Christmas, Albie decided to swallow his pride and call her.

‘What do you fucking want?’ Queenie hissed down the receiver.

‘I need a favour, love. The doctors said I can leave hospital if I’ve got somewhere to stay and a bit of help. Now, I know it’s over between us, but it won’t be for long, Queenie. As soon as I’m

up and about again, I'll find meself a little bedsit or something. Please help me, even if it's only for old time's sake?

Furious by the cheek of the untrustworthy waste of space, Queenie gave her deceitful husband what for. 'For all I care you can go and sleep under the arches with the rest of the fucking tramps. I will never allow you to darken my doorstep again, you dirty old toad. You're dead as far as me and my sons are concerned. Even little Brenda don't ask about you no more. I hope you rot in that hospital, and I pray you get bedbugs and sores as well. I'm hanging up now. Happy Christmas, you old cuntbag.'

When the line went dead and the nurse wheeled the phone away, Albie couldn't stop the tears running down his cheeks. He didn't want to spend his Christmas in bloody hospital. Now his family had disowned him, he had no visitors at all, and couldn't even get somebody to sneak him in a bottle of brandy.

Old Mr Perry opened one eye. He had been pretending to be asleep, but he had heard Albie ask Queenie if he could move back in with her. It was now time for one of his little sing-songs. 'Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do. I'm half crazy all for the love of you.'

Unable to take any more of Mr Perry, or life in general, Albie put his hands together and said a little prayer. 'Just let me croak it, God. Please, just let me fucking die, so I can get some bastard peace.'

Absolutely seething over what they'd just heard, Queenie and Vivian marched into the café like two bulls in a china shop.

'See you, you fucking old cow. I have just about had enough of you slandering my family. Who do you think you are, eh? My boys are good boys. And how dare you call Kevin a black bastard, you bigoted old hag,' Queenie yelled, her face dangerously close to Freda's.

Pushing her dinner plate away, Freda stood up. She was a stout woman with more than a bit of meat on her, whereas Queenie and Vivian were skinny as rakes. 'I ain't frightened of you, you pair of old dragons. Ruined my beloved Whitechapel, you and that scum you raised have.'

When Queenie and Vivian both lunged at Freda, Mary screamed in fright.

'What the hell is going on?' Donald asked, running out of the kitchen with a tea towel in his hand.

'Oh my God, Donald. Do something,' Mary shrieked hysterically, when a cup and saucer got smashed in the fracas.

Sturdy or not, Freda was no match for Queenie and Vivian, and was already lying on the floor with her legs open, showing her bloomers.

Being Christmas Eve afternoon, the café was empty now, so Donald had no alternative other than to break up the three brawling women himself.

Nancy and Christopher had both heard the commotion and, petrified, they ran down the stairs. 'What's happening, Mummy?' Nancy screamed, when she saw Vivian hit her father with her umbrella.

'Get out,' Donald shouted, as he grabbed Vivian's wrists to stop her from hitting him again.

Thinking that his father might get stabbed and die like the man outside the snooker club, Christopher put his hands over his eyes. 'Leave my dad alone,' he screamed.

When Freda suddenly leapt up and grabbed Queenie around the throat, Mary was rather relieved to see Vinny Butler barge through the café door. 'Mum, Auntie Viv, get in the car now,' he barked.

'And don't bloody well come back. You are officially barred from my premises,' Donald spat, as the two women stopped fighting and dusted themselves down.

'Watch it, mate. That's my mother and aunt you are talking to,' Vinny hissed. He had been stuck in traffic outside and had only glanced inside the café to see if he could see little Christopher, when he had spotted his aunt attacking Donald with her umbrella.

'Come on, Queenie. The food was shit in here anyway,' Vivian said, grabbing her sister by the arm.

'Yep. You're right. That last sandwich we had in here was fucking rotten,' Queenie lied.

Seeing Christopher standing behind the counter with his mother and sister, Vinny took a twenty-pound note out of his pocket, screwed it up, and chucked it on the floor at Donald's feet. 'That's to pay for any damage and whatever's left, give it to your kids as a Christmas present,' he said, generously.

'Silence money, that is. I know that Christopher witnessed you murder that man, 'cause I bloody saw him standing there,' Freda yelled.

Absolutely terrified of Vinny, and unable to cope with the lie he had told, Christopher burst into tears and ran up the stairs.

'Get out, all of you. Get out now,' Donald bellowed.

Heads held high, Queenie and Vivian strutted out of the door as proud as peacocks.

'And I don't want your dirty money,' Donald said, picking up the twenty-pound note and chucking it back at Vinny.

Vinny did not like Donald one little bit. In his eyes he was nothing more than a jumped-up pompous prick. If it hadn't been for the fact that Christopher had lied on his behalf, Vinny would have upped him there and then. 'The money's yours, if you don't want it, give it to your kids,' he ordered.

'Am I barred too?' Freda asked Donald.

'Yes. Get out,' Donald yelled.

Terrified that Donald and Vinny were now going to start fighting, Mary took Nancy upstairs. 'I don't like it here, Mummy. Can we please move back to Stoke Newington?' the girl sobbed.

Realizing that they now had no spectators, Vinny gave Donald his special stare. 'I'd watch your back if I was you, mate. No-one speaks to my mother and aunt like shit and gets away with it, and I mean fucking no-one.'

When Vinny walked out and slammed the door, Donald quickly locked it, then crouched down with his head in his hands. They had only been in Whitechapel for a short while and already their lives were in ruins. There was no way back after today's events. Whether Mary liked it or not, Donald was determined to put his foot down now. The quicker he got his family away from this God-forsaken area, the better.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Queenie Butler absolutely loved Christmas. The festive season was all about family, and there was nothing she enjoyed more than having all her brood around her. She opened the oven door to check on the sausage rolls and mince pies. Most women that she knew did the bulk of their cooking on Christmas Eve, so all they had to concentrate on the following day was cooking their vegetables. Not Queenie though. She had been up since six pottering about in the kitchen as she wanted everything to be nice and fresh. Only the best for her family.

Queenie grinned as Vivian let herself in and Lenny bounded up to her. ‘Has Santa been yet, Auntie Queenie? Mummy said he was delivering my presents to your house this year because he knew I would be here.’

‘Yes, Santa’s been, but he told me to tell you that you’re not allowed to open your presents until Vinny and Roy arrive,’ Queenie said, giving her wonderful nephew a loving hug.

‘Vinny not here yet? I hope he still ain’t got the hump with us,’ Vivian said, referring to the altercation in the café the previous day.

Vinny had been none too pleased when he had driven his mum and aunt home. ‘Why did you have to go in there of all places and kick off? You know their little boy lied for me in the identification parade. Think before you act in future, for Christ’s sake,’ Vinny had bellowed.

Queenie sent Lenny upstairs to tell Brenda and Michael to get their skates on, then turned to her sister. ‘Vinny’ll be fine, Viv. Loves the bones of me and you, you know he does. I’m sure he had something else on his mind yesterday and that’s why he went on the turn. Them people in the café won’t kick up no fuss. Didn’t you see the petrified look on that Donald’s face when you started whacking him with your broolly?’

Vivian couldn’t control the fit of giggles that followed. ‘And what about when you punched him in the side of the head? That overbearing wife of his started squealing like a pig.’

Laughing hysterically, Queenie held her crotch with one hand to prevent herself wetting her knickers, clinging onto her sister’s arm with the other. ‘What are we like, eh Viv?’

‘Salts of the earth, Queenie. Salts of the earth, girl,’ Vivian roared.

Less than a mile down the road, the festive spirit in the Walker household was anything but jovial.

‘Well?’ Donald asked, when Christopher pulled the wrapping paper off the plastic policeman’s helmet.

Unable to stop himself, Christopher burst into uncontrollable tears. How could he ever wear that hat and join the police force now after he had told such an awful lie?

‘Whatever’s the matter, love?’ Mary asked, holding her sobbing son in her arms.

Christopher could hide the truth no longer. ‘I lied to the police. Vinny did kill that man. I saw him do it.’

Outraged by his son’s confession, Donald let out a few expletives, then clouted the boy around his ear. ‘How could you lie to the police, Christopher? Your mother and I brought you up to be honest. Disgusted with you, I am. Bloody appalled!’

When Nancy began to cry as well, Mary ordered her husband to calm himself. ‘Hitting Christopher is not the answer here, Donald. You need to take him down to the police station to sort this mess out once and for all.’

‘Why did you lie to us all, boy? Why?’ Donald bellowed, his face red with temper.

‘Vinny threatened to hurt you, Mum and Nancy if I told the truth. Please don’t tell the police, Dad. Vinny scares me so much,’ Christopher begged.

Donald paced up and down the room in a total frenzy.

‘It’s OK. It’s not your fault,’ Mary soothed, putting a comforting arm around her son.

‘Please can we go back to Stoke Newington, Mum? Me and Christopher hate living here,’ Nancy pleaded.

‘Let’s see what happens after your dad has spoken to the police, love,’ Mary croaked, in a voice that sounded nothing like her own.

Donald turned to his wife. ‘I am not going to the police. Our lives will be hell if Christopher now admits to what he saw. He will be tarnished as a liar for the rest of his life, and we will forever be looking over our shoulders for repercussions from the Butler family.’

‘Well, what do you suggest we do then, Donald? A man has died. We can’t just let his killer roam the streets,’ Mary pointed out.

‘Oh, yes we can. We have to for our own safety. I will not have my children’s lives put in danger, Mary. We must pack up our belongings and leave this café immediately. We can then put the property on the market, and start afresh in a much nicer area.’

‘But we can’t just do a moonlight flit, Donald. I love this café. You know I do.’

‘And I love my children and you, Mary, which is why we have to leave.’

‘I’m so sorry I lied to you, Dad,’ Christopher cried. He felt so guilty. Everything was his fault.

Donald crouched down and stared his son in the eyes. ‘You did what you thought was right to protect your family, son, and I’m sorry that I hit you. What you told us today, I want you to now forget about. Can you do that for me?’

Relieved that he wasn’t about to be carted off to the police station, Christopher managed a weak smile. ‘Yes, Dad.’

Donald stood up. ‘And that goes for all of us. What Christopher admitted to today, I never want to hear mentioned again. Do we all agree on that?’

When her mother nodded her head, Nancy did the same.

‘Right, that’s settled then. Now, let’s start packing. The quicker we get out of this hellhole, the better.’

Donald fitted as many of his family’s belongings into the boot of the car as he could, then darted back into the café. Being Christmas Day, the street was empty, and that had pleased him immensely.

‘Where are we going to live then, Dad?’ Christopher asked chirpily. The thought of never having to see Vinny Butler again was already a weight off his young shoulders.

‘We are going to stay with your Auntie Phyllis in Ilford for a couple of days, and once the Christmas period is over, I will find us a place of our own to live.’

When Donald ordered the children to get in the car, Mary looked at her husband in despair.

‘I know you’re upset, my darling, but we will open another café one day, I promise you that,’ Donald said, sadly.

Unable to stop herself, Mary turned around to take one last look at her broken dream. She then burst into a sea of tears.

Vivian wiped the last of the dishes with the tea towel, then patted her bloated stomach. ‘Bleedin’ handsome that turkey, weren’t it? Melted in me mouth, it did. You cooked that to a tee.’

Ignoring the compliment, Queenie whispered in her sister’s ear. ‘Something is wrong with my Vinny today. He ain’t himself, you know, and he left all his Christmas pudding. He always eats his pudding, Vivvy.’

‘Perhaps he was full up, Queenie. It was a big dinner you cooked. Vinny seems all right to me. He’s been laughing and joking with the kids all day,’ Vivian whispered back.

Queenie shook her head. Nobody knew her Vinny like she did and something was troubling him. ‘Come on, let’s go and put some music on in the lounge.’

The sing-a-long was still going strong two hours later. Michael had bought his mum a Gracie Fields album for Christmas and Queenie and Vivian were even doing the hand movements as they sang ‘Wish Me Luck As You Wave Me Goodbye’ for the fourth time at the top of their voices.

‘Can we please have some rock and roll on now, Mum?’ Lenny asked impatiently, tugging on Vivian’s arm.

‘No. I want to play the Beatles,’ Brenda whinged.

‘Let Lenny put his rock and roll on first, Bren, then you can put your Beatles on straight after,’ Queenie ordered.

When the sound of Buddy Holly filled the lounge, Queenie proudly studied her boys. All three were incredibly handsome and looked so smart today. Vinny and Roy were always suited and booted, but even Michael was dressed up in his blue tonic suit and as he discussed a bit of business regarding the club with Roy, Queenie thought how grown-up he suddenly seemed.

Aware that Vinny wasn’t really listening to his brothers’ conversation, Queenie watched him light up his cigar. He looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders as he took his first puff and she wondered if it was to do with the man he had accidentally stabbed to death.

Even though as a mother Queenie knew you should love all your children equally, she had always had a special bond with her Vinny. He was her first-born, so surely the way she felt about him was understandable?

‘You OK, Mum?’ Vinny asked, clocking his mother staring at him.

Queenie jumped out of the armchair and gestured to her eldest.

Vinny followed his mum upstairs and sat awkwardly on the edge of her bed. ‘You’re not missing Dad, are you?’ he asked her.

‘You having a bleedin’ laugh, or what? Best Christmas I’ve ever had without that drunken old drop-out sitting in the chair scratching his cobbles.’

Vinny chuckled.

‘What’s up, boy? You ain’t yourself today. Are you still annoyed with me and Vivvy for kicking up a stink in that café?’

‘Don’t be daft. I could never have the hump with you and Auntie Viv for long.’

‘Well, what is it then? Is it that man who died? You can’t blame yourself for that, Vinny. It was two against one, and you never meant to kill him. It was an accident, son.’

Vinny took a deep breath. He had to tell somebody his little secret, and there was nobody in the world better to confide in than his beloved mother. ‘I’ve got a girl pregnant, and she wants to keep the baby,’ he blurted out.

Queenie was momentarily stunned. Since that little slag Yvonne Summers had broken Vinny’s heart many years ago, she had never even known him to court again. ‘Who is she, boy? Why didn’t you tell me you had a girlfriend?’

Vinny put his head in his hands and propped his elbows on his knees. ‘She ain’t my girlfriend, Mum. She is a pretty girl who works at the club who I’ve had a couple of flings with.’

‘Well, why didn’t you put a thingy on the end of it?’ Queenie asked, accusingly.

‘I did, well, apart from the once. What am I gonna do, Mum? I’ve offered her big bucks to get rid of the kid, but she knocked the dosh back.’

Unable to stop herself, Queenie slapped her pride and joy around the face to bring him to his senses. ‘You will not kill my grandchild, Vinny. I will not allow that to happen.’

‘But, I don’t even like the girl, Mum. I ain’t getting lumbered with her for the rest of my life.’

‘Who is she? Is she a decent girl?’

Feeling more embarrassed than ever before, Vinny shook his head. ‘No, she’s a stripper.’

Instead of scolding him for being stupid as her son expected her to, Queenie squeezed both of his hands and looked him in the eyes. ‘Buy the child off her, boy. Offer her what she wants to give birth to it, then I’ll bring it up for you.’

Vinny was astounded by his mother’s strange suggestion. ‘I can’t do that, Mum. I’m only twenty and I don’t want no ties.’

‘It won’t be your tie, it’ll be mine. You listen to me, Vinny, and you listen good and proper. You need something in your life to calm that temper of yours down. Being a father will save you from going to prison, I guarantee that. God works in mysterious ways, and this will prove to be your saviour, I just know it will. Look how good you are with kids. Lenny worships the ground you walk on, so imagine having a little Champ running around who is actually your own. You can’t murder your own child, boy. That baby will be my first grandchild and I would never forgive you if you took that away from me.’

Not wanting to admit to his mum that he had thought about bumping off Karen and the baby by drowning them in the Thames, Vinny suddenly felt a surge of guilt and had tears in his eyes.

‘Don’t get upset, boy. Everything will be all right, your mum will make sure of that,’ Queenie said, cradling him to her chest.

Vinny quickly pulled himself together. His mother was never wrong. Whatever advice she had ever given him in the past had always been proven as sound, so why should he doubt her wisdom this time round?

‘Well? What you gonna do?’ Queenie asked.

Vinny smiled at her. ‘I will sort out a deal with Karen and then we will bring up my baby together, Mum.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

Summer 1971

Nancy Walker felt a surge of excitement as she took in the electric atmosphere of the funfair. The waft of fried onions hung heavily in the air, music was being played at full blast, and the sound of laughter was prominent wherever you walked. Nancy's dad had never allowed her go to the fair with just a friend before. He said the rides were run by gypsies and they preyed on innocent young girls like herself. It had been her mum who had come up trumps for her in the end. She had argued that now Nancy was sixteen and in full-time employment, she was old enough to make her own decisions.

'I just love the smell of fairgrounds, don't you?' Nancy said to her best friend, Rhonda Gibbs. Nancy had met Rhonda soon after her family had moved to Ilford from Whitechapel. They had been in the same class at school, and were rarely seen out and about without one another now. They even had jobs working side by side in their local Woolworth's store.

'Yep. I love the smell too. Shall we get some candy floss? Or a toffee apple?' Rhonda suggested.

Nancy giggled. 'We have come over here to see if we can find the men of our dreams, Rhon. Candy floss and toffee apples are hardly man magnets. If we are munching on them, we are gonna look like kids.'

'But you've already found the man of your dreams. You've got Roger,' Rhonda joked.

Nancy punched her pal playfully on the arm. Roger Robins was the son of her parents' friends, Margaret and Derrick. At twenty-one, Roger worked for a branch of Barclays Bank in London. On numerous occasions, he had invited Nancy to go dancing or to the pictures, but much to her parents' dismay, Nancy had politely declined.

With her size-eight figure, ample breasts, and long blonde hair, Nancy wanted a bit more out of life than boring Roger. The pop star Marc Bolan was Nancy's perfect vision of a man. Marc was wild, cool and handsome, everything that Roger wasn't. Nancy liked excitement and she would rather entertain a bad boy any day of the week than date some complete and utter bore.

'Wow! He's nice,' Rhonda exclaimed.

'Which one?'

'He's got shoulder-length dark hair and is standing by the coconut shy with a group of lads.'

Nancy surreptitiously glanced around. 'All of them have shoulder-length dark hair. What's he wearing?'

'A cream flowery-patterned shirt and brown flared trousers.'

Fashion had changed immensely since the sixties when drainpipe trousers and button-collared shirts had been all the rage for young men. The Mod era had also now come to an end and the hippy look had taken over as the new trend. Spotting the guy who Rhonda had referred to, Nancy screwed her face up. 'Nah. His nose is too big for his face, Rhon. You know I have a thing about little button noses.'

Hearing the current song by Middle of the Road being blasted out of the speakers on a nearby ride, both girls linked arms. Giggling, because they were aware that the group of boys were now watching them, Nancy and Rhonda began wiggling their hips and singing the words to 'Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep'.

Vinny and Queenie Butler smiled proudly at one another as Little Vinny put on his boxing gloves and started to spar with his Uncle Roy. Roy was kneeling on the carpet and when his nephew caught him on the chin, Roy fell backwards to pretend he had been knocked out cold.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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