



If you live for
your family,
would you die for
your family?

The Victim

Kimberley
CHAMBERS

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Kimberley Chambers

The Victim

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If you live for your family, would you die for your family? Life is looking bleak for Frankie Mitchell. Not only has she lost custody of her two children to their sadistic father, gypsy Jed O'Hara, she is also pregnant and banged up in Holloway awaiting trial for attempted murder. In Frankie's absence, her father, underworld boss Eddie Mitchell, is determined to get his own back. Eddie plans the O'Haras' demise slowly and precisely. But when he finds out a secret and learns the real reason why his daughter is in the slammer, all hell breaks loose. Essex has never seen anything like the bloodbath that follows, but is either family capable of winning this long-running feud, or will they all become the victims of their past mistakes? The Mitchells & O'Haras Trilogy

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THE VICTIM

Copyright

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Dedication

Epigraph

A strong, successful man is not the victim of his environment. He creates favourable conditions. His own inherent force and energy compel things to turn out as he desires.

Orison Swett Marden

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PROLOGUE

Trussed up like a dead chicken, the man was in agony as he lay on the cold, concrete floor. His left arm was definitely broken, and he suspected his right leg could be as well. As his captor picked up the gun and pointed it at him, the man shut his eyes. His colourful life had finally caught up with him; there was no way out this time. Images of his family flashed through the man's mind. He pictured his beautiful wife and children whom he loved so very much. He wasn't afraid of death – he never had been – but he was very afraid of never seeing his family again.

Laughing at the man, his captor aimed a kick at his head and put the gun back down on the floor. The captor had waited years for this moment and he wanted to torture his prey as much as possible before he finally killed him off.

The man opened his eyes again. Every second that passed seemed like a minute and every minute like an hour.

Out of the shadows, the captor's accomplice reappeared. 'You not killed him yet? What you waiting for?' he asked.

The captor laughed, his tone full of evil. 'I was waiting for you. I thought you'd wanna watch the cunt take his last breath an' all,' he replied, picking up the gun once more.

The man clenched his eyes firmly shut as he felt the steel of the metal barrel pushed into his temple. This was it now, and with his past sins, he wondered if God would accept him in heaven or banish him to hell.

The captor put his finger on the trigger and ordered the man to open his eyes. He wanted to feel his anguish, see his fright.

'Wanna make one last wish?' he said mockingly.

'Go fuck yourself,' the man croaked. He had never bowed down to anyone in his life and he wasn't about to start doing it on his deathbed. If he was going to die, then he would die the way he had lived, with pride.

Hearing four gunshots, the man shut his eyes and prayed. He was no Bible-puncher, had never really believed in God, but what choice did he have now? Surprised that he wasn't feeling even more pain, the man wondered if he was already dead. Did the pain start to leave your body as your spirit left the earth? he wondered.

Frightened to open his eyes in case he came face to face with the devil, the man froze as he heard a familiar voice. It couldn't be! He must be dreaming – he had to be. He opened his eyes and gasped. This was no dream and, in that split second, the man realised that there must be a God after all.

CHAPTER ONE

1993

Eddie Mitchell's mind was working overtime as his motor crawled towards his aunt's house in Whitechapel. The A13 was chocka with roadworks, as per usual, and the five miles an hour he was able to drive gave him plenty of time to ponder over his decision.

For the first time since his father had been murdered and Eddie had taken control of the family firm, he'd been stumped over what he should do. He knew what he wanted to do – he wanted to wipe out every single one of the bastard O'Haras but due to what his dickhead brothers had done, that was now impossible for the time being.

Rubbing his tired eyes, Eddie thought back to the past. The feud with the O'Haras had originally started in 1970. At the time, Ed's father Harry was running an extremely successful pub protection racket in the East End of London, until one day a bunch of travellers turned up out of nowhere and tried to muscle in on their patch.

Ed and his brothers, Paulie and Ronny, had all worked for Harry at the time and an all-out war with the travellers to take control soon followed.

The O'Hara firm was run by the old man, Butch, but it was his son, Jimmy, whom Eddie despised the most. Ed still bore the scars of his tear-ups with Jimmy, but at the time he'd got his own back by putting Jimmy in hospital for a long spell. Not many moons later the O'Haras disappeared. Harry, Ed's father, finally got rid of them by shooting Butch in the foot. Ed thought he'd seen the last of them but, unfortunately for him, he hadn't.

It was many years later, when Ed was living in Rainham with his beautiful wife, Jessica, and their twins, Frankie and Joey, that Jimmy O'Hara reappeared. He bought a house nearby, so they became neighbours. A kind of truce was called and was sort of kept until Ed's daughter Frankie began dating Jed, Jimmy's youngest son. Then all hell broke loose.

The ringing of his mobile phone snapped Eddie out of his daydream. It was his fiancée, Gina, whom he'd sent away for safety reasons while he sorted things out. 'All right, sweetheart? How's tricks?'

'Oh, Ed. Claire's gone back to work today and I'm so bloody bored. I miss you so much and I swear I can look after myself, so please let me come back home. If I leave now, I could be back by teatime.'

Eddie sighed. He missed Gina dreadfully and the decision he'd made was partly because of that. 'Listen, I'm nearly at me aunt's now. I've come up with a plan that I'm gonna put to the lads and hopefully that will set the ball rolling so you can come back home. It won't be today though, babe. Stay put for now and hopefully you'll be home by the weekend. I have to be sure we're all safe first, so just trust me on this one, Gina.'

Eddie and Gina continued their conversation until he pulled up outside his Auntie Joan's gaff. When Ed's father was alive, he'd always insisted that any important meetings should take place in a room upstairs in Joanie's house and Ed had continued that tradition.

'You can never trust too many eyes and ears,' was Harry Mitchell's motto.

Ed said goodbye to Gina, then hugged his aunt as she opened the front door. She'd been baking, as usual, and the smell of her house was always a comfort to him. Joanie had brought him up as a kid after his mum had died of TB, and she was very special to Eddie.

'I've made you two plates of sandwiches and some rock cakes. Now you go on up, 'cause the boys have been waiting ages.'

Eddie took the stairs two at a time and entered what he called their office. The room hadn't been decorated since the seventies and Ed liked it that way, as it reminded him of the good old days

when his old man was still alive. A large mahogany table sat in the centre of the room, with eight mahogany chairs around it. An old-fashioned bar stood in the right-hand corner and, apart from a massive picture of Harry Mitchell, which Eddie had blown up as a tribute and had placed on the main wall, the room had little else in it.

‘What time do you call this?’ Gary asked jokingly.

Eddie sat down at the head of the table. The firm at present only consisted of four of them. Himself and Raymond, who was Jessica’s brother, and his two eldest sons from his first marriage, Gary and Ricky.

Ricky poured everybody a neat Scotch and then opened the door so Joanie could bring in the sandwiches and cakes.

‘Well, what you decided?’ Gary asked as soon as the door was shut.

‘Let’s eat first and talk after,’ Ed replied.

Raymond studied Eddie carefully. He knew Ed better than anyone, probably even better than Eddie’s sons did. When Eddie had mistakenly shot and killed Jessica, Ray had never envisaged being good pals with Ed again or returning to the firm, but he had done both, and was now raring to go. In Raymond’s eyes, Jessica’s death had been Jed O’Hara’s fault, not Eddie’s, and for the sake of his sister’s memory, Raymond now wanted revenge. Not even remotely hungry, Ray slung his sandwich back onto the plate.

‘For fuck’s sake, Ed, spill the beans. What we gonna do?’

Eddie pushed his plate away and sipped his Scotch. ‘I’ve thought long and hard about this and I think I should go round to Jimmy O’Hara’s house and call a truce. I shall tell him he can do what he wants with Paulie and Ronny. It’s the only way forward – for now, at least.’

Raymond was gobsmacked and Gary and Ricky looked at their father in complete and utter horror. Gary was the first to break the silence.

‘Have you fucking lost your marbles or what, Dad? How can you go round O’Hara’s house and shake his hand when he’s responsible for our whole family falling to pieces? Not only is Jessica dead because of them cunts, Frankie’s in Holloway and her kids have been kidnapped by the pikey bastards. You’ll mug us right off if you call a truce – O’Hara’ll think we’re a proper bunch of pricks.’

‘I agree with Gal. What about you?’ Ricky asked Raymond.

‘I want to get revenge for Jessica, but we have to get them kids back before we do anything else. She would have loved them grandchildren of hers and getting them home safe and sound would have been her priority.’

Eddie held his palms face up. ‘Hold your horses for a minute, the lot of ya. I run this firm and I make the decisions.’

Gary shook his head. ‘How can you offer your own brothers up on a plate, Dad? I know they’re a pair of fucking idiots, but they’re still our flesh and blood.’

Eddie’s eyes clouded over. He immediately stood up, picked up his glass and threw it at the wall, purposely missing Gary’s head by only inches. ‘Do you think I really want my brothers dead? No, they might be a pair of bell ends, but they’re still family. Remember, they’re in Belmarsh at the moment, and I know every face in there who’ll keep an eye on ’em for me. Use your loaves, lads, O’Hara is a fucking pikey and all he probably knows is two bob mugs in there. He ain’t gonna have many pals in a cat-A nick like Belmarsh, is he? If, by hook or by crook, O’Hara does somehow get to Paulie and Ronny, then that’s life, but I’m confident he ain’t got the brawn. But if he has and he wanted to do that, he could do it without my permission anyway. It’s our safety I’m more concerned about now. I want Gina back home with me and your boys alive. Raymond has got a nipper on the way – he don’t need the grief – and let’s not forget about Joey. Who’s to say that O’Hara wouldn’t try to top him? He’s an easy target, ain’t he? The way I see it, lads, is by pretending to hand Ronny and Paulie to O’Hara on a plate, we won’t have to look over our shoulders.’

Raymond immediately nodded his head in agreement. Gary and Ricky just stared at one another.

‘Do you think O’Hara will swallow it?’ Ray asked Eddie.

Eddie shrugged. ‘I don’t see why not. It weren’t us that killed his son or his grandkid, it was Ronny and Paulie. He knows I ain’t had fuck-all to do with my brothers for years, so why shouldn’t he swallow it? You gotta remember, Jimmy might be fuming, but he’s also grieving. He’s already lost two of his family and if he won’t accept my handshake, he knows the rest of ’em, including that rotten, fat, ugly wife of his, are in danger.’

Gary shook his head. ‘I think we’re all forgetting something ’ere. What are we meant to say to Frankie, Dad? She’s tried to kill Jed, he’s got her kids, so what do we do? Tell her that you’ve shook hands with his father and everything is fucking hunky dory now?’

Ordering Raymond to top all their drinks up, Eddie gave a false chuckle and, for the second time that day, his eyes clouded over. ‘Son, you’ve got a lot to learn about me. For now, what I propose we do is just a temporary answer to our current problems. Then we start planning, and I mean properly planning. We’ll take our time, we have no choice.’

Pausing momentarily, Eddie stood up and stared at his dead father’s photograph. He then placed his hand against his heart and turned to Gary and Ricky. ‘I swear on your grandfather’s grave, that one day I will get revenge for what the O’Haras have done to this family.’

He then turned towards Raymond. ‘And I promise you, Raymondo, that I will also get revenge for Jessica’s death. Believe me, I will personally fucking kill them pikey cunts one by one, and may God be my judge if I fail.’

CHAPTER TWO

Frankie sat bolt upright as the piercing screams of the new girl disturbed her wonderful illusion. She'd been dreaming of Georgie and Harry. They'd all been at the funfair together, and the reality of waking up and finding out that it wasn't real filled her with sadness. Frankie had been banged up for stabbing her then-boyfriend, Jed O Hara. On finding out that Jed was responsible for murdering her grandfather, Harry Mitchell, Frankie had tried to kill her evil ex and apart from now being parted from her children, the only regret Frankie had was that Jed had managed to cling to life.

'The fucking snakes, there's a load of 'em! Get the bastards off me!'

Closing her eyes, Frankie lay back down and pulled the covers over her head. There were no snakes of course, the new girl was just having withdrawal symptoms, which seemed to be a common occurrence on the hospital wing.

It was three weeks to the day since Frankie had had her second bail application rejected. In her first week in Holloway she'd been bullied something chronic, so she'd taken her father's advice, acted doolally and got herself put in the hospital wing.

As the girl in the next bed started screaming again, Frankie put her hands over her ears. The days she could handle, but she hated the nights. Most of the other inmates were heroin addicts. They were given methadone to suppress their withdrawal symptoms, but Frankie soon realised that the alcoholics were the worst. It was usually them that kept her awake all night with their hallucinations.

Aware that somebody had arrived to deal with the distressed inmate, Frankie pretended to be asleep. It was daylight now, but all Frankie wanted to do was shut her eyes and picture her beautiful children again.

'Wakey wakey, Mitchell. Get up and pack your stuff. I've just been informed there's a space waiting for you on the maternity wing. Sort yourself out and I'll come back to collect you as soon as I get the OK from the powers above.'

Frankie immediately leaped out of bed and, for the first time in days, smiled. She was just over twenty weeks pregnant now and the baby inside her was the only thing that had kept her going over the last few weeks. She had been doing buttons to move to the maternity wing. Surely in there she would meet some other nice inmates and they could discuss their kids and stuff.

With a spring in her step, Frankie packed her belongings up. She was done and dusted in ten minutes flat. She sat back down on her bed, rubbed her swollen tummy and whispered to her bump. 'Your father might have taken your brother and sister away from me, but he'll never get his evil hands on you. I still don't know if you're a little boy or a girl, but whatever you are, your mummy will love you dearly and you will belong to her.'

Unaware that his sister was about to be moved, Joey Mitchell opened the front door and gave his father a hug. He had barely seen his old man since Frankie's last court case and, seeing as they'd only recently been on good terms again, Joey had missed their new-found closeness.

Eddie kissed his son on the forehead and then shook Dominic's hand. Dom was Joey's boyfriend and when Ed had originally found out about his son's sexuality, he'd gone apeshit. Being a notorious East End gangster, Ed just couldn't deal with the fact that his sperm had produced a homosexual son, and it had taken a lot of pride for him to step down off his anti-gay soapbox.

Now things were different and even though Ed still couldn't quite understand his son's preferences, he'd learned to live with them. It also helped that Dominic was a lovely fella – so much so that Eddie often felt guilty for turning up at his flat that time and threatening to cut his cock off.

When Joey's Chihuahua ran into the hallway to greet him, Ed picked the dog up and kissed her on the nose. He'd always loved animals, especially dogs. 'Hello Madonna, my little darling,' he said, laughing.

Dominic grinned. 'I hope you're hungry, Ed. I've just made a big pot of chilli for lunch. I've used lean steak mince, of course. It's a wonderful recipe; my mother gave it to me.'

Eddie smiled. He was anything but hungry – he felt too worried to eat – but he didn't want to be rude. 'I could do with a drink first, actually. Listen, I need to speak to your boys, so get us all a drink and we'll chat before we have any grub.'

Joey sat down nervously on the sofa. His dad wasn't his usual jovial self and he hoped that whatever was wrong didn't involve Frankie. His twin sister had been through hell already and it would be awful if she had been beaten up in prison or something.

Dominic handed Eddie and Joey a bottle of lager each and sat on the armchair.

'Please tell me that nothing bad's happened to Frankie, Dad. I couldn't deal with her having any more bad luck.'

Eddie shook his head. 'Frankie's OK. She rang me yesterday. Look, I don't want you to worry about this, because it's probably just me being paranoid, but yesterday I went round to Jimmy O'Hara's to try and sort things out. Someone has to try and shovel up the mess your uncles have created, so I thought I'd offer him a truce.'

The colour drained from Joey's face. 'He didn't threaten you, did he?'

'No, he wasn't even there. The whole place was locked up, no one was there, so I rang Pat Murphy, who informed me that the O'Haras have gone away and they've been missing for over a week. Georgie and Harry are obviously with them, but no one seems to know where they've gone. I don't trust O'Hara – he's a snake, always has been – so I just want you and Dominic to be extra vigilant, in case they're planning any repercussions.'

'What! And you think they'd come here?' Dom asked anxiously.

'No, I don't. If Jimmy or Jed want anyone's blood, it's mine, not yours, but just watch your backs. I shouldn't think for a minute that they even have a clue where you live, but I don't trust the pike bastards. They're scum, the lowest of the low and I would never put anything past 'em.'

When the room fell silent, Joey picked Madonna up and held her to his chest. 'If anyone tries to hurt you, I'll kill them,' he whispered in her ear.

Aware that his boyfriend was worried, Dominic broke the ice. 'So how's Gina, Eddie? And when are you both going to let me and Joey take you to that fabulous new restaurant we told you about?'

'Gina's fine. She's staying at her mate Claire's at the moment, but as soon as I sort things with O'Hara, she'll come back home. To be honest, I really miss her; I'm rattling around like a lost sheep in that cottage on me own.'

Joey handed Madonna to Dominic. 'Take her outside for a wee-wee, Dom. I need to have a quiet word with my dad.'

When Dominic left the room, Joey closed the door and turned to Eddie. 'I didn't want to say too much in front of Dom 'cause, unlike our family, his parents are so normal, but what I don't understand is how is Jimmy O'Hara going to accept a truce when Uncle Ronny and Paulie have killed his son and blown his grandchild to pieces?'

Eddie was a little taken aback. Unlike his other two sons, Gary and Ricky, Joey had rarely taken any interest in the family business or asked any questions in the past. Ed downed the rest of his lager and decided to be truthful with Joey.

'I'm going to offer O'Hara Ronny and Paulie on a plate. Tell him that what happened was fuck-all to do with me and if he wants revenge, it's all right to do whatever he wants to do to them. And before you call me a wrong 'un, Ronny and Paulie are in Belmarsh, where I know plenty of people who will watch their backs for me so O'Hara's henchmen can't get to 'em. What else can I say to the man, Joey? I have no choice.'

Joey had steel in his eyes as he faced his father. When he was a child, he'd been a proper crybaby and even now he'd sob at the drop of a hat, especially if it was a sad story or film where

someone was nasty to an animal. But at the end of the day, he wasn't a boy any more, he was a man. He might be gay, enjoy a normal life and detest violence, but he was still his father's son.

'Paulie and Ronny are both a pair of arseholes, always have been. I've never liked them and neither has Frankie. They haven't exactly got many good points, have they?'

Eddie threw an incredulous glance Joey's way. He couldn't quite believe what he was hearing and for a second he wondered if his son was taking the piss out of the callous way he'd sometimes behaved in the past.

'Are you having a laugh with me or what, Joey?'

'No, Dad. I'm deadly serious.'

Eddie scratched his head. It was a habit of his when he was struggling for the right words. 'Look, I know what you're saying, and yes, your uncles are both arseholes, especially Ronny, but they're still our flesh and blood, son. Even though I'm gonna tell O'Hara it's OK to fucking top 'em, I don't think he has the power to do it. Once they come out of Belmarsh he might, but they're looking at life and until then, I think they're both safe. Whatever my or your opinion of 'em, I grew up with 'em, and you know how much I loved your grandad Harry. I can't, in reality, order a hit on me own, Joey, it ain't done in my circles.'

Joey faced his father with a nonchalant expression on his face. He walked towards him and placed his hands on Eddie's shoulders. 'Listen to me Dad, and listen carefully. I might not be part of your world, but I'm not stupid. If I was, I wouldn't be working in the Stock Exchange. I'm worried about us. Me, you, Frankie, Dom, Nan and Grandad. And let's not forget about Dom, Gina, Gary and Ricky. Mum's death toughened me up and I've thought about your world a lot since. Do you honestly think that if you offer O'Hara Paulie and Ronny and then he can't get to them, he's gonna fall for that? He won't. I barely know the man and even I know he won't. Frustration at not getting his own back will set in and then he'll look for other targets. You seem to be more concerned about Jimmy, but I know that Jed is the worst out of the lot, Dad. Frankie didn't tell me too much, but I know he's evil and he won't let something like this rest. Don't ask anyone to protect your brothers in prison. It's all their own doing, aint it? Let the O'Hara's have their revenge. If you don't, you're putting all our lives at risk.'

Frankie's good mood evaporated as she walked into the dormitory and saw who she'd be sharing with. The girl that had bullied and humiliated Frankie on her arrival at Holloway had been black and this girl was the same colour. Fearing the worst, Frankie smiled and nervously held out her right hand.

'Hi, my name's Frankie.'

As the girl stood up, Frankie was shocked by how short she was. She was no more than five feet tall, if that. With a mass of bushy afro hair and enormous breasts, she almost looked as though she was about to topple over. The girl smiled, and as she did, her face lit up. She had one of the most beautiful smiles that Frankie had ever seen, and perfect white teeth. As she began to speak, her voice had a slight Jamaican lilt to it.

'Thank you, Lord. I prayed last night that I wouldn't be saddled with another head case, and he must have listened because he sent me you. My name's Barbara, but you can call me Babs. Me and you, Frankie, are gonna get along just fine.'

Eddie arrived home, poured a large Scotch and sat at the kitchen table. The cottage seemed dismal and lonely without Gina's presence and he couldn't wait for her to return. Unable to stop thinking about what Joey had said earlier, Ed mulled over his words once more. The boy was right: if O'Hara couldn't get to Paulie and Ronny, he'd get his revenge elsewhere. With his conscience pricking him, Ed topped his drink up. If he ordered nobody to watch his brother's backs in Belmarsh, he was sure O'Hara could find somebody to get to them. The question was, could Eddie order his own brothers' death sentences? He was temporarily saved from feeling like an executioner by the shrill ring of his phone.

‘Ed, it’s Pat. Just a quick call to let you know that Jimmy’s home. They’re all back, including Jed and your grandkids. Apparently they’d spent the week with poor Marky’s wife and kids.’

‘Did you tell Jimmy that I wanna speak to him, Pat?’

‘No. To be honest, I don’t really want to get involved, mate. It’s awkward, because I’m friends with the both of yous. Having said that, I do think you need to sort it, Ed. I know you’re no man’s fool, but if I was you I’d get this shit sorted fast. Jimmy ain’t a man to be messed with, you know.’

Eddie ended the call and sat back down at the kitchen table. He could sense the threat in Pat Murphy’s voice: O’Hara had said something to him, that part was obvious. Furious with the decision he was now faced with, Ed slammed his glass down so hard that it shattered into pieces. The O’Haras were the bane of his life and he would never be truly happy until they were all dead.

Over in the maternity wing in Holloway, Frankie and Babs were getting along rather well. Frankie had been suspicious of Babs’ warm welcome at first, but the more she’d chatted to her, the more her earlier distrust had evaporated. Babs was six months into her pregnancy and, like Frankie, she was also the mother of two other children, a boy and a girl. The only subject they hadn’t yet discussed was how they’d both come to end up in prison. Frankie was the first to broach the subject.

‘So when is your court case, Babs? And how long have you actually been in Holloway?’

‘My trial is probably next year sometime. I’ve been in here four months, but I know I’m gonna get life.’

Frankie was gobsmacked. Babs seemed so nice, but she must have done something really bad to be looking at life. Sensing Frankie’s reluctance to ask her what she’d done, Babs started to open up. In the four months she had already spent in Holloway, she had never really talked about her crime. The other inmates all knew what she’d been charged with, but nobody knew why she had done it. Her usually bubbly expression disappeared and was instantly replaced by a look of sadness.

‘My first boyfriend, Dennis, was a bastard to me. He’s the father of my daughter, Matilda, and I met him when I was fifteen. As soon as I fell pregnant, the beatings started. He nearly killed me one time; pushed me down some concrete stairs and I was in hospital for nearly two month. He was Jamaican, like me, and involved with the Yardies, into drugs, prostitution, the works. Once he even made me sleep with a mate of his while he filmed it.’

‘Oh my God, that’s awful,’ Frankie said, shocked.

Months of not speaking about what had happened came bubbling to the surface and Babs was determined to share her burden with Frankie.

‘That’s nothing compared to what happened next. I contacted one of those women’s refuge places and they were brilliant. They put me in one of their safe houses and me and Matilda were so happy until Dennis turned up one day and set fire to the place with us inside. We managed to escape through a back window, but it were such an awful experience, Frankie. Even to this day, a whiff of smoke is enough to frighten the living daylights out of me.

‘The police never caught Dennis: he went on the run, and he knew the right people to protect him. Me and Matilda got moved again, this time to Surrey, but I could never say we were happy there. I used to sit in the dark most nights in case Dennis had found out where we were. Then, one fine day, a copper knocked at the door. Dennis had been found dead on the streets of Brixton. He’d OD’d on drugs, crack cocaine, and the police reckon he’d died in a house or flat and had been dumped on the pavement after his death. I was so happy. All I wanted was to move back near my family and friends, but Dennis dying just seemed too good to be true. I insisted on viewing his body – I needed to know it was definitely him – and when I saw his evil face in that morgue, I danced for joy, as I was finally free.’

‘So, how did you end up in here? The police didn’t accuse you of injecting him or something, did they?’

Babs shook her head. ‘Dennis died over ten years ago and I vowed never to get involved with any other man, but I was desperate for a brother or sister for Matilda, so I had a fling until I got what I wanted. Jordan’s dad was a guy called Brandon. I barely knew him, and I never told him Jordan

were his son. He seemed an OK sort of dude, but he lived with a girl. I doubt he would have been happy about it, as I'd told him I was on the pill. Me and the kids were then given a council house in Streatham and that was the happiest I've ever been in my life. There was a park nearby and because I never had much money, I used to buy a cheap loaf of bread and take the kids there to feed the ducks. Then one day I got talking to this guy. I'd seen him there before and he seemed so nice. He was great with the kids, especially Jordan.'

When Babs began to cry, Frankie sat on the bunk next to her and put a comforting arm around her shoulder. 'If it's too upsetting for you, don't tell me any more,' Frankie whispered.

'I want to. I need to tell someone,' Babs sobbed.

Trying her hardest to pull herself together, Babs continued her story. 'Unlike all my ex-boyfriends, Peter was a white dude. He was a bus driver and seemed such a kind, honest, down-to-earth person. I didn't rush into anything. I met him loads of times at the park before I agreed to go out on a date with him.'

'Ssh, it's OK. He can't hurt you no more, nobody can,' Frankie soothed, as Babs began to cry once again.

'I went out with Peter a whole year before I let him move in with me. He'd play football with Jordan, help Matilda with her homework, he seemed like the ideal stepfather. Then one day I was meant to be taking Jordan to his friend's birthday party. Peter had offered to look after Matilda and I told him I'd be back in a couple of hours. When I got to the party, they'd had to cancel it because the child's grandma had died suddenly. Jordan was upset, so I said we'd go home and Peter would take us all to the Wimpy. As I opened the front door, I could hear Matilda crying. I thought she'd fallen over and hurt herself, but as I listened more carefully I realised it was something much worse. "Please stop, Peter, you're hurting me," she was pleading. Twelve years old, that's all she was.'

'Oh my God,' Frankie whispered. She had guessed what was coming next.

'I told Jordan to be quiet and sit in the living room, then I took the dagger out of the drawer. It had once belonged to Dennis, but I had always kept it after I split up with him, as it made me feel safe. I crept upstairs and saw the bastard with my own eyes. Matilda was naked from the waist downwards and Peter was raping her. I tiptoed into the room and then I stabbed him in the back over and over again, until the breath and blood seeped out of him.'

Frankie was crying herself now. She thought she'd had it tough with Jed, but it was nothing compared to what poor Babs had been through. 'You won't get life. If you tell the jury the truth, they'll let you off, I know they will.'

'I can't. Apart from you, I've told nobody. I told the solicitor I killed Peter because he used to beat me up.'

A good judge of character, Frankie now decided that Babs was the real deal, totally genuine. She urged her to listen to what she had to say. 'I'll have a word with my dad if you like. He'll find you a good brief to represent you. Babs, you must tell the truth for the sake of your children. I know your mum is looking after them, but they need you, especially Matilda.'

Babs shook her head furiously, then put her hands protectively on her rounded stomach. 'I will never put my Matilda through a court case and let's not forget, I'm carrying that evil bastard's child. I love my children more than anything else in the world, and to protect them, I'm willing to keep my trap shut and do life.'

Eddie Mitchell stared at the clock on the kitchen wall. He had promised himself he would make a decision by midnight and he had ten minutes left to do so. He poured himself another Scotch and stared at the now empty bottle. Jessica used to hate him drinking the stuff, said it changed him as a person and made him violent. Well, tonight he'd done at least three quarters of a litre, but he wasn't drunk and had only been drinking to help him make a decision. Picking up his glass, Eddie walked into the lounge. A big photograph of his dad was on the opposite wall to Jessica's. It had been taken on his dad's sixtieth birthday at the restaurant where they'd all celebrated and Harry looked as large as

life, with a big grin on his face and a fat cigar in his hand. Ed stared at the photo and smiled sadly. He still missed his dad dreadfully and he would never rest until he found out who had murdered him so brutally. One day Ed would find out, that thought kept him going, and when he did, he would torture those responsible before he actually killed them. He began to speak, his voice full of emotion.

‘I’ve had to make a decision, Dad, and I want you to know that it’s been the most difficult one of my life. I would like to shoot every O’Hara tomorrow. I could easily kill the fucking lot of ’em, but I can’t because of everything that’s happened and I would hate to see Frankie’s kids end up in care. I’m gonna plan my revenge carefully. Last time when I tried to kill Jed, I went at it like a bull in a china shop and look what happened – I lost my beautiful Jessica and I’ll never forgive myself for that. This time around, I need a proper plan. Things have to be perfect and, when they are, I’ll use my loaf, keep my wits about me and strike. I hope you can forgive me for what I’m about to tell you, but there’s a good chance Ronny and Paulie will be arriving at the Pearly Gates soon. I don’t want that to happen and I’ll be devastated if and when it does, but I really do have little choice in the matter. Ronny and Paulie have dug their own graves, unfortunately, and I have to put the safety of my children first and also Gina and Raymond, who both mean the world to me. Please forgive me, Dad, and if you see Ronny and Paulie before me, tell ’em I love ’em and I’m sorry.’

CHAPTER THREE

‘Mummy! Come back, please, Mummy. Don’t leave me! I promise I’ll be good.’

Harry O’Hara woke up and rubbed his tired eyes. At three years old, Harry was eighteen months younger than his sister, Georgie. To look at they were chalk and cheese. Harry was a pale-skinned, chubby blonde boy, whereas Georgie was very tall for her age, skinny, with long, dark hair and dark skin. Harry got out of bed, toddled over to his sister and prodded her arm.

‘Georgie, what a matter?’

Georgie sat bolt upright and began to cry. She kept having the same awful nightmare. Her mum would come back home, then she would walk out and leave her again.

Harry clambered onto his big sister’s bed. Georgie was the only one who would give him a cuddle these days. His mummy used to give him loads, but whenever he asked his dad, nanny Alice, or grandad Jimmy for one, they all laughed at him. ‘Stop being such a sissy, Harry. You’re a big boy now and big boys don’t need cuddles. Cuddles are for babies and girls, you dinlo,’ his dad would tell him.

Georgie and Harry huddled together in silence. The last month had been awful for both of them. Firstly, their mum had disappeared, then on the day they’d found out that they had a brother called Luke, he’d had his brains blown out in front of them.

‘Are you thinking of Luke?’ Harry whispered.

Georgie shook her head. ‘I was thinking of Mummy.’

‘Can we go see her, Georgie?’

Georgie didn’t answer immediately. Nanny Alice had told her that her mum was in prison because she’d tried to kill her dad, but Georgie didn’t believe it. Her mum would never do something like that, she was too nice. Hearing movement on the landing outside, Georgie turned to her brother, so her mouth was next to his ear.

‘If I tell you something, you won’t tell anyone, will you, Harry?’

‘Promise, Georgie.’

Ever since Georgie first learned to walk, she’d had a habit of running away and exploring. Once, when her uncle Joey had taken her to a pub, she’d hidden in the woods, climbed up a tree and watched the police search for her. She loved an adventure; it was part of her nature.

‘You know yesterday when Grandad drove us home?’

Harry nodded.

‘I think I saw Nanny Joycie’s and Grandad Stanley’s house. It wasn’t far from here, so maybe we can run away and they can take us to see Mummy.’

For the first time in weeks Harry’s eyes lit up. He liked Nanny Joyce and Grandad Stanley and, most importantly, they always gave him cuddles. ‘Can we go there now?’ he whispered.

About to reply, Georgie was stopped in her tracks by the bedroom door opening.

‘Up you get, yous two. Come on, now. Nanny Alice is gonna do us all a nice big fry-up. Bath first, then breakfast after.’

When her nan turned her back, Georgie put her forefinger to her lips to warn Harry to keep schtum. She then held his hand and led him out of the bedroom.

Jimmy and Jed O’Hara had got up at the crack of dawn and gone over to the fields to check on the horses. It had been cousin Sammy’s job to feed them and keep an eye on them while Jimmy and Jed were away, but by the looks of the stallion lying on the grass, he hadn’t done a very good job.

Neither Jimmy nor Jed could be described as animal lovers. Jimmy owned a goat that he rather liked, but he’d sold all the dogs now, and the horses were just a way of making money.

Jed knelt down and looked into the stallion’s eyes. ‘He don’t look good, Dad. I think you’d better ring a vet.’

‘Nah, he’s had it, boy. It’ll be cheaper to shoot him meself,’ Jimmy replied.

As they headed off to get the gun they kept hidden nearby, the conversation turned to Alice.

‘She seems much brighter now, Jed. Did her the world of good spending time with Tina and the kids.’

Jed agreed. Tina was his brother Marky’s wife. The last month had been awful for all of them, none more so than himself. Marky had been murdered, then Jed’s son Luke had been shot by mistake. The bullets had been meant for Jed, and Lukey boy had died in Jed’s arms. Jed had thought he would never smile again at the time – he wished he was dead instead of his boy – but, unlike the boy’s mother, who had literally fallen to pieces, he’d had to pick himself up and carry on. As a proud travelling lad, he had no choice other than to put on a brave face, but what had happened was eating away at him inside, like a fast-spreading cancer, and he would never be truly happy until he got revenge for his brother and Lukey boy.

‘What’s happening with Sally? Why don’t you invite her round for dinner, that’ll cheer your mother up no end,’ Jimmy suggested.

Jed shrugged. Sally was Luke’s mother, and she was also pregnant with their second child. Unlike Frankie, whom his mother had despised, Sally got on like a house on fire with Alice.

‘Why you shrugging? You ain’t split up with her, have you?’

‘Nah, but I’ve barely seen her since Lukey boy died. I’ve only met up with her twice since her father came round and poked his fucking oar in. She’s still staying at his, and when I rang her earlier to tell her I was home, she came out with some cock and bull about having gut ache. I reckon her old man has told her to keep away from me.’

‘Or she could be telling the truth, Jed. Perhaps the girl ain’t well. How far gone is she now?’

Jed smirked. ‘I dunno. Men don’t take much notice of dates and times, do they? She’s probably about three month, at a guess, but what with that slag Frankie being pregnant at the same time an’ all, I didn’t really listen.’

As they reached the field again, Jimmy turned to his son and smiled. ‘I know it’s been a tough few weeks for you, boy, but you’ll get through this, I know you will. None of us will ever forget Lukey boy, he was a little diamond, a chavvie to be proud of, but you and Sally will have plenty more chavvies. Take my advice and look after that Sally – she’s a good girl, your mother likes her and you could do a lot worse.’

Without waiting for a reply, Jimmy marched over to the stallion, put the gun to its head and dispassionately shot it.

Eddie Mitchell was not in the best of moods. He’d drunk far too much Scotch the previous evening and even though he hadn’t felt drunk at the time, this morning it had made him feel sluggish and heavy-headed. Even a shower hadn’t made him feel any better; it had actually made him feel worse. Ed got dressed and studied himself in the mirror.

With his six-foot frame, his couple of days’ trademark stubble and his short dark hair, which he’d recently started to wear slicked back to cover the odd strands of grey, he looked good for fifty-three and he knew it. He’d always been broad-shouldered, but when he’d been banged up for accidentally killing his wife Jessica, he’d trained a lot in prison through boredom and he’d walked out of those gates with the toned body of a thirty-year-old.

Turning his head slightly to the right, Eddie fingered the scar down the left-hand side of his cheek. Women had always loved it – they said it made him look rugged – and men had always been jealous of it, wishing they had one to make them look as manly, but he’d always fucking hated it. It wasn’t the actual scar itself: if someone other than Jimmy O’Hara had put it there, he would have probably been quite proud of it, but the fact that his worst enemy had scarred him just reminded Eddie every day how much he hated O’Hara.

The shrill ring of the landline interrupted Eddie’s foul mood. It was Stuart, his old cellmate from Wandsworth.

‘One week to go. One week to go. I’m counting down the hours, and I can’t fucking wait,’ Stu sang to the tune of ‘Here Comes the Bride’.

Despite his own problems, Eddie had to laugh. Stu had recently been moved to an open prison and he seemed to have the use of a phone morning, noon and night.

‘What’s been happening, mate? How’s Gina?’ Stuart asked.

‘Yep, everything’s fine and Gina’s just popped to Tesco,’ Eddie lied. He wasn’t one for talking over prison phones and he hadn’t told Stu any of the recent gossip. He would tell him everything when he picked him up next week. ‘Listen, Stu, I’ve gotta shoot out, I’m running late as it is. Bell us later if you can and don’t worry, your bed’s all made up here and Gina insists you can stay as long as you like.’

Ending the call, Ed wanted to smash the phone against the wall as the bastard rang again. ‘What?’ he screamed into the receiver.

‘Ed, it’s me. Are you OK?’ Gina asked.

‘Sorry, babe. I thought it was one of the boys.’

‘When can I come home, Ed? I’m pulling my hair out here through boredom.’

‘Soon. I’m going to sort things out right now – that’s if I ever get off this poxy phone,’ Ed said sarcastically.

‘Oh, sorry, go on, you get off and ring me as soon as you get things sorted. I can’t wait to see you again. I love you, Ed.’

Eddie returned the compliment, apologised for being snappy, then ended the phone call. The thought of what he was about to do next was making him feel physically sick. What type of man signs his own brothers’ death warrants? he pondered, as he searched high and low for his keys. He found them down the side of the armchair and, as he stood up, he came face to face with his father’s photograph.

‘I’m so sorry. Please forgive me, Dad.’

Alice O’Hara was feeling more positive than she had in weeks. Her son and grandson being murdered had knocked her for six, but visiting Marky’s widow and his two sons had somehow helped her come to terms with her grief. Her daughter-in-law, Tina, was a tough cookie and she had given Alice a serious talking-to. Tina had made her realise that no amount of screaming, crying and self-pity were going to bring Marky or Lukey boy back and, for the sake of the rest of the family, she needed to get her act together.

Singing along to Hank Williams’ ‘Lovesick Blues’, Alice carried two large china plates over to the kitchen table. On one there were sausages and bacon and on the other black pudding and fried bread.

‘Get stuck in and I’ll bring the eggs and beans over in a tick,’ she said.

Georgie stared at the two big plates in horror. The meat was swimming in grease and she hated that black stuff and the horrible bread that her nan cooked.

‘Nan, can me and Harry have Rice Krispies instead?’ she asked.

‘Don’t start, Georgie. You need to get some meat on them bones of yours, so you eat what Nanny gives you,’ Jed shouted.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ Jimmy said as the doorbell rang. He hated being disturbed at mealtimes; it pissed him off big style.

‘You eat your breakfast, Jimmy. I’ll answer it and tell whoever it is to take a running jump,’ Alice insisted.

With the spatula still in her hand, Alice stomped into the hallway and, as she opened the front door, very nearly had a fit. ‘Gertcha, you murdering mother’s cunt. Get off my property before I kill you,’ she screamed, as she lunged at Eddie with the greasy spatula.

Eddie held his hands in front of his face to stop the stupid bitch from blinding him. ‘I ain’t come here to cause no trouble. I need to speak to Jimmy. I wanna make amends for what happened.’

‘Amends! Fucking amends! Gonna bring my Marky and Lukey back from the dead are you, you animal?’

Hearing a commotion, Jimmy and Jed ran to the front door.

‘You no-good shitcunt,’ Jed yelled as he lunged at Eddie.

As his son grabbed Mitchell around the neck, Jimmy waded in to pull Jed away from him.

‘Look, I’ve come here to apologise, not fight. I know nothing can make up for the stupidity of my brothers, but what happened was fuck-all to do with me. I wanna try and sort this mess out for good,’ Eddie said.

Georgie O’Hara was brighter than most four-year-old girls and as soon as everybody had left the kitchen, she’d scraped her and Harry’s greasy breakfasts into the bin and covered the evidence with her nan’s tea-towel. Now she’d led Harry into the hallway to see what all the fuss was about.

Because Eddie had been in prison for virtually all of his grandchildren’s lives, neither Georgie nor Harry knew him that well. Both had visited him in Wandsworth with their mum, but it was Harry who had seen him more recently than his sister, and recognised him first. Thinking that his grandad had turned up to take him and Georgie home to their mum, Harry let go of his sister’s hand and ran towards Eddie.

‘Grandad, can we see Mummy?’ he yelled excitedly.

Eddie had been too busy arguing with Jed to notice the kids were there and he felt really emotional as he laid eyes on the pair of them. Georgie looked skinnier than the last time he’d seen her and Harry seemed a few inches taller.

‘Get away from them chavvies. They’re nothing to do with you or that whore of a daughter of yours any more!’ Alice screamed.

‘I want my Mummy!’ Georgie sobbed, as Alice roughly dragged her and Harry back towards the kitchen.

‘Grandad, can we come home with you?’ Eddie heard Harry shout just before the door was slammed. Eddie felt completely useless. He could tell the kids were unhappy – it was written all over their little faces – and he needed all his self-restraint to stop himself from putting them in his motor and taking them home with him.

‘You ever come near my kids again, I’ll fucking cut you to pieces,’ Jed yelled, lunging at Eddie once more.

Jimmy grabbed his son by the hair. ‘Get in that kitchen with your mother and make sure them kids are OK.’

‘No! Why should I? That bastard killed my son and ...’

Grabbing Jed by the neck, Jimmy marched him into the kitchen. ‘You leave this to me and if you come back out this kitchen, I shall clump you so hard you’ll see fucking stars,’ Jimmy warned as he slammed the door and marched back to where Eddie was standing. He walked out into the cold December air, shut the front door and marched Eddie over to where the stables were.

‘You’ve got some fucking nerve turning up here, I’ll give you that much,’ he spat.

Unlike Eddie, Jimmy O’Hara was no oil painting. He was six feet two, had dark, greying, wavy hair, thick lips, a beer belly and a big bulbous nose that splattered over to one side of his face. Jimmy opened the stable door, let Eddie inside and turned to him with a look of hatred.

‘So, what do you want?’

Eddie was finding it increasingly difficult to keep his cool. Jed had attacked him and had ripped his Armani shirt, he hadn’t been able to speak to his own grandchildren and now he had this big, ugly prick looking at him as if he were some kind of faeces he’d trod on. Taking the advice of his probation officer, who had told him to take ten deep breaths whenever he felt as if he was about to lose his rag, Eddie spoke in the most sympathetic voice he could muster.

‘I came here to apologise for the deaths of your son and your grandson.’

Jimmy gave a sarcastic chuckle. 'Well, that's fucking big of ya. We'll forget all about it and be best buddies then, shall we?'

'Just drop the sarcasm and hear me out will you, Jimmy? It weren't fucking easy for me to come round 'ere today, so the least you can do is listen to what I've got to say. If you don't, then I'll walk away now and we all know what will happen next, don't we? You'll shoot a couple of my family and then I'll shoot a couple of yours. And so it goes on Jimmy, like it always bastard well has done, until we're all laying six feet under.'

'Go on then, talk, I'm all ears,' Jimmy spat.

'I've come here today not only to apologise, but also to offer you a deal. You know as well as I do that I had sod-all to do with what happened. I've had sweet fuck-all to do with my brothers for years – they might be my flesh and blood, but they're mugs, the pair of 'em. I ain't stupid; I know you're gonna want revenge and so would I if I'd gone through the same as you had. So I'm gonna give you permission to go ahead, do what you've gotta do with Paulie and Ronny and when you do, I promise they'll be no repercussions from me or my family.'

'I think you've forgotten something, Mitchell. Your cuntin' brothers happen to be in Belmarsh with a lot of your old pals and I know for a fact that you'll say one thing to me, then have their backs watched for ever more. Don't insult me, by treating me like some dinlo, please.'

'I promise you, Jimmy, I won't get involved. My brothers fucked up big time and now they have to pay the price. I'll keep out of it, I swear I will.'

Jimmy was thinking of the bigger picture. He would never truly rest until all of the Mitchells were dead, especially Eddie, but if he agreed to this deal now, it would give him plenty of time to plan the rest of their executions properly. Neither Eddie nor his sons were any man's fools, and Jimmy wanted that fucking Raymond dead as well. Doing life in prison didn't appeal to Jimmy one little bit and if Alice ever lost her beloved Georgie girl over his rash actions, she would never forgive him, and would probably leave him for good.

'Well?' Eddie asked impatiently.

Determined to make his biggest enemy sweat, Jimmy glared at him. 'Hold your fucking horses, Mitchell. This is heavy shit and I need five minutes to think.'

Jimmy knew quite a few traveller lads in Belmarsh and even if Eddie's heavies were looking out for Ronny and Paulie, Jimmy was sure he could bribe someone to get to them for him. He turned to Eddie; he was determined to have the last laugh, even today. 'I'll agree to the deal on one condition.'

'What?'

'I know two lads who will sort out your brothers, but they ain't gonna do it for nothing. I want thirty grand off you so I can give 'em fifteen each.'

Eddie was gobsmacked. This was getting silly now. 'No way. It's bad enough I know my brothers are gonna die without paying for some bastard to do it. I can't do that, Jimmy, it's fucking despicable.'

For the first time in weeks, Jimmy felt like really laughing out loud, but he managed to hold it back. 'Well, that's my terms, so take it or leave it.'

Feeling as though his head was about to burst, Eddie sat down on a bale of hay. He hadn't told Gary, Ricky and Raymond that he was coming to see Jimmy today and now he could never tell them. With images of his kids, his grandchildren and Gina flashing through his mind, he stood up. Their safety was his priority right now.

'OK, you've got a deal. But it's between me and you, and if you blab to anyone, including any of your family, the deal's off.'

'Cushti. When will I have the wonga by?' Jimmy asked.

'Friday. I'll meet you in the car park of the Optimist at twelve noon.'

Jimmy smirked. 'We gonna shake on this then?'

Eddie reluctantly shook Jimmy's hand, and then took a slow walk back to his motor. Paying for his own brothers to be killed literally made him feel like the Devil in disguise. Picking up pace, Ed

broke into a jog. He knew O'Hara had made a complete mug out of him today, but he could hardly refuse his terms; his hands were tied for now.

Feeling as sick as a dog, Eddie started his motor and drove at speed towards home. When he reached his own driveway, he got out of the Range Rover, leaned against it and pictured Ronny and Paulie's faces. He then vomited like he'd never vomited before.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stanley Smith smiled as his lady friend, Pat, handed him a mug of steaming coffee with a big dollop of cream on top. They had only known one another for six weeks, but it felt more like six years.

Pat, or Pat the Pigeon, as she preferred to be called, had recently moved to Orsett in Essex from the East End of London. Stanley had met her in the Orsett Cock pub and there was an instant spark between them. They had since become great friends and Stanley often popped round Pat's for a cuppa and a natter. Joyce, Stanley's wife, had no idea of his special friendship. There was nothing untoward going on, but Joycie would probably chop his testicles off if she found out he'd been sitting in another woman's house on a regular basis.

Unlike Joycie, Pat was a good listener. She had a caring nature, a heart of gold, and Stanley felt able to pour his problems out to her. Jessica, his daughter, had been murdered by her villainous husband Eddie Mitchell, and Pat was the only one who truly understood Stanley's despair and heartache.

'You're not your usual chirpy self today, Stanley. What's bothering you?' Pat asked in a sympathetic tone.

Stanley stared wistfully out of Pat's conservatory window. Unlike the house he now lived in with Joycie, Pat's was only a two-bed semi-detached, but it was homely and it always reminded him of his and Joycie's old property in Upney.

'I'm OK, love. I just hate that bloody house I live in so much. I miss me old house – I was happy there.'

Pat the Pigeon nodded her head understandingly. Stanley had told her that Joycie had forced him to live in the house that had once belonged to his daughter, Jessica. Apparently, Eddie Mitchell had given the house to Joyce as some kind of compensation for accidentally shooting her and Stanley's daughter.

'Well, you know my views on that house, Stanley. How your Joycie can live there with everything that's happened, I don't know. I don't like to speak ill of people I haven't met, but your Joycie must be as hard as old boots. I could never have taken a gift off a man who had murdered my daughter.'

'Well, that's my Joycie for ya, Pat. Full of airs and graces, and I ain't gonna change her now, she's too long in the tooth. She loves that big house, lords it over her friends, she does, and she'll never move, not a cat in hell's chance. We were at it hammer and tongs arguing again this morning – drives me bleedin' bonkers, she does. That money we've got left in the bank from the sale of our old house, she wants to buy a flash motor with it. Not a second-hand one, a brand bleedin' new one. I like me old Sierra – it might not look a picture, but it drives like an angel. I mean, what do I want a poxy Mercedes at my age for? I only want a run-around to get me from A to B and to cart me pigeons about in.'

Pat smiled and nodded in agreement. She had been terribly lonely since her husband Vic had suddenly passed away, but meeting Stanley had brought some sunshine back into her life. His wife Joycie sounded like a right domineering old dragon and Pat just hoped that one day Stanley would leave Joyce, move in with her and they could live happily ever after.

'I made a nice date and walnut cake this morning, Stanley. Shall I make us another coffee and cut you a nice big slice?'

'Thanks, but I'd best not stuff me face, Pat. In fact, I'm gonna have to make a move in a minute. It's Jock's granddaughter's twenty-first birthday and I promised him that I'd accompany him to the restaurant this evening. They're having a little surprise do for her.'

Pat knew Jock. She had met him at the pigeon club a few times. 'Oh, a birthday party sounds lovely. Where's it being held, Stanley?' she enquired, hoping for an invite.

‘Jock still lives in Barking, but his granddaughter lives in Rainham, not that far from me. They’re holding it in a poxy Chinese by the Cherry Tree somewhere. Shame it ain’t a steak-house. I don’t really like foreign food.’

When Stanley stood up, Pat stood up as well. ‘Well enjoy yourself, love. Is Joycie going with you?’

‘No, I mentioned it to her last week, but I don’t think she fancied it.’

‘Oh well, never mind. I’m sure you’ll have fun anyway. Why don’t you pop round and tell me all about it tomorrow? I can wrap the cake in foil and you can have a piece then if you like.’

Stanley smiled. Pat really seemed to enjoy his company as much as he enjoyed hers. ‘I’d like that, Pat. I’ll pop round about midday.’

Even when she was a young girl, Pat the Pigeon had always loved sex. She couldn’t help it; it was in her nature. She had been married to her husband, Vic, for many years and their sex life had never dwindled. When Vic had died, Pat never thought that she would fancy another man or ever have sex again. Then she’d met Stanley and, for her, it had been love at first sight. The problem was, she could tell that Stanley was a shy one and she didn’t want to put him off by being too forward. Pat ushered the object of her affections towards the front door and, as she usually did, gave Stanley a gentle peck on the cheek.

‘Bye, Stanley. Look forward to seeing you tomorrow, love.’

Over in Holloway, it was visiting time, and Joey had just given his twin sister a loving hug. ‘I’m really sorry I’m late,’ he said as he sat down opposite her. Because she was on remand, Frankie was allowed plenty of visits, but Joey’s hectic job meant he could only get up to visit her a couple of times a week.

‘So how’s the Stock Exchange? Still doing your head in, is it?’ Frankie asked. She liked to wind Joey up, but she was extremely proud of his high-flying career.

‘Brain damage, per usual. Half-eight I left the bloody office last night. No wonder most of my colleagues have cocaine instead of food for lunch; at least it keeps ’em awake.’

‘You ain’t taking cocaine, are you?’ Frankie asked suspiciously.

‘Don’t be daft. Dom would bloody kill me. There are a lot of blokes at work on it, though. Most of them are real big drinkers as well. I’m fine, I can handle the pressure and stress, but you’d be surprised how many men can’t, especially the macho, straight ones. Anyway, enough about me. How are you? You look much happier than when I came up last weekend.’

‘Well, now I’m out of that awful hospital wing, I’m sleeping so much better. The maternity wing is quite nice compared to the rest of the prison. The staff are polite and my new cellmate is lovely. Her name is Babs, she originally comes from Jamaica and we get on really well. I’ve only known her for a short while, but it feels like we’ve been mates for years.’

Joey was pleased by the change in his sister. Her mood had been so low on a couple of his previous visits that he hadn’t really known what to say to her. He’d cried once as he had left the prison because he’d felt so bloody helpless.

‘So, what’s your friend Babs in here for? Is she convicted, or on remand like you?’

Frankie leaned forward so nobody could hear what she was saying. ‘Babs is on remand and she’s in here for stabbing her boyfriend as well. He died and now she’s looking at life, poor cow.’

Horrified that his sister was sharing her cell with a murderer, Joey clasped her hands in his. ‘Be careful, Frankie. Watch she don’t turn on you.’

‘Babs is one of the most sweet-natured people I’ve ever met in my life, Joey. Her bloke was far worse than Jed and I don’t blame Babs for killing him. Any woman would have done the same in her situation.’

‘What did he do? I won’t say nothing, I promise,’ Joey said in a hushed tone.

Frankie leaned over and covered her mouth with her hand. ‘He raped her twelve-year-old daughter, the fucking nonce. The bastard deserved to die, don’t you think?’ she whispered.

Joey nodded dumbly. This conversation was getting a bit heavy for him and he was desperate to change it. 'Dad popped round the other day. He didn't stay long; I think he's got a lot on his plate over what Paulie and Ronny did. He's even sent Gina away to stay with her mate. I think he's lonely in that cottage on his own.'

'What! Is he living with her then?'

Cursing himself for putting his foot in it, Joey lowered his eyes and looked sheepish. 'I thought you knew they were living together. Gina's really lovely, Frankie. If you gave her a chance, I know you'd like her.'

Fuming that her father had forgotten to mention that he'd moved his old tart in, Frankie glared at Joey. 'Unlike you, I'm loyal to our mum. You might wanna be friends with the old slapper, but I don't. She probably only got her claws into Dad 'cause she knows he's a face and he's worth a few quid.'

Joey shrugged. He wasn't about to argue, because when Frankie had one of her cobs on she could be a complete bitch. He changed the subject yet again. 'I wonder how Georgie and Harry are coping? Do you reckon Jed and Alice are looking after them properly? Dom and I miss them dreadfully, so I hate to think how you must feel.'

Frankie's face hardened. She'd spoken about her children to Babs and she couldn't help constantly dreaming about them, but at all other times she tried not to think about Georgie and Harry as it upset her too much. Knowing the O'Haras had custody of her children was pure torture and Frankie could not deal with it. 'I don't wanna talk about the kids, Joey. I can't, OK?'

Noticing tears in his sister's eyes, Joey gently squeezed her arm. 'You'll get them back one day, I know you will, Frankie.'

Frankie ignored his comment. 'How's Nan and Grandad? Have you seen them lately?'

Joey shook his head. 'What with being so busy at work and visiting you up here, I haven't had much chance to pop round there. Nan rang me at work the other day, invited me and Dom to dinner this Sunday, so we'll see them then. She was ranting and raving about Grandad on the phone, something about a new car. You know what they're like, Frankie, they don't change.'

Frankie smiled. Her grandparents had never got on, but it was her nan who threw all the insults – her poor grandad had never had the guts to retaliate.

Desperate to get an answer to what had been playing on his mind, Joey leaned forward. 'Kerry rang me late last night; she wants to come and visit you. I spoke to her for ages and even though she wouldn't tell me much, I know something really bad happened, Frankie. Why did you really try to kill Jed? We've never kept secrets from one another before, so please tell me the truth.'

Frankie's heart urged her to open up to her brother, but her head told her not to. Joey was close to her father again. He was also a gossip, especially in drink, and if he blurted out the truth, all hell would break loose. Her dad's life was probably already in danger because of what her uncles had done to Jed's family and if she told Joey that Jed had tortured and murdered their grandfather, Harry, carnage would be sure to follow. Frankie knew just how evil Jed was and the thought of her dad or brothers getting killed was enough to make Frankie keep schtum for ever more. Relieved that the bell was ringing to signal the end of visiting time, Frankie stood up and hugged her twin brother.

'You take care and give my love to Dom,' she said.

Joey pulled away from her and stared deep into her eyes. 'You haven't answered my question yet, Frankie.'

'I wish I could answer it, Joey, but I'm sorry, I can't,' Frankie replied. She then walked away without a backward glance.

Stanley Smith was not having the best of evenings. When he was a lad he had been taken to one of the first Chinese restaurants ever to open in London. He had no memory of whereabouts exactly it was, but he did remember that he had been taken there because it was his Auntie Agnes's fortieth birthday. The evening itself was nothing to write home about, but what did stick in Stanley's mind was that he was forced to eat some kind of fish heads, then on the way home he got a clip round the

earhole from his mother because he spewed his guts up over some poor bloke on the train. Ever since that day, Stanley had avoided eating Chinese food like the plague.

‘So what do you fancy then, Stanley?’ Jock said, handing him a menu.

Stanley glanced at the menu and immediately felt queasy. ‘Don’t they do any English food, Jock? I ain’t a lover of rice or bleedin’ noodles, mate. I had food poisoning on this shit once.’

Jock laughed and called one of the waiters over. He explained Stanley’s predicament and the waiter turned to Stanley. ‘We do very nice omelette and very nice chip.’

‘Yeah, that’ll do, mate,’ Stanley said politely.

As Jock chatted to his granddaughter, Stanley studied the rest of the company. They were all bloody youngsters and he felt about as out of place as a Nigerian at a National Front march.

‘You remember my daughter Louise, don’t you?’ Jock asked, as he excused himself to go to the toilet.

Stanley hadn’t seen Jock’s daughter for a good few years and she had put on that much weight he would never have recognised her unless Jock had told him who she was.

‘Hello, love. You look well,’ Stanley lied.

‘Ah, thanks Stanley. How are you keeping? Your Joycie still looks well, don’t she? I saw her recently in a pub.’

‘What pub? She never said, where did you see her, Louise?’

Louise sat down on the chair next to Stanley. ‘In the Bull in Romford. I work behind the bar in there at lunchtimes. To be honest, I didn’t speak to her, Stanley. I’ve put on a lot of weight recently, so she probably wouldn’t have recognised me anyway. Not only that, she was with Eddie Mitchell and I didn’t wanna make meself busy.’

About to swallow a sip of his beer, Stanley very nearly choked. He spat the beer back into the glass. ‘Eddie Mitchell! It couldn’t have been my Joycie. We’ve had nothing to do with him since my Jessica died.’

‘It was definitely Joyce. I was always round your house years ago and she still looks the bleedin’ same. I could hear her chatting and laughing with Eddie. There ain’t many people got a full-on laugh like your Joyce has, Stanley.’

Feeling the colour drain from his cheeks, Stanley grabbed Louise’s arm. ‘Are you sure it was Eddie with her? Think carefully, because this is important.’

Louise was rather merry. She also wasn’t the brightest of girls and didn’t even realise she’d said the wrong thing. ‘Of course I’m sure it was Eddie. Everyone knows who Eddie Mitchell is, don’t they? Blimey, Stanley, my mate Carol went out with him before he got with your Jess, so I know what he bloody well looks like. He even bonked Carol in the back of his car once while I was sitting in the passenger seat like a bloody gooseberry.’

‘Whatever’s the matter, Stanley?’ Jock asked, as he returned to the table and clocked his pal’s deathly white face.

Stanley ignored him and turned back to Louise. ‘How long ago did you see them in the pub together?’

‘About six or seven weeks ago,’ Louise replied, necking the rest of the wine in her glass. She had just sort of realised that something was amiss when her dad had shaken his head frantically behind Stanley’s back and she didn’t fancy any agg with Eddie Mitchell. She stood up and smiled. ‘Perhaps I got it wrong, Stanley. My eyes play me up terrible sometimes. In fact, I’m going to have an eye test next week to see if I need glasses.’

Stanley knew without a doubt that Louise was lying. He stood up just as the waiter reappeared.

‘Omelette and chip, sir.’

Filled with anger and betrayal, Stanley pushed the waiter, who then unfortunately dropped the plate on the floor.

‘Stanley!’ Jock yelled, as he chased his friend out of the restaurant.

‘Leave me alone, Jock,’ Stanley warned. ‘You knew about this, didn’t ya? Go on, fucking admit it.’

Jock at least had the sense to look shamefaced. ‘I’m so sorry, Stanley. I didn’t wanna get involved, I knew how you’d react and I didn’t wanna cause no trouble between you and your Joycie.’

Stanley turned to Jock with a look of pure hatred on his face. ‘You were meant to be my poxy mate!’ he screamed.

‘I am your mate, but everyone knows what Eddie Mitchell is capable of and like most people, I don’t wanna cross him. I’ve gotta think of my own family’s safety, ain’t I?’

As Jock turned to grab his arm, Stanley roughly pushed him away. He then walked towards him and, as Jock backed into a wall, Stanley pointed his forefinger into his face. ‘Me and you are finished, Jock and don’t you ever fucking contact me again.’

Full of pent-up rage, Stanley turned on his heel and stormed over to his car. He had been betrayed by the two people closest to him in the worst possible way and he would never forgive either of them until the day he died.

CHAPTER FIVE

‘Are you OK, Frankie? You been ever so quiet since visiting time. Did your brother upset you or something?’ Babs asked her cellmate.

Frankie sat down on the edge of her bed. ‘I’m OK, it’s just I’ve been thinking about my kids a lot today. I try not to as a rule, because it upsets me too much, but sometimes you just can’t help it, can you?’

Babs stood up, walked over to Frankie’s bed and sat down next to her. ‘Look, don’t feel you have to, but I feel so much better inside for telling you my story, so if you wanna tell me yours, I’m a good listener. Like me, you’re a lovely person, Frankie, and I know something bad must have happened to you as well.’

Frankie bowed her head and stared at her feet. Her dad had always told her to be careful to whom she told things. ‘Tell no bastard nothing, Frankie, especially someone you’ve only known five minutes’, he’d always say.

Frankie turned to Babs. She might have only known her new friend for what her dad would call ‘five minutes’, but gut instinct told Frankie that she could trust her. Not only that, she was desperate to share her burden with somebody, so she took a deep breath and started right at the beginning.

‘I met Jed on my sixteenth birthday in a club in Rainham called the Berwick Manor. I was there with Joey and my friends and it was the first time we’d been to a proper nightclub. We usually just went to a local pub, but the Berwick held these rave nights and we were all desperate to try it ‘cause everyone had said how good they were. Anyway, I met Jed at the bar and I was instantly smitten by him. He was good looking, confident and charming and he had the most beautiful bright green eyes that I’d ever seen. We got chatting, he bought me a drink and it wasn’t until we swapped names that I realised who he was. Apparently, we’d met once before when we were kids.’

‘Whaddya mean, who he was? Was he famous or something?’ Babs asked, intrigued.

Frankie shook her head. ‘He was the son of my dad’s biggest enemy. My dad’s a bit of a face, you know, a sort of gangster, and for years he had this feud going with a bloke called Jimmy O’Hara. Well, it turned out that Jed was Jimmy’s son.’

Babs knew a lot of drug dealers like her ex, Dennis, who were into prostitution rackets and similar stuff, but most of them were scumbags. She didn’t know any real gangsters. ‘So, is your dad like the Krays or something?’

Frankie shrugged. ‘Sort of, I suppose. He’s a moneylender and he’s got his fingers in loads of other pies. He comes out of Canning Town originally, but he’s quite famous all over. I don’t know too much about the businesses he runs, but I do know everyone’s shit-scared of him. Every school me and Joey attended, everybody wanted to be our friend because of who our dad was.’

‘Wow, that’s well cool,’ Babs said, in awe.

‘Anyway, getting back to Jed. Knowing who he was, I should never have got involved with him in the first place. I knew if and when my dad found out there’d be murders, but I was so young and naïve, I just couldn’t help myself. Jed was so sexy and I’d never felt that way about any boy before. To be honest, I’d never really had a proper relationship before Jed.’

‘So, what happened next?’

‘Well, we started dating and we both fell in love. With everything that’s happened since, I do often wonder if Jed ever really loved me at the time, or if he was just trying to get one over on my dad, but I don’t think he was. At first, I’m sure Jed really did love me.’

Babs was fascinated. When she was at school, she’d been in the play *Romeo and Juliet* and the way Frankie was telling her story reminded Babs of it in some strange sort of way. ‘Tell me more,’ she said, as she put a comforting arm around Frankie’s shoulder.

‘I fell pregnant with Georgie within months of meeting Jed. I didn’t know what to do, so I told my brother. Joey advised me to have an abortion. He said Dad would go mental, but I couldn’t do that, Babs, so I told Jed about the baby.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Jed was really pleased. He’s a travelling boy, you know, a gypsy, and they all have their kids young. He even proposed to me, but when my dad found out, everything went dreadfully wrong.’

‘So, what did your dad do? Did he beat Jed up, or what?’

Frankie shook her head. ‘As a kid I was always a daddy’s girl. Joey was very close to my mum, he never used to get on that well with my dad, but I did. My dad adored me. Because Jed was Jimmy O’Hara’s son, I couldn’t face telling Dad what I’d done. He would have been so angry and disappointed in me, so I took the coward’s way out. Jed and me, we hid behind a bush until my dad went out, then I went indoors and told my mum. My Uncle Raymond was there, he worked for my dad, and he went mental and tried to lock me in the house, but Jed confronted him, then we legged it back to his. Jed only lived down the road; he had his own trailer on his father’s land.’

Frankie paused. She didn’t even want to think about Jed, let alone remember her romance with the evil bastard, but she had to carry on now and once she had told Babs, she would never tell anyone ever again. ‘It was Jed’s idea to go to Tilbury. His dad had a trailer there on an old scrapyard and Jed said my dad would never find us there, but he did.’

‘What did your dad do, Frankie?’

Reliving the memories as though it was yesterday, Frankie started to cry. Her mum had died that night and, looking back, she now realised it was all mainly her fault. When Frankie’s cries turned to painful sobs, Babs held her friend’s shaking body to her own. She soothed Frankie by stroking her long, dark hair.

‘Sssh, it’s OK, sweet child. You have a lie down and get some rest. If you wanna talk again later, we can, and if you don’t, then that’s fine by me.’

Joycie Smith was thoroughly enjoying the latest episode of her favourite soap. She always prerecorded *EastEnders* and watched it when Stanley wasn’t about, as his constant jibes and criticism of the programme often resulted in an argument.

‘Load of old bleedin’ codswallop. Ain’t nothing like the real East End. I should know, I was born within the sound of Bow bloody Bells,’ Stanley would constantly chirp.

Sipping a drop of sherry, Joyce put her glass down and clapped her hands in glee as her current fancy man appeared on the screen. Up until recently, Joycie’s only love interest had been that Eamonn Holmes off GMTV, but since that dishy David Wicks had appeared in *EastEnders*, Eamonn had taken a back seat in her affections.

Fantasising that David Wicks was snogging her instead of the actress playing his girlfriend, Joyce was annoyed as she heard Stanley’s car pull up outside. ‘Bleedin’ nuisance,’ she mumbled as she pressed pause.

‘What are you doing home? I thought you were going for a meal with Jock,’ Joyce shouted as she heard his key in the lock.

Stanley marched into the room, his face as black as thunder. He walked towards his wife and stared at her with a look of pure repugnance. ‘How could you, Joycie? How fucking could you?’

Joyce was stunned. What was she meant to have done? Surely Stanley didn’t think she was having an affair or something. ‘Whatever you on about? You silly old sod.’

Stanley had never hit a woman in his life, but he’d been made so furious by his wife’s betrayal that he could have quite easily knocked her from one side of the room to the other. Restraining himself, he instead pointed a finger in her face. ‘You have been fraternising with the enemy, Joycie. I know all about you meeting Eddie Mitchell in the Bull in Romford. How could you sit there laughing and joking with that bastard when he obliterated our daughter? You absolutely repulse me. In fact, I fucking hate your guts.’

Shocked by her husband's contorted expression and harsh words, Joycie decided to be truthful with him. 'It's not what you think, Stanley. I only met up with Eddie the once to sort things out between him and Joey. It's what Jessica would have wanted and I did it for her.'

'Don't you dare say you did it for our daughter. I know exactly why you met up with him – 'cause you love being associated with the villainous bastard, you always have done. You only encouraged our Jess to marry him because he was a face and that gave you something to brag about. In that warped, fucked-up mind of yours, our daughter ending up with a notorious gangster gave you the street-cred you'd always craved. Well, let me tell you something, Joycie, you are a nasty little nobody, and none of them people you used to brag to even fucking liked you. Even your friends Rita and Hilda can't bastard well stand ya – no one can. You're an evil old dragon; everybody knows exactly what you're like.'

Livid that Stanley had brought her friends into the argument, Joyce knocked his dumpy finger away from her face, stood up and gave him a dose of his own medicine. 'You wicked, bald-headed old bastard! How dare you call me a nobody! If anybody's a nobody in this house, it's you, Stanley. You have no style about you, no bloody class, and that's why you always hated Eddie Mitchell from the word go, because he was something that you wasn't. I loved my Jessica more than I've ever loved anyone, and if I can accept that what happened was an accident, then why can't you? Both Frankie and Joey have forgiven their father – they know how much he loved their mum – but no, not you, you have to be the odd one out, Stanley. Bitter, twisted and full of grudges, that's what you are.'

Unable to control his boiling temper any longer, Stanley lifted his right hand and slapped Joyce fiercely around the face. 'You are poison, Joycie, and I'm leaving you. In fact, I want a divorce.'

As Stanley stomped out of the living room, for the first time in donkey's years Joyce was left totally struck dumb.

Back in Holloway, Frankie had stopped crying and was now ready to continue her story. 'Where was I?' she asked.

'You and Jed had fled to the trailer in Tilbury,' Babs reminded her.

'Oh yeah. Well, my mum rang my mobile, said that my dad was on the warpath and she asked if she could come and see me to sort things out. She was so sweet, my mum, she was beautiful and everybody loved her, Babs. Anyway, I gave her the address, but not long after she'd turned up, my dad and uncle Raymond turned up as well, so my mum hid under the bed. My uncle kidnapped me; he bundled me into a car and drove off. He didn't know that my mum was there, but he'd put tape over my mouth and my hands were tied up, so I couldn't even tell him. Finally he realised something was wrong and he stopped the car. When I told him that my mum was in the trailer, his face went white and he drove straight back there. But, we were too late. By the time we got back there, my beautiful mum was already dead.'

As Frankie began to cry once more, Babs rested her young friend's head on her shoulder. 'If it's too upsetting for you to talk about your mum's death, just tell me what happened with Jed,' Babs suggested.

Frankie nodded, then wiped her eyes with the cuff of her sweatshirt. Talking about her mother's demise was still far too raw and she couldn't relive it – it was too awful for words. 'Well, after my mum, you know, died, my dad got put in prison and I moved in properly with Jed. Things started to go downhill almost immediately. I hated his mother and I couldn't adapt to what he called "a traveller's way of life". By that time I was trapped, though. I was pregnant with Georgie, my mum and dad weren't there to help me, and I wasn't even speaking to my grandparents. Jed was a bastard. He knew I couldn't run away 'cause I had nowhere to run to, so he did exactly as he pleased. I was so naïve, Babs. I used to think that he was actually working when he stayed out all night, but he was out shagging other birds. Jed was such a convincing storyteller, even God would have believed his lies.'

Babs squeezed Frankie's hand. 'Don't beat yourself up for believing him. They're all lying bastards – trust me on that one, honey.'

Frankie smiled gratefully, then carried on talking. 'Looking back now, apart from right at the beginning, I can't believe that I ever really loved Jed. I mean, how can you love someone who tries to strangle you and gives you black eyes regularly? And I'm sure the night Harry was conceived, Jed practically raped me.'

'You can easily love an evil man like that, because I did it also, remember?'

'He even got another girl pregnant while we were together and I still forgave him, but one day I woke up and I felt differently. The love I'd had for him had turned to hate and I wanted him out of mine and my children's lives.'

'So, is that why you stabbed him then?'

Frankie fell silent for thirty seconds or so. Apart from her friend, Kerry, nobody knew the real reason that she had stabbed Jed, and she was weighing up whether she should tell Babs or not. She turned to her cellmate. She had barely spoken to Kerry for weeks and she had to tell somebody the secret that was burning a hole in her heart.

'My grandad was a legend in the East End. Harry Mitchell was his name, and I think he was one of the biggest villains to ever come out of Canning Town. He wasn't the best grandfather in the world – me and Joey rarely saw him – but obviously I still loved him 'cause he was my dad's dad. Anyway, a few years ago my grandad got murdered. It happened on Christmas Day and it was awful for my dad. Well, to cut a long story short, I found out that it was Jed and his cousin Sammy that had killed him and that's why I tried to kill Jed. That and everything else, I suppose. I just lost it.'

Babs eyes were like organ stops. Her own sorry tale was just about druggies like Dennis and nonces like Peter, but Frankie's sounded like something out of one of those gangster movies. A bit like *Once Upon a Time in America*.

Babs caught her breath and asked the all-important question. 'Are you sure it was Jed that killed your grandfather?'

'Absolutely positive. I recorded the evidence on tape, but Jed's cousin ran off with it, so I have no proof.'

Both girls stared at one another. Neither knew what to say next, but it was Babs who broke the ice by laughing. 'Wow, man, that is some heavy gangster crap, but Frankie, my sweet child, if we don't laugh about the shit God threw at us, we will go mad and fucking cry.'

Pat the Pigeon was having one of her nostalgic, melancholy evenings. In the daytime she was quite a happy person. She would spend time with her family, tend to her pigeons and she had the added bonus of Stanley's habitual visits. However, once darkness fell, Pat's mood changed. It was only then that she realised what a lonely fifty-five-year-old woman she really was.

Flicking through the TV channels, Pat stared at BBC1 with a glum expression on her face. *Waiting for God* was on, a programme about people like herself who had no spouse and ended up in one of those poxy retirement homes, sitting in their own piss and shit. About to turn the depressing programme off, Pat was stunned to hear the doorbell ring. She glanced at the clock, it was just gone half-nine and nobody ever visited her at this time of the evening. Pat put on her fluffy slippers and cautiously walked towards the front door.

'Who is it?' she shouted nervously.

'Pat, it's me, Stanley.'

With her heart leaping out of her chest with excitement, Pat undid the chain-lock and opened the front door. 'Are you OK? Whatever's the matter, Stanley?' she asked as she clocked the dismal expression on poor Stanley's face.

Stanley nodded to the suitcase beside him. 'I'm really sorry for turning up here this late, Pat, but I didn't know where else to go. Joyce has betrayed me in the worst way possible, so I've left her. I've got the pigeons in the back of the car. I couldn't leave 'em at home 'cause she's such a wicked old bag. She threatened to cook 'em in a pie once. Is it OK if me and the birds stay here for a few days? We'll be out of your way in no time, I promise.'

Pat looked into Stanley's distressed eyes. She rubbed his arm and smiled. 'Of course it is, my love. My home is your home, Stanley, and you're welcome to stay here for as long as you like.'

CHAPTER SIX

Eddie Mitchell was having another little bout of insomnia. He had to meet O'Hara at lunchtime to hand over the dosh and the guilt he felt at what he was about to do was eating away at him. Picturing his brothers' faces once more, Ed turned onto his side and forced himself to think about Gina. He'd sent his fiancée away to her friend's house while he sorted out the sorry mess his brothers had made, but she was coming back home this afternoon and Ed couldn't wait to hold her in his arms and tell her how much he loved her.

At thirty-four years old, Gina was nineteen years younger than Ed. They'd originally met when he had found her in the Yellow Pages. Gina was a private detective and Ed had hired her to follow his son, Joey. It was through Gina that Ed had found out the truth about his son's homosexuality and his relationship with Dominic.

Months after Ed had got arrested for murder, Gina had written to him in the nick and stood up in court as a witness at his trial. They'd sort of got together soon after that. Gina became a regular visitor to Wandsworth Prison and they'd planned their future in the odd hour they snatched together every week. It was a gamble coming straight out of the slammer and moving in with a bird he barely knew, but the gamble had paid off. They had originally rented, but had since bought the cottage in Rettendon and, until all this shit had kicked off with the O'Haras again, had been as happy as two pigs in shit.

Picturing Gina's naked body, Eddie smiled. Facially she was a ringer for the famous Page Three girl, Linda Lusardi, everybody said so. She was tall, with long, dark hair, legs up to her armpits and a pair of tits to die for. Feeling himself getting harder, Ed lifted the quilt, looked underneath it and smiled. He might be fifty-three, but his king-sized attribute was still in fine working order. Seconds later, Ed heard an enormous crash coming from downstairs. His erection deflated like a burst balloon and he gingerly got out of bed and grabbed the baseball bat he kept underneath it. Ever since he'd been a young man, Ed had slept with a gun nearby, but recent events had made him hide it away from the cottage. Another long stretch for a firearms charge was the last thing he needed.

Eddie put on a pair of shorts and crept down the wooden stairs. He held the bat firmly in his right hand, ready to strike if need be. Daylight was just breaking, so he could easily see where he was going without falling arse over head. The front door was shut, so Ed moved cautiously towards the kitchen. He could have sworn that he'd heard the sound of breaking glass and, if that was the case, the kitchen was the easiest form of entry for an intruder. He checked the windows and door; there was nothing untoward, so he headed into the lounge. Ed's stomach lurched as he spotted the culprit. His dad's framed photo that hung on the wall opposite Jessica's had, for no apparent reason, fallen onto the floor and smashed.

Eddie sat on the sofa and put his head in his hands. It must be a sign, a sign that his father disagreed with his decision-making. Well, he couldn't go through with what he had arranged now, not after this, and if it turned out to be his own poisoned chalice, then so fucking be it.

Joey Mitchell dried himself with a towel, then looked at his watch in dismay. He liked to have a strong coffee in St Paul's before he ventured into work, but he was running late this morning, so wouldn't have bloody time.

Dominic had an important meeting with an investor up in Hammersmith at lunchtime and was still lying in his pit. As the phone rang, Dom answered the one in the bedroom.

'Joey, it's your nan,' he shouted.

'Tell her I'll ring her later,' Joey yelled back.

Stark bollock naked, Dominic ran out of the bedroom with the phone in his hand. 'You'd better talk to her now, Joey, she sounds in a right old state.'

Silently cursing his dysfunctional family, Joey snatched the phone. 'What's the matter, Nan?'

‘Your grandad’s gone. He went last night.’

Feeling his legs go from beneath him, Joey sank onto the bed. ‘Oh my God! What did he die of?’ he whispered, tears forming in his eyes.

‘He ain’t bleedin’ dead, although I wish the bastard was. He’s gone, left home, wants a divorce, the silly old sod. You’re gonna have to come over, Joey. I can’t stop in this house on me own. I’ve already had a large brandy and I’m worried I’ll do something silly and end up back in that nuthouse again.’

‘I can’t come over, Nan. I’m really busy at work at the moment and I need to go in.’

Joyce was an expert at making people feel guilty – she’d practised for years on Stanley. ‘Oh well, if your job’s more important than your poor old nan, best you get off. But, if and when something bad happens to me, don’t you dare come crying round my grave. If you do, I shall come back and fuckin’ well haunt ya.’

Joey felt his conscience pricking him. ‘Can’t you ring Raymond, Nan? My boss will kill me if I don’t go in today.’

‘Already rung him. Since that tart of his has been up the spout, he’s had no time for his poor old mum whatsoever. He says he’s got an important meeting with your father. Knowing what a lying bastard Raymond is lately, I bet his important meeting is at one of them poncy antenatal clinics with that stuck-up prat he married.’

Joey sighed. The last time his grandad had left home, his nan had completely lost the plot and ended up in Warley Hospital. If that were to happen again, Joey knew he would never forgive himself for not being there when she needed him. ‘Don’t drink no more, Nan. I’ll ring work, tell ’em I’m ill and I’ll be with you within the hour.’

After he’d found his father’s photograph lying horizontal on the living-room carpet, Eddie had knocked back a large brandy to calm his fragile nerves. He had then taken it upon himself to call an emergency meeting. None of the lads were very happy at being woken at 7 a.m., but that was tough shit; he was the boss and he called the shots.

As per usual, Eddie had ordered the meeting to be held at his Auntie Joanie’s house. These days he would never chance any of their important gatherings being held anywhere but. He was too worried about the Old Bill; they weren’t so backward as they used to be. The filth had been well pissed off when the jury had found him not guilty of the murder and manslaughter charges against Jessica. He’d still done bird for unlawful possession of a firearm but knowing how desperate the rozzers were to lock him up and throw away the key, Ed would never put it past the bastards to bug his, Gary’s, Ricky’s or Raymond’s home addresses. Joanie’s house was by no means foolproof, but it was definitely the best for security purposes and also better than meeting in a café or some poxy boozier.

Ed had called the meeting for 9 a.m. He had to meet O’Hara at twelve in Upminster, so he’d had no choice but to call it on so early. Due to the decrepit state of the A13, Eddie arrived at his aunt’s at twenty to ten. Joanie answered the door and, pushed for time, Ed gave her a quick peck on the cheek and darted straight up the stairs.

‘Shall I make you a pot of tea and some sarnies?’ Joanie shouted out.

‘No thanks, Auntie. We’re fine, sweetheart,’ Eddie replied.

Raymond, Gary and Ricky were already sitting around the big mahogany table with glum expressions on their faces. Gary and Ricky had both been on the piss until the early hours and felt like crap, and Raymond had had an earful from Polly, as he’d had to tell her that something important had cropped up and he couldn’t attend the antenatal clinic with her.

‘This better be fucking important, Dad,’ Gary said, thoroughly pissed off that he’d been woken so early then his old man had had the audacity to turn up late.

Eddie grabbed a bottle of Scotch from the bar and ordered everybody to drink one.

‘For Christ’s sake, Ed. It ain’t even ten o’clock. I was meant to go somewhere with Polly and she’ll annihilate me if I go home smelling of booze.’

Not in the mood for Raymond's marital issues, Eddie knocked back his drink in record time and slammed the empty glass on the table. 'Fuck Polly, this is business and what I've got to say is far more important than anything your old woman will say to ya later.'

Raymond immediately shut up and, as Ed began to tell the story of what he'd agreed with Jimmy O'Hara, Gary and Ricky sat open mouthed.

'So, when your grandfather's picture fell off the wall, I just knew I'd done the wrong thing. Call it fate, but I know now I can't go through with it,' Ed said remorsefully, concluding the tale.

Ricky knocked back his Scotch and looked at his father in outright disgust. 'How could you pay to arrange your own brothers' deaths in the first place? That is sick, Dad, fucking proper sick. Say O'Hara gets to them somehow?'

Gary shook his head in disbelief. 'I know Paulie and Ronny are a pair of useless cunts, but they're still family, Dad.'

'Yes, I know they're family, but they ballsed up, not us. All I was trying to do was keep the rest of us safe. O'Hara ain't gonna let this rest, you know. If he can't get to them, he'll come for us, I just fuckin' know he will.'

Gary gave a sadistic smirk. 'Worried about your new fancy piece, are ya?' he asked sarcastically.

As Eddie grabbed his eldest son by the neck, Raymond intervened and dragged Eddie away. 'For fuck's sake, arguing and fighting amongst ourselves ain't gonna solve this, is it? Let's get a grip and sort this out sensibly, shall we?'

Ray turned to Gary and Ricky. They were good lads, but they were also playboys. Gary was twenty-nine now and Ricky twenty-seven. They were both handsome boys, but neither had settled down. Therefore, they had no idea about what it was like to worry about a wife or kids.

'Your father has got a point, you know. If anything happened to my Polly or the baby, I couldn't deal with it. Yous two are single: once you settle down and have kids of your own, you'll understand where your dad's coming from.'

Gary shrugged. He had no intention of settling down. Tarts were a pain in the arse and 'love 'em and leave 'em', was his motto. 'So what happens now, then? Are you just not gonna turn up to meet O'Hara?'

Eddie rubbed the stubble on his face. He used slow movements from his cheeks to his chin like he often did when he was deep in thought. 'I've got the dosh on me. I think I should still meet O'Hara and pay him the thirty grand. It sounds big bucks but it's peanuts to me. Let him think he's still got a deal. He won't get to Ronny and Paulie, not if I put the word about.'

'And how you gonna stop him fuckin' getting to 'em?' Ricky asked wisely.

'Ginger Mick, Lee Adams, Scouse Lenny – they're all banged up in Belmarsh and they all owe me a favour or two. I'll get word to Paulie and Ronny to spend as much time as possible inside their cells. Any time they come out, I'll have someone watch their backs.'

'It's an impossibility to get someone to watch over Ronny and Paulie all the time, Dad. I mean, how do you know that your pals are even on the same wing as them?'

'Because I made phone calls on the way here. Flatnose Freddie knows everything; he also told me that Paulie and Ronny are sharing a cell. He reckons if they hadn't have spilled their guts to the filth, the system would have definitely split 'em up, but they did, so no one cares. Also, the screws don't wanna be bothered clearing up Ronny's shit and piss. They ain't got a lot of time for cripples, I know that for a fact. That poor raspberry who was a few cells away from me in Wandsworth, the one that had strangled his mother, he was left to rot. That's why Paulie is sharing with Ronny; the authorities want Paulie to take care of the cunt, save them a job.'

Raymond was worried, very worried. 'Jimmy O'Hara ain't no mug, Ed. I know he's been out the frame for a few years, but don't underestimate him. His son and grandkid have been killed, for Christ's sake and he ain't gonna be happy if he can't get revenge of some kind.'

Eddie poured himself another large Scotch. ‘Look, these pikeys are backward bastards deep down. There is no way O’Hara will think I’ve parted with thirty grand if I ain’t in agreement of the deal. Yes, in the end, chances are he will clock on, but for now the dough should be enough to keep the mug sweet.’

Raymond shook his head. He had the same feeling as he’d had the night that Jessica had died. This was a bad idea and he half-wished he’d stuck it out in the jewellery trade and never come back to the family firm. ‘When Jimmy O’Hara finds out you’ve crossed him, he’ll come gunning for you, Ed,’ he warned.

Eddie looked at his watch and stood up. ‘Not if I go gunning for him first, he won’t.’

Gary smashed a fist onto the table. ‘Why are we giving these pikeys the time of day? Why don’t we just get rid of the whole lot of ’em in one fell swoop, Jed included?’

‘Because of them kids. Once Frankie is out, we can do what we want, but if we strike now, not only will the Old Bill know that we’re behind the O’Hara’s disappearance, there’s a good chance Georgie and Harry will be taken into care. The filth have got it in for me big time, they always have had, and more so since Jessica’s death. James Fitzgerald Smythe reckons he can get Frankie off her charge and I believe him,’ Eddie replied.

‘You’re off your head. Frankie admitted to what she’d done and won’t even tell no one what really happened. She’s going down, I know she is,’ Ricky reminded his father.

Eddie stood up. He truly believed that it was not the snapped string on the frame that had caused his father’s photograph to crash to the floor; he believed it was a sign from above. It was Harry Mitchell’s way of telling him that what he was about to do was wrong and, with his dad’s guidance, Ed knew things would work out OK. ‘I’ve gotta go and meet O’Hara now. We’ll talk again later in the week.’

Full of his usual self-assurance, Eddie ignored the worried looks that were being thrown his way and bowled confidently out of the door.

Joey snatched the glass of brandy out of his grandmother’s hand. He darted out to the kitchen, poured it down the sink and then gave her what for. He hadn’t lost a day off work to watch her drink herself to death.

‘Drink is what sent you loopy the last time, Nan. Now tell me exactly what happened and I’ll help you find Grandad,’ he said kindly, as he sat back down on the sofa.

‘I don’t wanna find him. I hope the nasty old bastard rots in hell,’ Joyce replied dramatically.

Joey smiled. He could see through his nan’s façade, her hard exterior. Deep down she loved his grandad and even though she rarely had a good word to say about him, she was a lost soul without him.

‘Shall I ring Jock? My guess is that Grandad’s stopping with him. What happened anyway? You haven’t even told me yet, Nan.’

Joycie finally broke down as she repeated what had happened and the names Stanley had called her. ‘I only went to meet Eddie so I could sort things out between you and him. I wanted you and your dad to get on ’cause I know your mum would have wanted it,’ she wept.

Joey put both of his arms around his nan and held her tightly. Stanley Smith was a weak man and his nan would never have lasted that many years married to a man with more balls. She was a woman who liked to have the final say, make the decisions, and a stronger man would have divorced her yonks ago.

‘I’ll ring Jock now. Is his number in your address book?’ Joey asked.

Joyce nodded tearfully. ‘He must be at Jock’s, ’cause he took them stinking, bastard pigeons with him,’ she said.

Joey released his nan’s grip, stood up, flicked through her address book and dialled Jock’s number. ‘Hiya Jock, it’s Joey, Stanley’s grandson. Is my grandad there? Only I’m at my nan’s house and she wants to speak to him.’

Joey listened to Jock's reply and instantly felt rather nauseous. He couldn't leave his nan alone until his grandad returned, and he had his own bloody life to be getting on with.

'Well, can you make some phone calls, see if you can find out where he's gone, Jock?' Joey thanked Jock for his co-operation, then replaced the receiver and turned to Joyce.

'He's not there. Jock said they had a big row at some restaurant and he hasn't seen or heard from Grandad since.'

Joyce shot off the sofa as though someone had put a bullet up her arse. She had noticed Stanley acting strangely a lot recently; he kept disappearing at lunchtimes, saying he was going for a 'little drive', and she could have sworn blind she'd smelled women's perfume on his clothes two or three times in the past few months. She walked over to the drinks cabinet and poured herself a brandy for the shock.

'Please, Nan, don't drink any more,' Joey pleaded.

'Don't fuckin' drink any more! I need a bastard drink. Your grandfather has gone and got himself a bit of fluff, Joey, and when I find out who the old slapper is, I'm gonna wring her bleedin' neck until her tits fall off. Little drive! I'll show him what a little drive is when I drive that knife straight through his bollocks.'

Eddie Mitchell grinned as he heard Gina's car pull up outside. He deemed himself too cool to run outside to meet her, but he was no good without a woman by his side and to say he had missed her was putting it mildly.

The handover with O'Hara had gone to plan. There had been few words exchanged. Jimmy had pulled up in a pick-up truck, Eddie had got out of his own motor, handed him the dosh, then walked way and driven off. O'Hara had smirked when the dosh was handed over to him, Ed had clocked that, but he wasn't worried, as he knew he would have the last laugh. 'Good things come to those who wait,' his dad used to say.

When the front door opened, Ed walked into the hallway.

'I have missed you so much, Eddie,' Gina said, as she threw herself into his arms.

Eddie grinned, then kissed her passionately. He only had to look at her to feel his dick go rock hard. 'Let's go to bed, eh?' he whispered.

Usually, Gina would have run up the stairs, but not only was she ravenous, she also had something on her mind that had been plaguing her for the last few days. 'As much as I fancy you Ed, we need to talk first. I'm also starving. Have you been shopping or shall we get a takeaway?'

Thrown by the matter-of-fact tone in Gina's voice, Eddie lifted her chin with his hand and stared deep into her dark-brown eyes. 'You ain't gonna fuck me off, are ya? Don't tell me the first bit of agg we've had, you're bolting, babe.'

Gina looked at Eddie's handsome face. No, she wasn't impressed by being shoved off to her friend Claire's house for weeks, but she loved Ed dearly and would never leave him, no matter what he did.

'Ed, I love you more than I love myself. How can you even ask such a thing?'

Eddie pushed her long, dark hair away from her forehead. 'Something's wrong, I know it is. Tell me.'

Gina smiled. Nothing was wrong, everything was right, but for once it wasn't just herself she was having to think about, it was another little person. 'There's nothing wrong. I'm pregnant, Ed.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Terry Baldwin sat in the Thatched House in Barking with a glum expression and a pint of Guinness. His wonderful grandson's murder had left Terry stunned and heartbroken. He'd fucking loved that kid, idolised every hair on his little head.

Purgatory would be the best way to describe the six weeks since Luke had died. Terry's daughter Sally had been distraught, in absolute bits and, even though she was pregnant, had hit the bottle big style.

'You're gonna be burying another baby if you carry on like that,' Terry had warned her only yesterday.

'I'm so unhappy living here. I need to move back in with Jed. Please say I can, Dad. You can't keep me away from him for ever. I love him.'

Sick of watching Sally necking the wine night after night, Terry had reluctantly agreed that she could move back in with her no-good, pikey arsehole of a boyfriend. When Luke had first been murdered, Terry had turned up at the O'Haras' and ordered Sally to return home so she was safe and they could grieve and cry together. Terry had hoped that she would leave Jed for good, especially when she learned from the police that Frankie was also pregnant in the nick with the toerag's child, but it wasn't to be. The silly little cow was going back to him for now, until Terry found a way to get the piece of shit out of her life for good.

The pub door opened and Terry nodded as Jamie Carroll sat down opposite him. Jamie was a fixer and whether you wanted a firearm, a dodgy motor got rid of, or some bastard assassinated, Jamie could fix it for you.

'What you having to drink?' Terry asked.

'Nothing, I've gotta be in Shoreditch in half an hour. You got the boodle?'

Terry nodded. 'Shall I give it to you here?'

'No. I'll leave first; you finish your beer and meet me outside in five minutes. I'm in a silver Jag.'

Obeying Jamie's orders, Terry sipped his pint. He then stood up, checked nobody was watching him and left the pub. He spotted the Jag at the far end of the car park and walked towards it.

'Shall I get in while you count it? It's in bundles of a thousand.'

Jamie shook his head. He'd done bird with Baldwin and knew he was sweet. 'I trust ya. As soon as I get the nod, I'll let you know,' he replied. He started the engine and sped out of the car park like a racing driver.

Terry watched him go and then got into his own car. There was no going back now, not now he'd called it on. Nothing would bring Lukey boy back, but as the child's grandfather, Terry saw it as his duty to do whatever he could for Luke's memory.

Georgie and Harry O'Hara sat silently on the sofa as their dad fondled Sally on the armchair. Neither child particularly disliked Sally – she had always been quite kind to them and given them lots of attention when Luke was alive – but today she was solely focused on their father and had barely spoken to them all afternoon. Noticing that her dad had put his hand up Sally's short skirt, Georgie grabbed Harry's hand.

'Come on, let's play in the other room,' she said.

Thrilled to have Sally back and also desperate for a leg-over, Jed was happy to let his children do their own thing. His mum had gone to do the weekly shop, his father had driven her there, and when she got back he would leave her in charge of the kids while he took Sally upstairs for a good seeing-to. It would do them good to spend some time alone; they could have sex, then talk about Lukey boy.

'What you doin', Georgie?' Harry asked, as his sister stood on a chair and removed items from the fridge.

'Ssh,' Georgie warned. She didn't want her father to get wind of what she was up to.

Harry watched his sister in awe as she buttered the bread, spread some Marmite over it, then put big lumps of cheese in the middle. Georgie placed the sandwiches into her Mister Blobby lunchbox. She then placed four cans of Pepsi and four packets of crisps in a carrier bag.

‘You hold the lunchbox, I’ll carry the bag ’cause it’s heavier,’ she whispered to Harry.

Georgie put her Puffa jacket on, helped Harry into his, opened the front door and urged Harry to follow her outside. She could hear her dad making strange noises in the living room, so she left the door slightly open in case he heard it click shut.

‘Are we going for a picnic, Georgie?’ Harry asked excitedly.

Georgie held Harry’s hand and urged him to run towards the nearby fields. ‘No, we’re running away to Nanny Joycie’s house.’

Unaware that his great-grandchildren were on their way to his old abode, Stanley Smith finished the last of his rabbit stew and puffed out his cheeks.

‘Have some more,’ Pat the Pigeon ordered, as she leaped out of her seat to bring the large saucepan over.

‘Christ no, I’m that bloated I can’t even move.’

Pat smiled. She knew how to take care of a man – her mother had instilled it into her from a very early age. ‘Patricia, all you’ve got to do in life is learn to cook like an angel and act like a whore in the bedroom. If you can successfully master those two acts, no man will ever leave you – why would he?’ her mum used to insist.

‘I’ve made a rhubarb crumble, but if you’re stuffed we’ll eat that later for supper, Stanley. My Christine lent me a film the other day, reckons it’s bloody brilliant. It’s called *Thelma and Louise*. Have you seen it?’

Stanley shook his head. ‘Well, you go and make yourself comfortable in the living room while I wash up and then we’ll have a couple of cans of bitter to wash that dinner down and watch our film.’

Stanley grinned and did as he was told. Unlike Joycie, who had always treated and spoken to him like something untoward on the bottom of her shoe, Pat was kind, she respected him and Stanley could get very used to that indeed.

Back in bitterly cold Rainham, Harry O’Hara was shivering, tired and had just fallen over on the uneven ground and grazed his knee. ‘Can you pick me up, Georgie? My knee hurts,’ he asked with a tremor in his voice.

Seeing headlights approaching, Georgie pushed Harry behind a bush. The only way to Nanny Joycie’s house was via the road and because it was a country lane there was no pavement to walk on.

‘Why do you keep pushing me?’ Harry wept.

Aware that Harry’s teeth were chattering, Georgie gave him a hug. She opened her Mr Blobby lunchbox, gave Harry a sandwich, then handed him a can of Pepsi out of the carrier bag. It was dark now, pitch black, and as they nibbled on their sandwiches they could barely see what they were eating.

‘I’m sorry I pushed you, Harry, but if we don’t get out the way when a car drives along, we might get run over.’

Harry nodded tearfully. He didn’t like the dark, had always been afraid of it. ‘When will we see Nanny Joycie’s house?’ he asked.

‘Soon, but you have to walk quicker, Harry. I can’t carry you.’

They finished their sandwiches in silence, then Georgie stood up and grabbed her brother’s hand. She knew they were going the right way. Her teacher had taught her how to tell her left from her right and she knew her nan’s house was this way, because she’d spotted it from her grandad Jimmy’s truck. Georgie didn’t miss going to school at all. She hadn’t been back since her mummy had disappeared and she was pleased that she didn’t have to sit cooped up in a classroom every day. Not only that, she didn’t want to leave Harry indoors on his own. If she went to school, her brother would have no one to play with.

Feeling herself shiver, Georgie turned to her brother. 'It's nearly bedtime now, so we must run before Daddy finds us.'

Not wanting to be found by his daddy, Harry ignored the pain in his bruised knee and did as he was told.

Alice O'Hara had had a pleasant afternoon. Her Jimmy rarely took her out, but on the way back from Tesco, he'd suggested they have a meal in a local pub. For the first time since Marky and Lukey boy had died, Alice had laughed and smiled. She'd even drunk five pints of Guinness and it was good to forget her troubles, even if it was only for a day.

'I wonder what the chavvies have been up to?' Alice asked Jimmy. She was dying to get home now to have a little cuddle with her Georgie girl.

'I dunno, but you'll soon find out,' Jimmy replied, as he pulled up outside their house.

'I'll kill that Jed, he's left the poxy door open, the house'll be bloody freezing,' Alice moaned as she marched into the hallway. 'Georgie, Harry, Nanna's home,' she yelled.

The silence immediately unnerved Alice and left her with her usual feeling of doom and gloom. 'Jed, where are you?' she screamed. He had to be here, his Shogun was outside.

Hearing his mother's dulcet tones, Jed got out of bed, put his pants and jeans on and walked to the top of the stairs. 'I'm up 'ere. Sally's home, so we've been getting reacquainted, if you know what I mean.'

'Are the chavvies up there with ya?' Jimmy asked.

Jed felt the colour drain from his face. He'd got so used to his mum looking after the kids, he'd sort of forgotten she wasn't there. He ran down the stairs like a lunatic. 'Georgie! Harry!' he yelled.

Alice ran back into the hallway. She'd checked all the rooms and looked out the back. 'You stupid, selfish little bastard. The front door was open, you dinlo.'

As Alice began pummelling her son's bare chest with her fists, Jimmy searched for his mobile. He'd forgotten it earlier when he'd gone out with Alice. 'We'd better call the gavvers,' he yelled.

Alice stopped hitting her son and chased her husband into the lounge. 'No, dordie, no. If the gavvers get involved, we'll have social services knockin' on the door and they'll take the chavvies away from us. We gotta find 'em ourselves.'

Fuming that after such a good day his Alice was now in floods of tears, Jimmy grabbed his youngest son around the throat. He tapped his forehead with his free hand. 'You wanna start thinking with that rather than this,' he said as he kneed him in the bollocks.

'For fuck's sake, Jimmy, fighting ain't gonna find 'em. Let's go search for 'em,' Alice cried.

The house had automatic lights at the front and back, but Jimmy grabbed a couple of torches. Georgie was four and Harry was only three, so they couldn't have got far.

'You don't think the Mitchells have snatched 'em do you?' Jed asked, still holding his private parts.

'No chance, with Frankie still inside. It's more than they dare do,' Jimmy replied confidently.

'What's going on?' Sally asked, as she appeared at the top of the stairs.

Jed ignored her and pushed his parents out of the front door. He felt tearful now and sick with fear. He'd already lost one child and losing his other two didn't bear thinking about.

Stanley sat open-mouthed as Thelma and Louise prepared to drive off the cliff. It wasn't the film that was causing his state of shock, it was because Pat the Pigeon had just laid her head on his shoulder and put an arm across his belly.

Even as a lad, Stanley had been no lothario. Women had never liked him, full stop, and apart from the rare fumble with Joycie, he'd had fewer sexual encounters than a monk.

Willing Thelma and Louise to get on with it and drive off the bastard cliff, Stanley was relieved when they did so and as the credits rolled, he immediately faked a yawn and stood up. 'Oh well, that's me done for the night. Them bitters have knocked me out.'

'What about your rhubarb crumble?' Pat asked, sitting up straight.

‘I’m still bloated from that stew, love. Is it OK if we eat it tomorrow?’

Pat the Pigeon was a five-foot-two, voluptuous and big-breasted blonde. She was in her mid-fifties, but still had a lovely complexion and an extremely pretty face. With her hearty laugh and sexy smile, men had always fallen at her feet and even when she’d been married to Vic, she’d had to fight off unwelcome advances from her army of admirers. Stanley was a different kettle of fish and as desperate as Pat was to get him into bed, she knew she had to play the waiting game.

‘Slowly, slowly catchee monkey,’ her wise old mum used to say.

‘Yes, of course it’s OK to eat it tomorrow, Stanley. You get off to that nice comfortable bed in the spare room and I’ll see you in the morning, lovey.’

Desperate for his nan not to go off her head or get drunk and smash the house up like she did the last time when his grandad left home, Joey had offered to stay the night with her. Dominic, being the best partner a man could wish for, had just arrived with a big bag of fish and chips for them all.

Pleased that his nan was tucking in, Joey offered her another pickled onion.

‘I bet that’s the old bastard. He’s probably too frightened to use his key,’ Joyce said as the doorbell rang.

Positive it couldn’t be his grandad, as they hadn’t heard his car pull up, Joey put his plate down and stood up. He opened the door and could barely believe his eyes. Georgie was standing on a plant pot, which she’d used to reach the doorbell, and Harry was standing next to the pot, shivering and crying.

‘Oh my God. Get inside, you’re both freezing,’ Joey urged his niece and nephew.

When the children walked into the room, Joyce dropped her dinner on the floor in shock and burst into tears. ‘Oh, my little darlings,’ she said, as she knelt down and hugged them both.

Dominic looked at Joey in astonishment. ‘How did they get here? Did Jed drop them off?’

Joey knelt down, it had been raining for the past half an hour, so he took the children’s coats off and ordered them to sit next to the fire. Harry was still sobbing and, overcome by emotion, he clung to his Nanny Joyce. Her cuddles reminded him of his mummy.

Joey knelt down and held Georgie in his arms. ‘Who brought you here?’ he asked her.

‘No one. We ran away.’

As Georgie then burst into tears as well, Joey turned to Dominic. ‘What are we gonna do?’

Dominic knelt down next to Joey. ‘This is important, Georgie. Why did you run away? You must tell us what happened.’

‘Because we wanted to see our mummy,’ Georgie cried.

Joyce was the next to break down in tears. ‘How did you find Nanny’s house?’ she wept.

‘Cause I saw it when I was in Grandad Jimmy’s truck.’

‘Where is Mummy? Don’t wanna live with Daddy no more,’ Harry exclaimed, hiccupping.

Joyce held both children tightly to her chest. They were frozen stiff, the poor little mites. ‘Shall Nanny make you something nice and hot to eat and drink? It will warm your cockles, I promise.’

Georgie and Harry both nodded. They had chucked the rest of their sandwiches away and, after their marathon walk, were now both starving.

Joyce walked out into the kitchen and urged Joey to follow her. ‘What are we gonna do? We can’t keep them ’ere, we’ll get ourselves arrested. Should we ring the police?’

Joey thought momentarily, then shook his head. ‘Not yet. I’m gonna ring Dad, he’ll sort it out.’

Hearing Georgie and Harry chatting in the other room to Dominic, Joyce placed the sausages in the frying pan. She had missed her great-grandchildren so much and perhaps now they had run to her in their hour of need, something good might come out of this. Perhaps the authorities might let her have some kind of access to them.

Joyce made two mugs of hot chocolate and added some cold water so the poor little ha’porths didn’t burn themselves. ‘There you go, me little angels,’ she said, handing the mugs to them.

‘Can we see Mummy soon?’ Harry asked innocently.

'Mummy isn't here, love. But she told me to tell you that she can still see you from where she is and she loves you both very much.'

'Daddy says Mummy is in prison and Nanny Alice says she is an evil old shitcunt,' Georgie said, not quite understanding the meaning of her words.

'If anyone is evil, it's your Nanny Alice, not your mother,' Joyce said standing up. She could smell the sausages burning.

Joey ended his phone call and walked into the kitchen. 'Me dad said don't do nothing till he gets there. He's on his way.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eddie Mitchell rang his trusted solicitor Larry, then hit a ton as he zoomed along the A13. Gina announcing she was pregnant had been a big enough bolt out of the blue, but finding out that his grandkids had run away and turned up at Joycie's had literally knocked him for six. What was God trying to do? Give him a fucking heart attack?

Hearing his dad pull up outside, Joey opened the front door and ran outside to greet him.

'How are they? Are they OK?' Eddie asked, concerned.

Joey nodded. 'Nan's just made 'em sausage sandwiches and given 'em a hot bath. They was in a right state when they arrived though, Dad. Their clothes were soaked and they were frozen stiff. They could have been snatched by some pervert or anything.'

Eddie nodded, then put an arm around Joey's shoulder. 'Have they said why they ran away?'

'Yeah, they wanted to see Frankie. They said they missed their mum.'

As tough a man as he was, Eddie felt his eyes well up as he walked into the lounge. Georgie and Harry were sitting either side of Joycie. They both had big white bath towels wrapped around them and were munching on a bowl of crisps that was positioned on Joycie's lap.

'Look, Grandad Eddie's here. Go and give him a cuddle,' Joycie urged them.

Harry loved a cuddle, so he immediately stood up, and held his arms wide open. He didn't care that his towel dropped to the floor.

Eddie picked up Harry's naked little body and swung him around in the air. 'Hello, me little bruiser, Grandad loves you, you know,' he said, planting kisses on his face.

Georgie sat motionless on the sofa. She knew she had a Grandad Stanley and a Grandad Jimmy, but she didn't really remember her Grandad Eddie. She was sure she had heard her mum mention him, but he didn't look familiar to her.

'Give your Grandad a kiss, Georgie,' Joycie ordered.

Eddie sat Harry on the sofa next to his sister, then knelt down in front of the pair of them. Apart from a quick glance when he'd knocked at O'Hara's house, he hadn't seen Georgie for well over a year, but still felt hurt that she didn't seem to remember him. He spoke gently. 'I know neither of you really know who I am, but that's my fault because I had to go away somewhere. I'm your mum's dad, your Grandad Eddie.'

Georgie and Harry glanced at one another. Within seconds, Georgie had worked it all out. 'What, like my dad is Jed and you are Eddie, Mummy's dad?'

Eddie smiled. 'That's right, and being your mum's dad makes me your grandad.'

Georgie smiled and then hugged him. If this man was her mum's dad, then she liked him.

'Can we see Mummy now?' Harry asked again.

'Hopefully you can soon, but you have to do what I tell you to do, is that OK? Will you do that for me?'

Georgie and Harry both nodded excitedly. They couldn't wait to see their mum.

'In a little while a man and a lady are going to come here. You must tell them that you ran away from home because you miss your mum so much. The lady will ask you some questions and you must tell her that you don't like living with your dad, Nanny Alice and Grandad Jimmy. Tell her you want to live with Nanny Joyce, Uncle Joey, or me.'

'Will she take us to see Mummy then?' Harry enquired.

'Not tonight, but hopefully very soon,' Eddie replied.

'Why did Mummy leave us?' Georgie asked sadly.

Eddie stroked her long, dark hair. 'Your Mummy didn't leave you. She would never do that because she loves you and Harry more than anything in the world. Something happened between your mum and dad and the police took your mummy away for a little while.'

Georgie chewed her fingernails. 'Is Mummy in prison? Daddy says she is and Nanny Alice says she's an old shitcunt.'

Eddie could barely believe what he was hearing. He was no angel, but how could any grandmother teach her four-year-old granddaughter that type of language? 'Your Nanny Alice needs her mouth washed out with soap. Tell the lady that as well, Georgie, tell her what Nanny Alice said about your mum. Don't forget, will ya?'

'She said Mummy is an old shitcunt,' Harry repeated proudly. Neither child was old enough to understand the meaning of such awful language.

'Good boy,' Eddie said, patting Harry on the head. Larry and the social worker would be here soon, and they needed to get this right. 'Now, I want you to pretend that I'm the lady and when I ask you a question, you are to answer it like I told you to. Can you do that for me?'

Both children nodded.

'So, why did you run away from home?' Eddie asked.

Joyce, Joey and Dominic all smiled at one another as the children repeated what Ed had told them to say. Georgie was especially convincing, as she answered every question in detail with the answers her grandfather had given her.

'Was that your idea or Larry's, Dad?' Joey asked, impressed.

'A bit of both really, but it was Larry's idea to get the social worker involved. She's got a lot of sway, apparently.'

'I can't believe the O'Haras ain't knocked here. I mean, surely they know the kids are missing,' Joyce said, perplexed.

'They're scum, what do you expect?' Eddie replied.

Dominic turned to Georgie and Harry. 'Where was your dad, nan and grandad when you ran away? Were they all at home?' he asked.

Both children shook their heads. 'Nanny Alice and Grandad Jimmy went out and Daddy was in the front room with Sally, making funny noises,' Georgie replied.

Eddie glanced at Joey, shook his head and knelt down again. 'Tell the lady that as well. Tell her that when you ran away, Daddy was making funny noises with his girlfriend in another room.'

Georgie grinned and nodded eagerly. She really liked her Grandad Eddie; he was cool and treated her like a big girl. 'Can we live with you, Grandad?' she asked hopefully.

Feeling himself getting all emotional again, Eddie stood up. Anything could have happened to those kids today, absolutely anything. Say some nonce-case had spotted them and abducted them? The O'Haras wanted shooting and the fact that they'd put his grandchildren in danger made Ed want to be the one to pull that trigger even more.

'Where you goin', Grandad?' Harry asked as Eddie bolted from the room.

'Toilet,' Eddie lied. The truth was, he was struggling to hold back the tears and it wasn't in his nature to show weakness, not even in front of his own.

Alice O'Hara was inconsolable. Crying one minute, screaming, ranting and raving the next. She was losing the plot, especially with Jed, and Jimmy knew it. They'd all spent an hour searching on foot, but there was neither hide nor hair of Georgie or Harry. It was as though the kids had disappeared into thin air. Knowing they had to widen their search, Jimmy had now called reinforcements in. His nephew Sammy had already arrived and his son Billy was on his way and was bringing another four blokes from his site with him. Pat Murphy had offered to help as well. He'd got here within minutes of Jimmy's phone call, as he only lived down the road.

'Don't just fucking stand there, then!' Alice screamed at everyone.

Jimmy grabbed hold of his wife and held her shaking body close to his chest. 'We're just waiting for Billy boy, love, and then we'll jump in three or four motors and we'll find them. They'll be OK, I promise you that.'

‘You promised me Marky’s funeral would be OK and look what happened there. As for you,’ Alice yelled, breaking free from her husband and punching her youngest son in the side of his head, ‘you ain’t fit to be a father, you selfish, no-good cunt.’

As Sally tried to cuddle him, Jed pushed her away. He blamed his girlfriend entirely for what had happened. It was all her fault; he’d been happily watching the telly with the kids until she’d started rubbing his cock. She should never have done that, not when she knew he had to look after Georgie and Harry.

‘Do yourself a favour and go back to your father’s tonight, Sally. I ain’t in the best of moods, OK? If you hadn’t have come round ’ere today, none of this would have happened.’

Sally looked at Jed with an incredulous expression on her face. None of this was her bloody fault. How could he even say that when the reason her beautiful son was dead was because of him?

‘You bastard! My Lukey boy died because somebody was trying to shoot *you*. How can you blame me for this, Jed? After everything we’ve been through, how could you be so callous?’

‘Don’t you dare blame that girl,’ Alice yelled at Jed.

Desperate to get back into his mother’s good books, Jed did what he was best at and lied. ‘You don’t know the fucking half of it, Mum. I told her to leave me alone, but she kept touching me in front of Georgie and Harry. I didn’t want them to see all that shit, that’s why we went upstairs. I mean, I ain’t had sex for weeks, so what was I supposed to do?’

Jed had always been the apple of Alice’s eye and she was now glad she had an excuse to stop hating him and blame somebody else. ‘Go home, Sally, and don’t fucking come back until you learn how to behave,’ she screamed viciously.

Jed pushed Sally towards the front door. ‘Wait at the end of the drive. I’ll order you a cab and ring you tomorrow.’

Sally was in floods of tears. Her dad was right, the O’Haras were scumbags and Jed was a lying, cheating, no-good bastard.

Seeing his brother Billy pull into the drive, Jed waved his hand for him to stop, then ran over to Sally.

‘I’ll bell you when the chavvies are home,’ he said, attempting to peck her on the cheek.

Sally turned her head and, seeing Jed for what he really was for the first time ever, boldly spat in his face. ‘Drop dead, you shit-bag. And I swear, if you ever try to contact me again, I will make sure my dad fucking kills you!’

Larry Peters arrived at Joycie’s at 9 p.m. He had represented the Mitchell family and had been on their payroll for many decades, hence his quick response to Eddie’s phone call. When asked by some of the snobs in his profession about his relationship with the notorious clan, Larry liked to describe himself as a family friend. He had been especially close to Harry, Eddie’s father, and had been devastated when Harry had met his maker in such awful circumstances.

Larry turned the ignition off, got out of the car and opened the passenger door for Carol. Larry had known Carol Cullen for many years. She had done him a few favours in the past and vice versa and he knew she was the right person to be involved in an incident like this. If anyone could pull some strings for him in social services then that woman was Carol.

Eddie opened the front door, shook Larry’s hand and was then introduced to Carol. ‘Thank you so much for visiting us at such short notice. My grandchildren have had the most awful ordeal and I’m very concerned over their future well-being. They miss their mother enormously,’ he said, laying it on as much as he could.

Carol shook his hand, then walked into the living room and smiled at Georgie and Harry.

‘Hello, my name is Carol. Wow, don’t you two look nice and snug with them big bath towels wrapped around you?’

‘Can you take us to see our mummy?’ Harry blurted out.

Carol hated making promises if she couldn't keep them. 'Hopefully, I can organise a visit so you can see your mum, but first I need to ask you some questions, is that OK?'

Georgie and Harry both nodded. Their grandad had now told them numerous times what they had to say and his words were firmly drummed into their little brains.

'Do you mind if I speak to the children alone? It's the usual procedure,' Carol asked Eddie.

Larry had prewarned him that Carol would probably ask to speak to the kids alone, so Eddie nodded and he, Dominic, Joey and Joycie left the room.

'I hope they remember everything you told them,' Joyce whispered.

'Of course they will. They ain't silly kids, especially Georgie. Bright as a button, she is,' Eddie said confidently.

Larry joined the quartet in the kitchen. 'Did you have a chat with 'em, like I told you to, Ed?'

Eddie nodded. 'So what happens next, you know, after she's spoken to 'em?'

'I briefed Carol about everything that has happened in the children's lives on the way down here. Once she has finished speaking to them, she will inform the police that they are here, so it gets noted. I have a feeling that when the O'Haras realised they were missing, rather than involve the police, they have probably been searching for them themselves. You know what travellers are like, Ed, they hate the police and everything they stand for. If my theory is right and they haven't contacted the authorities by the time we do, that will go very much in our favour to getting some kind of access. I should imagine the children will almost certainly be allowed to visit Frankie on a regular basis. She is their mother, after all. Now, if you'll excuse me, I am in desperate need of a visit to the lavatory.'

'Where's Stanley, Joyce? Out the back with them birds of his?' Eddie asked.

Joyce had barely given her husband a second thought for the past few hours. She wasn't worried – she knew Stanley too well – and was positive he would be back home in the next couple of days with his tail between those knobbly knees of his.

'Stanley's stomped off in one of his tantrums, the silly old bastard. He found out that I'd met you in the Bull that time and threw all his toys out of his pram,' Joyce replied.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Joycie. How did he find out?' Eddie asked.

'No idea, he was too busy asking for a divorce to tell me that vital piece of information,' Joyce said, laughing.

Dominic glanced at his watch. He had an early meeting in the morning with a potential billionaire investor. 'Do you mind if I make a move, Joey? I've got that meeting early tomorrow morning with that American guy I told you about. I would stay here with you, but I've no change of clothes and Madonna will need to be fed and watered.'

Joey put a casual arm around his boyfriend's shoulder. 'You get off, Dom. I'll stay here with Nan tonight. Perhaps pick me up tomorrow when you finish work. I'll have to call in sick again, I'm afraid, but it can't be helped.'

Eddie shook Dominic's hand. 'Thanks for being there for my Joey, mate. You're a good lad.'

Joycie grinned. Sod Stanley's sulks, Eddie had now fully accepted Joey and Dominic's relationship and that was all that mattered.

In the lounge, Carol was still talking to Georgie and Harry. Both children had spoken candidly about why they had run away, and their love for their mother was clear to see. 'So, has your daddy explained why your mummy had to go away for a while?' she asked.

Remembering her grandfather's words, Georgie nodded. 'Daddy told us that Mummy was evil and Nanny Alice said that Mummy was in prison because she's an old shitcunt.'

'Nanny told me that, too,' Harry chipped in. He was determined to do his bit for the cause.

Carol was horrified. She was used to dealing with children that came from deprived homes, but what sort of grandmother was Nanny Alice to use vile words like 'shitcunt' to children so young? Carol stood up; she had made plenty of notes of her conversation with the children and now it was her duty to call the police.

‘Can we see Mummy now?’ Harry asked her again.

Carol smiled and ruffled his hair. ‘Hopefully, you can see your mummy soon and I promise I’ll do my best to make sure that happens.’

Eddie looked at Carol with expectation as she walked into the kitchen. ‘Well, did they answer all your questions OK?’ he asked.

‘Yes, they did, and they have given me plenty of insight into the family they are currently living with. I am going to ring the police now and they will collect the children and take them back home. I shall then submit my report to my husband, who is in charge of this entire area.’

Joyce was gutted. Having the children at home had made her forget about all her other problems.

‘Do they have to go back to the O’Haras? They obviously aren’t happy living there and I’m willing to look after them,’ she pleaded.

‘I’m afraid the law says they do have to go back to their father, for now at least. I do understand how worried you are for their welfare, but these things take time. The one thing I am sure about is that I can arrange a regular visit for the children to see their mother. My husband, Phillip, is actually in charge of social services in this area, and I can make sure that definitely happens. As for the children being taken away from their father, with the circumstances of their mother’s plight, that might prove to be quite difficult.’

‘Go and sit with the kids,’ Eddie ordered Joey and Joyce. ‘Why is it so difficult to take them away from the scumbags they’re currently living with?’ he asked Carol. ‘I’m willing to look after them and even if my police record puts the kibosh on that, Joyce will have them until Frankie comes home.’

Larry gave Eddie a warning look. His voice was raised, and if he lost his cool, it could balls everything up.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Mitchell, but it’s just not that simple. Now, if you will excuse me, I really do have to call the police now,’ said Carol.

Realising that his adorable grandchildren were about to be carted off back to what he fondly described as ‘pikey hell’, Eddie stomped into the lounge and crouched down in front of them.

‘Did you tell the lady everything I told you to?’ he whispered.

Georgie and Harry both nodded. ‘Can we see Mummy now?’ Harry asked, his voice filled with hopeful innocence.

Joyce and Joey both had tears in their eyes as Eddie explained that the police were coming round and the children would have to be taken back to live with their father.

Georgie and Harry started to cry. It had been a long day and they were both physically and mentally drained. ‘But we don’t want to live there, we want to live with you, Grandad,’ Georgie pleaded.

Eddie leaned forward and held both sobbing children close to his chest. He had rarely cried after he’d reached the age of ten, but for once he couldn’t control the tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘Everything is gonna work out just fine. Your grandad will make sure of that, I promise.’

CHAPTER NINE

Harry O'Hara was first to wake up the following morning. His Nanny Alice had ordered his Grandad Jimmy to sleep elsewhere, so that he and Georgie could share the bed with her. Harry was careful as he prodded Georgie. His nan was snoring like a disgruntled pig and he didn't want to wake her. He actually preferred her when she was sleeping.

Georgie sat up, rubbed her eyes and smiled at Harry. Neither of them had wanted to come home last night, but the police had made them. Both children had cried themselves to sleep, but this morning, they felt brighter. The nice social worker lady had promised she would arrange visits so they could see their mum. She even said she would try to sort it so they could see their Nanny Joyce again as well. They had asked her if they could see Grandad Eddie also, but she hadn't answered that question.

'My legs hurt,' Harry mumbled, remembering his ordeal from the day before. He wasn't used to long walks and his knee was grazed and scabby from where he had fallen over.

'I'm hungry. Shall we get some breakfast?' Georgie whispered.

As the children quietly got out of bed, Alice sat bolt upright. 'What you doing? Where you going?' she asked fearfully. She immediately presumed they were about to do a runner again.

'We're hungry, Nanny, we want some food,' Georgie replied.

Alice leaped out of bed and put on her slippers and dressing gown. She was so relieved to have the children home safe that after the police had left last night, Alice had vowed to Jimmy to move heaven and earth to make them happy again.

'Nanny'll cook breakfast for you. What do you want? How 'bout a nice fry-up?'

Georgie glanced at Harry and both children shook their heads. Since Marky and Lukey boy had died, nobody had been very nice to them. Everybody had virtually ignored them, even their dad, and Georgie instinctively knew that running away would change all that. Their escape could only make life better for them.

'Me and Harry don't like your fry-up. We like toast with Marmite and cheese on top, that's what Mummy used to cook us,' Georgie said brazenly.

Alice ignored the mention of Frankie, crouched down and hugged both children close to her chest. She had been so wrapped up in her own grief, she had sort of neglected these two and they needed her, needed her badly.

'From now on, yous two cheeky little chavvies can have whatever you bleedin' well want. Your Nanny Alice loves you both very much.'

Eddie had woken up early, made love to Gina, then ordered her to have a lie-in while he cooked the breakfast, for a change. Watching his grandkids being carted off back to the O'Haras' last night had upset Ed immensely. He had spoken to the police and demanded answers as to why the O'Haras hadn't reported them missing in the first place.

'They should be with us, a normal family who would love and care for them, instead of living with a load of two-bob pikeys,' he'd insisted.

The two coppers had very nearly burst out laughing. Neither had ever had any personal dealings with the Mitchells before, but every police force in England were well aware who they were, what had befallen them in the past, and they were anything but bloody normal.

When Ed had got back home last night, he'd poured himself a large Scotch and had a proper heart-to-heart with Gina about the upbringing of their baby. Eddie had insisted that she must give up her job for good and be a full-time mum and, as luck would have it, she had seen sense and agreed.

'I always told myself that the day I fell pregnant I would walk away from it all. I loved being a private detective but it's a job for a childless woman, not a mother,' Gina admitted, not wanting Eddie to think she was jacking it in just because he wanted her to.

As he was about to scramble some eggs, Eddie's mobile rang, so he took the saucepan off the hob. It was Gary. He had had a problem with a geezer who had done a bunk. 'What does he owe?' Eddie asked, when Gary finally stopped talking.

'Well, he borrowed twelve grand and promised he would pay it back in six weeks, so me and Ricky did a deal with him. He was desperate for it that day, so we said yes, but only if he paid us back sixteen. We said we'd take ten in a month, then give him the extra two weeks to pay the odd six. It was a month yesterday since we lent it to him, so we went round to his gaff to pick the ten up. When we got there, we found out he'd done a runner. It didn't take us long to find out where he was. We gave his mate a proper good dig and then he gave us the address. I tried to ring you all last night, but I couldn't get hold of you. Where was you?'

'What's the cunt's name?' Eddie spat, ignoring the question. He'd been in the money-lending game for years now and because of his reputation, people rarely dared take the piss out of him.

'Colin Griffiths, but he sometimes uses Simmons as his surname as well. He used to be a publican, ran a couple of dives in Barking and a couple more in East Ham. I think he might have even ran the Central at one point.'

Eddie was fuming. He and Raymond had a meeting with a geezer over in Whitechapel who owned boozers in the East End and wanted to pay protection to get rid of an Asian gang who had been making a nuisance of themselves. Ed made his decision and smashed his fist against the wall in annoyance. Twelve grand was peanuts to him, but it was the fucking principle, not the money. 'I'll tell Raymond to go to our meeting alone and I'll pick you and Rick up in an hour, Gal.'

Over in Holloway, Frankie was in a far happier mood than her father was. The prison had organised an antenatal class for anyone on the maternity wing who wanted to attend, and she and Babs had put their names down for something to do.

In the maternity ward there were a lot of young girls who were first-time mothers, and their faces were a picture as the woman was describing 'how to give birth in the correct manner' out of some textbook she was reading from. The woman's posh voice wasn't doing her any favours, either. Most of the girls in Holloway were as common as muck, and they had never heard anybody who spoke the way she did; she sounded as if she had a plum in her mouth, and even Frankie was shocked by her upper-class accent.

When the woman picked up a doll, put it in a plastic bath and said the word 'vagina' as she was washing it, nearly all the lags burst out laughing. In their world it was called a noony, a snatch, a cunt or a fanny.

As she and Babs were giggling, Frankie noticed a girl with dark hair staring at her. She had seen the same girl looking at her earlier. 'Don't look now, but there's a girl that keeps looking at me. She's got a black cardigan on, curly shoulder-length hair and she's on your left. Look in a minute and see if you know who she is.'

Babs did as Frankie asked, then nudged her pal. 'Never seen her before. Perhaps she's a lezzie and fancies you.'

'Don't say that, that's all I'm short of,' Frankie said worriedly.

Laughing, Babs gently punched Frankie on the arm. 'I'm only winding you up. If she was a lezzie I doubt she'd be preppers, would she? And even if she was one of them bisexual bitches, you've no worries, 'cause Babbsy will look after you, sweet child.'

When the posh woman ended her speech with, 'May God bless each and every one of you,' Frankie stood up with the rest of the girls. The girl who had been staring at her immediately approached her.

'Are you Jed O'Hara's girlfriend?' she asked.

Frankie was instantly on her guard. The girl was obviously a traveller; she had the same strange accent as Jed and his family.

'Who wants to know?' she asked boldly.

The girl held out her right hand and smiled. 'I'm Katie, Katie Cooper. I don't know if Jed ever mentioned my sister, Debbie. She went out with him for a year when he was fourteen. Debs was older than him, she was sixteen at the time.'

Frankie shook her head. 'No, he didn't and Jed's not my boyfriend, he's my ex.'

Katie shook her head understandingly. 'I heard what happened, news travels fast in our community. Jed's a bastard and I don't blame you for what you did to him. I wish I'd had the guts to do the same to him and that cousin of his myself as payback for what he did to me and my sister.'

Frankie looked at the girl suspiciously. 'All travellers stick together,' Jed had always told her.

'Mitchell, move, come on, and you, Lewis, back to your cells,' the screw shouted at Frankie and Babs. Babs stared at the screw. She was going nowhere without her friend.

'Come on, let's go,' Babs said, urging Frankie to move away from the girl.

Frankie allowed herself to be led away. She didn't like Katie – she was a traveller and Frankie had never met a decent one yet. Glancing around to make sure Katie wasn't behind her, Frankie turned to Babs.

'I don't trust her. She's probably one of Jed's spies and he's told her to befriend me.'

Babs put a comforting arm around Frankie's shoulder. She could tell that speaking to that girl had upset her, reminded her of the past. 'There ain't many people you can trust in here at all, honey.'

Frankie linked arms with Babs. She trusted her with her life. 'Especially travellers. I fucking hate 'em, Babs.'

Back at the O'Haras', Georgie and Harry were both being thoroughly spoiled rotten. Their dad hadn't left their side all morning, neither had Nanny Alice or Grandad Jimmy and they'd been playing games with them, which was unheard of in the past. Usually Georgie and Harry were expected to amuse themselves.

Alice heard a car pull up outside and looked out of the window. 'Oh dordie, it's the gavvers and they've got some woman in a smart suit with them. They ain't taking the chavvies away, are they?' she asked, petrified.

Jimmy put a comforting arm around his wife's shoulder and ordered Jed to answer the door. 'It'll be OK. They probably just wanna check that Georgie and Harry are OK,' Jimmy assured his wife.

'What's the problem?' Jed asked, as he opened the front door. There was a male and female copper and also an important-looking woman in a smart grey suit.

'Are you Jed O'Hara, Harry and Georgina's father?' the policewoman asked. Carol Cullen had asked the police to accompany her, as she suspected a breach of the peace could take place.

Jed nodded. He hated the Old Bill, wanted to tell 'em to fuck off, but he knew that kind of behaviour wouldn't do him any favours. 'Georgie and Harry are absolutely fine. They're in the living room playing with their grandparents,' he said politely.

'I'm DS Fletcher and my colleague is PC Hughes. Could we come in, Mr O'Hara? Mrs Cullen needs to speak to you about the children.'

Jed immediately started to panic and dropped his politeness. 'Who is she?' he asked, pointing at the woman in the smart suit.

'I'm Mrs Cullen,' the woman said, holding out her right hand.

Jed ignored the gesture, 'Who are you, then? What do you want? We ain't committed no crime.'

'I'm a social worker and I need to speak to you regarding your children's welfare.'

Jed unwillingly led the trio into the lounge. If they could see the kids were happy, with a bit of luck they would piss off and leave his family alone.

Alice was shaking like a leaf as Jed handed out the introductions. The gavvers always scared her, but today the social worker accompanying them was scaring her more.

'Hello,' Georgie said beaming, as she spotted the nice lady who had come to Nanny Joycie's house the previous evening.

'Can we see Mummy now?' Harry asked bluntly.

Carol crouched down and patted both children on the head. 'How are you both today?' she asked.

'OK. Daddy, Nanny Alice and Grandad Jimmy have been playing cowboys and Indians with us,' Georgie replied happily.

'That sounds like fun,' Carol said, as she stood up and turned back to the adults.

'You ain't takin' 'em away. I won't allow it,' Alice said, tears streaming down her face.

'Stop worrying. Nobody's taking the children away from you,' Carol said kindly.

DS Fletcher cleared her throat. She had only recently been promoted to DS after being in the force for many years and she took her new role extremely seriously. 'Why didn't you report the children missing yesterday?' she asked.

Jed felt his hackles rise. 'I explained all this last night. We were searching for 'em ourselves. Us travellers are a close-knit community. I had my own reinforcements, so there was no need to bother you. I knew they'd turn up alive and well anyway, kids always do.'

DS Fletcher looked at Jed in disbelief. Any nutter could have picked up those poor children yesterday. 'Do you not realise the seriousness of not reporting the disappearance of children so young? They could have been abducted by a paedophile, run over – anything could have happened to them.'

Jed was beginning to lose his temper now. What was the bitch insinuating – that he was a bad parent? 'All kids run away. I did it loads of times when I was their age. It's all part of growing up, ain't it? Anyway, I've had a good chat with them and both Georgie girl and Harry have promised me faithfully that they will never do anything like that again.'

Jed turned to his children. 'Go on, you tell the policewoman that you won't run off again, like you told me.'

'We promise we won't run off again,' Georgie said.

'I won't, 'cause my legs hurt,' Harry mumbled.

'We idolise them kids and you can see that they're clean, loved and well fed,' Alice said proudly.

Jimmy put a comforting arm around Jed's shoulder. If his son lost his temper, which he was quite capable of, the kids might be carted off there and then.

Carol Cullen turned to Jed. 'Could I speak to you alone for a minute?'

Jed led her out to the kitchen. He'd seen his mum give him a warning look and he knew he had to learn how to control his temper more, especially when dealing with the authorities. 'I'm sorry if I've been a bit snappy, but what with my brother being killed and then Luke, my son, it's been a tough time lately,' he explained.

Carol nodded understandingly. 'The reason I've come here to see you today is about access for the children to visit their mother. I spoke to Georgie and Harry at length last night and it is clear that they miss their mother dreadfully and, in my opinion, it would be in their best interests if they were to have contact with her.'

Jed stood with his mouth wide open. He couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. 'Are you serious? Frankie is a loony, a proper nutter. She tried to kill me, for fuck's sake. Would you want your kids seeing a potential murderer? I love my chavvies and I don't want them anywhere near that monster of a mother of theirs.'

'Calm down, Mr O'Hara. If you keep behaving like this, I will have to write a bad report on you and chances are you will lose your children for good.'

Telling Jed he might lose his children was like waving a red rag at a bull. 'Get out of my house, you fucking shitcunt!' he shouted as he tried to bundle Carol Cullen towards the front door.

Jimmy, Alice and the two police officers heard the fracas and ran out to the kitchen.

'Whatever's going on? Leave my boy alone,' Alice screamed, as the two Old Bill grabbed hold of Jed.

'Calm down, you dinlo,' Jimmy yelled, as Jed tried desperately to free himself.

Georgie and Harry had followed everybody else and were now standing at the kitchen door, holding hands.

‘They wanna let my chavvies visit that slag in prison,’ Jed shrieked.

‘Over my dead body are they visiting that evil whore,’ Alice yelled.

Guessing that they were discussing her mum, by the words ‘visit’ and ‘prison’, Georgie put her two penn’orth in. ‘But me and Harry want to see Mummy. That’s why we ran away, ’cause we wanted to find Mummy.’

As Jed began to scream at Georgie, Jimmy shoved him and Alice out of the back door and locked it. ‘Jed don’t mean to get angry. He’s so stressed at the moment, what with his boy being murdered,’ he explained.

‘One more outburst from your son and he’s nicked,’ Fletcher replied meaningfully.

Carol felt dreadfully sorry for Georgie and Harry. Life with the O’Haras seemed even worse than she’d anticipated it to be.

‘Can we see Mummy now?’ Harry asked her innocently.

Carol led them into the lounge and sat down next to them on the sofa. ‘I’m going to take your case to something called a civil court and then hopefully you will be able to see your mummy again.’

Eddie Mitchell was not in the best of moods. Driving to Milton Keynes to extract money out of some prick who had underestimated him was one reason, and the other were the looks on Gary and Ricky’s faces when he’d just told them that Gina was pregnant.

‘Fucking hell! Anyone would think that I’d just told you someone you were close to had died. Ain’t you happy for us, or what?’

Gary glanced at his brother. Both were thinking about their future inheritance. ‘Yeah, course we are, but a newborn baby’s a lot to take on at your age, ain’t it?’

Eddie slammed his foot on the brake and mounted the kerb. ‘I’m fifty-three, not eighty,’ he yelled angrily.

‘Does Frankie know yet?’ Ricky asked. His half-sister was not going to be pleased; she hadn’t even come to terms with her dad being with Gina yet.

‘I’m visiting Frankie tomorrow, so I’ll tell her then. Joey, I’ll ring tonight. I saw him yesterday, but with all the chaos over Georgie and Harry, it was neither the time nor the place. Now check that map and see where we are. It’s Bradwell village we’re looking for.’

Ricky gave him directions. Five minutes later, they’d found where they were looking for. ‘This is it. Do a right here, then first left and it’s number sixty-six.’

Eddie pulled up a few doors away from the address. He glanced around to make sure nobody was about, then got out of his Range Rover. ‘Does he live here with anyone?’ he asked Gary.

‘Dunno. The geezer never said.’

Ed grabbed his baseball bat from under the back seat. It was a standing joke between him and the boys that they carried the full baseball kit around with them. They even had catcher’s mitts and a helmet complete with ear flaps. They’d got tugged a good few years back, just before Ed had got put away, and the filth had swallowed the lie that Gary was training to become a professional baseball player. They’d cracked up for days over that one.

‘You knock,’ Eddie ordered Ricky, as he stood to the side of the porch and placed the bat beside the wall.

‘Is Colin in?’ Ricky asked, as a plump, dark-haired bird with big knockers answered the door.

‘No, I think you’ve got the wrong house. My fella’s called John,’ she said.

‘This is definitely the right address,’ Ricky insisted.

The woman shook her head. ‘We’re not from round here, we’re from East London. We only moved here two weeks ago, so maybe you’re looking for the previous tenant.’

Eddie poked his head around the porch door and smiled. The mention of East London had given it away; Colin was obviously using a different Christian name and was now calling himself

John. 'Where is your bloke, out of interest? Can I have a word with him? You never know, he might have a forwarding address for Colin. We need to contact him because his mum has died and it's her funeral on Friday.'

'Are you three policemen?' the woman asked.

'Yes, love,' Ed said politely.

'You'll find my John in a pub called the Victoria Inn. Spends half his life in there since we moved here, he does. His surname is Griffiths,' the woman said laughing.

Eddie grinned at the woman, then walked away. 'Thank you, you've been most helpful, and I'll tell you something else, if I had a pretty woman like you indoors, I wouldn't be spending all my time in a pub.'

The woman giggled, waved and closed the front door.

Eddie, Gary and Ricky walked back to the Range Rover. They all knew that John Griffiths was actually Colin. The dickhead was even using his own surname.

'We passed that boozier on the way 'ere, it's only a couple of minutes down the road. What I suggest is you two go in and bring the cheeky cunt outside. I'll wait in the motor and then we'll take him for a nice little ride.'

Eddie watched the boys walk into the boozier, then collared a man walking his dog. 'Excuse me, is there any forestry or woods around here? My son has taken our dog for a walk and has rung me and asked me to pick him up. We're new around here, so he's a bit lost, I think.'

The man nodded, then gave directions. 'Come on, Poppy,' he said, as he toddled off with his faithful friend by his side.

Seconds later, Eddie saw Gary and Ricky walk out of the pub alone. 'Where the fuck is he, then?' Ed asked as they got in the motor.

'Gary'll explain,' Ricky said, leaving his brother to do the talking.

'The bloke who lives at the house we knocked at *is* called John Griffiths. He was in the boozier; we've just spoken to him. He's just moved here from Custom House.'

Ed glared at Gary. 'You've gotta be havin' me on.'

'It ain't all bad news. The geezer knew Colin, says he drinks in that pub an' all. He reckons he lives at number six, not sixty-six. I must have misheard that arsehole we gave a dig to and took the address down wrong, unless he gave me a dodgy one on purpose.'

'Well, let's go and knock at number six then.'

Gary shook his head. 'Colin has gone to the Canary Islands, Gran Canaria apparently. He ain't due back until Saturday week. That John hates him, said he's a right mouthy prick. He told me that Colin gets in the boozier at twelve on the dot every lunchtime.'

Eddie smashed his fist against the steering wheel. His bad mood had just doubled. Not only had he had a wasted trip to Milton Keynes, and now had to come back there again, but the shit-bag that had ripped him off was now pissing his money up in sunny climates, the cheeky bastard.

Eddie started the ignition and sped off like a loony. 'I tell you something, and I mean this. When I catch up with Colin Deadman Griffiths, not only am I gonna make him pay me twenty-five grand back, I'm also gonna disfigure the cunt for life. No one takes the piss out of me and gets away with it, and I mean no one!'

CHAPTER TEN

Jimmy O'Hara met his contact in the Derby Digger in Wickford. Bobby Berkley was a lifelong family friend and was also the brother of Pete Berkley, who was coming towards the end of a ten stretch in Belmarsh. Pete was willing to carry out the killing of Ronny and Paulie alone for the sum of twenty grand.

At first Jimmy had ummed and aahed over the wonga Pete demanded. He knew a few travellers in Belmarsh who would probably do the job a lot cheaper, but in the end, he had decided to stump up the cash. Mitchell had given him thirty, so whatever he shelled out, he was still in credit and that thought made Jimmy smile. Mitchell paying him to kill his own brothers while giving him a good drink on top was the stuff that dreams were made of.

Bobby Berkley stood up and shook Jimmy's hand. 'What are you drinking, pal?'

'I'll have a pint of bitter,' Jimmy said, sitting down at the table.

Bobby returned with the drinks and the men got straight down to business.

'As agreed, there's five up front and you'll get the other fifteen when the job's done,' Jimmy said, as he handed Bobby an envelope under the table.

'I'm visiting Pete on Wednesday and will tell him it's all systems go. He's on the same wing as Ronny and Paulie and he's already been watching their movements,' Bobby said.

'I don't care how he does it, I just want 'em both dead and I want it done before Christmas.'

Bobby nodded understandingly. 'Don't worry. Pete won't let you down.'

Back in Rainham, Joycie Smith was starting to get very worried. She still hadn't heard a dickie bird from Stanley, and had no idea of his whereabouts. When Stanley had had his little tantrums in the past, he'd always gone to Jock's or their old house in Upney. He was at neither this time, as he'd fallen out with Jock and their old house had now been sold.

Joyce made herself a brew and sat on the sofa feeling desperately sorry for herself. Their house was in the middle of nowhere, down a country lane, and without Stanley and the car, Joyce felt like a prisoner in her own home. There wasn't even a bus stop nearby. Stanley always drove her to and from the nearest one if she wanted to go into Romford or somewhere. Knowing that she would need to go food shopping in the next day or two, Joycie's worry quickly turned to fury. She debated whether to ring Joey and Dominic and ask them to take her to Tesco tomorrow, but immediately decided against it. The poor little sods lived miles away and it wasn't fair to keep spoiling their weekends. Getting more angry by the second, Joyce picked up the phone and dialled Jock's number.

'Jock, it's me, Joycie. Have you found out where that senile old bastard is yet?'

'I haven't, Joycie. I ain't heard a word from him, love.'

'Well, I need you to do me a favour. I've got hardly no food here and I need to do a shop, so you're gonna have to go to his little drinking haunts and find him for me. I need him to come home now, Jock.'

'I don't think Stanley's gonna take orders from me, Joycie. The best I can do is pop up to where the pigeon club drinks and see if I can find out where he's staying. If so, I'll get the address for you.'

'Thank you, and if you get no joy, let me know and I'm calling the police. The old goat could be lying dead in a ditch for all I know. Then again, I doubt I'd be that lucky.'

Jock laughed at Joycie's warped sense of humour. 'I'll go and see if I can find out anything now and I'll bell you as soon as I have any news.'

Eddie held Frankie close to his chest. Her hair had been styled, she had make-up on and, even though she was pregnant, she looked a damn sight better than she ever had when she was with Jed.

'Wow, you look well. Been having a makeover in here, have ya?'

Frankie grinned and sat down. 'My cellmate Babs made me up. She's well cool, Dad. Babs is Jamaican and we get on so well. You know when you meet someone and just click? We're gonna be friends for life, I know we are.'

Eddie frowned. Joey had told him all about this Babs bird and he wasn't happy at all that his beautiful daughter was sharing a cell with a murderer. 'You shouldn't get too friendly with this girl, Frankie. Joey mentioned her to me. She's up for murder, ain't she?'

Frankie was instantly annoyed. She knew her dad was only concerned about her welfare, but he could be an irritating bastard at times. 'Look, I know you're worried about me, but give me a bit of credit, will ya? I know a wrong 'un when I meet one, living with Jed taught me that. I am currently in Holloway, Dad, so I'm hardly going to be sharing my cell with a nun or a good Samaritan, am I? Babs is truly lovely and I was gonna tell you a bit about what happened to her, but now you're being a stropky arsehole, I ain't gonna bother.'

Eddie held his hands up in an 'I surrender' gesture. Frankie was a fiery little cow, she took after him and he hadn't come here to argue with her. 'I'm sorry, babe. I just worry about you, that's all.'

'Well, you've no need to worry. I am quite capable of choosing my own friends and I also know how to look after myself. You really do wind me up sometimes, Dad. When you were inside, you shared with Stuart, who was also a murderer, yet he was the greatest thing since sliced bread. And what about our family? I mean, we're hardly the fucking Waltons, are we?'

Eddie grinned. His daughter most definitely had the Mitchell sense of humour. 'So, how's your pregnancy going? Is everything OK?' he asked, cleverly changing the subject.

The mention of her unborn baby was enough to make Frankie calm down. 'Everything's fine. Me and Babs went to this antenatal lesson the other day. This posh woman took it and we had such a laugh. I feel a bit fat, but other than that I feel fit and healthy. I've had hardly no sickness with this one at all.'

Eddie nodded. He was dreading telling her that the kids had run away, but she was their mother and needed to know because of the civil court case that was being arranged. 'I've got some news for ya, but I don't want you to panic, 'cause it's created some good as well.'

Frankie's face turned deathly white when her father told the story of Georgie and Harry's little escapade. 'So they ran away to find me?' Frankie asked, bursting into tears.

Eddie took his daughter's hand in his. He was desperate to comfort her, but he didn't really know how to. 'Look, don't cry. The kids are fine, honest, and I think they're gonna be allowed to visit you up here now. That social worker Larry got involved is taking the case to court. She reckons it's in their best interests to see you regularly.'

Frankie's eyes shone with a mixture of tears and happiness. 'Oh Dad, I've missed them so much. When do you think I can see them?'

'We've gotta wait for a date for the court hearing first, but it should be soon. The social worker reckons they might be able to have some sort of contact with your nan, as well.'

'Did Nan make a fuss of the kids? How are she and Grandad?' Frankie asked.

'The same as ever. Stanley weren't there when I went round. Joycie and him have been rowing again, but she was over the moon to see Georgie and Harry.'

'So how did Georgie and Harry look? Did they look clean and well fed? You know how fussy Georgie is with her food, do you think she's been eating OK?'

The kids had turned up at Joycie's door in an awful state, but Eddie wasn't about to tell Frankie that, as a lot of it was down to the trek they'd endured. 'They both looked well and they ain't 'arf got big. Georgie's really tall now and they're definitely being fed OK, as Harry's shot up and looks as sturdy as a bull.'

Frankie thought of her two beautiful children and smiled. She then bombarded her father with lots more questions about them. Not wanting Frankie to worry unnecessarily, Eddie answered her as

honestly as he could. He didn't tell her that the O'Haras hadn't even reported the kids missing, as he knew that would play on her mind.

'So, who else has been up to see you, apart from Joey?' Ed asked, changing the subject again.

'Kerry's coming up next week. I haven't seen her since that day I was last in court.'

Remembering that he'd promised himself what he would tell Frankie, Eddie began to fidget in his seat. Telling his daughter the news of his impending fatherhood was not something he relished, but it had to come from him. 'There's something else I need to tell you. It's about me and I know you ain't gonna like it.'

'I'll have a guess, shall I? You're getting married,' Frankie said sarcastically.

'Well, yeah, but not yet. Gina's pregnant,' Ed said bluntly.

With images of her poor mother flashing through her mind, Frankie stood up, walked towards a screw and asked to be taken back to her cell.

'Frankie, what you doin'?' Don't be like this, babe,' she heard her dad shout.

Turning around, Frankie glared at him. 'You make me fucking sick!' she screamed.

Over in Orsett, Stanley and Pat the Pigeon had had a lovely day. Firstly, they'd had lunch in the Halfway House and then, on Pat's insistence, they'd popped into the Orsett Cock pub, where the pigeon club congregated.

'Don't you worry about bumping into that bloody turncoat, Jock. He's the one in the wrong, not you,' Pat had maintained.

Although still fuming over Jock's betrayal, Stanley wasn't one for confrontation and had been relieved that Jock wasn't in the pub when they'd arrived.

About to take a sip of his pint, Stanley nearly choked as Pat muttered the words he'd been dreading hearing. 'Here he is, just walked in, the bloody Judas. I feel like giving him a piece of my mind, Stanley, I really do.'

Stanley looked up, locked eyes with his once best friend, scowled and looked away. 'Don't bother saying ought to him, Pat. He ain't bleedin' worth it, love.'

Under no illusion that Stanley was anything other than still mad at him, Jock walked over to the bar where Brian and Derek were standing.

'What's happened between you and Stanley? I asked him where you were earlier and he nearly bit my head off,' Derek asked.

'It's a long story, but I've had Joycie on the phone, worried sick about him. Stanley's left her and she was going to call the police and report him missing.'

Brian started to laugh. 'He's all right, is our Stanley. He's moved in with Pat, she was telling me earlier. I bet they've been at it like rabbits.'

Jock glanced at Stanley and Pat in horror. How was he meant to tell Joyce this piece of news? She would blow a fuse.

Unlike Frankie, who was currently sailing through her latest pregnancy, Sally Baldwin was indoors, crippled up with stomach pains. The stress of splitting up with Jed was taking its toll and the constant threats he kept making weren't helping matters either. He'd been ringing her all day and at first he'd been quite pleasant.

'Please come back. I didn't mean to talk to you like I did. I'm such a dinlo and I really miss you,' he'd begged.

Sally's father had then grabbed the phone and had given Jed a right mouthful. Terry Baldwin was sick of seeing his daughter upset and was at the end of his tether.

'If you ever come near my Sally again, I swear I will fucking kill you,' he'd warned Jed.

Jed, being Jed, hadn't taken any notice of the warning and had since left tons of threatening messages on the landline answerphone, the last being, 'If you ain't fucking back 'ere in one hour, Sally, I'm gonna come round there and cut your shitcunt of a father to shreds.'

Sally winced as her father entered the room and put a cup of coffee down next to her. The pains were griping and she was desperate to go to the toilet.

'How do you feel now?' Terry asked, concerned. Sally was as white as a sheet and he wondered if he should call an ambulance.

'I'm OK, but I must go a loo,' Sally replied, as she half staggered from the room.

Seconds later, Terry heard an almighty scream.

'Dad, there's blood everywhere, I think I'm losing the baby,' Sally cried.

Not one to drink too much when he had to drive from Orsett back to Barking, Jock had four pints and set off home. He felt sick with worry about Stanley's unusual behaviour. Not only had his old pal looked very drunk, but he and that Pat had looked far more than just friends, and Jock didn't have a clue what he was now going to say to Joyce.

Within seconds of walking indoors, Jock heard his phone ringing. He glanced at the clock. It was 4 p.m. and his daughter usually rang him at this time most days. He picked up the phone and was horrified to hear Joyce on the other end.

'Well, did you find the old bastard?'

'Aye, but I didn't speak to him, Joycie. He's still really angry with me, I could see it in his face.'

'So, where is he then? Where did you see him?'

Aware of how irate Joyce sounded, Jock chose his words carefully. He didn't want to get his old mate into too much trouble, but if he didn't give Joycie some information, she would be sure to call the police and find out Stanley's whereabouts anyway.

'He was in the Orsett Cock pub. He's staying with a friend who lives up that way, I think.'

'Friend! What friend? Apart from you, my Stanley has never had any bleedin' friends. What's the bloke's name he's stopping with?'

'I've no idea,' Jock replied untruthfully.

Joyce instinctively knew that Jock was lying. Stanley had definitely been behaving oddly for the last couple of months. He disappeared regularly, usually at lunchtime. He'd put on weight, but ate smaller meals at home, and she could swear she'd whiffed women's perfume on his clothes and it certainly wasn't her Estée Lauder. It all added up now, every single, last, sordid detail.

'What's the old tart's name, Jock? I know it's a woman, so don't you dare fucking lie to me.'

Jock felt like a rabbit caught in the headlights. 'I swear, it's not what you think, Joycie. Him and Pat are just friends, that's all. Your Stanley has decent morals, love,' he stammered.

'Well, I'll give him morals and I'll give her fucking Pat. What's the old bag's address?' Joyce screamed down the phone.

Jock was petrified of Joyce at the best of times. 'I don't know, I swear I don't. All I know is she lives in Orsett,' he said, his hands shaking.

'Well, I'll be taking a little trip to Orsett and when I find that dirty old bastard I married, I'm gonna chop his fucking bits off and feed 'em to his pigeons.'

Unaware that his old woman was on his tail and currently spitting feathers, Stanley and Pat were rather inebriated and cuddled up on the sofa. They had left the pub about an hour ago and they must have sunk at least ten or twelve drinks while they were out. At one point, Stanley had even felt his legs start to buckle.

'Do you wanna watch a film, Stanley, or shall we have an early night?' Pat asked him expectantly.

Not getting the gist of what she was asking, Stanley smiled at her. Unlike Joycie, Pat was a loving person and he sometimes liked it when she put her arms around him. It made him feel manly and wanted. 'You watch a film if you like, love. I'm knackered, though, so I think I'll have an early one.'

Desperate to get Stanley into her own bed rather than the one in the spare room, Pat edged towards his lips and placed her own there.

Feeling Pat's tongue inside his mouth, Stanley leaped from the sofa as if he had a bullet up his arse. 'Night, love,' he shouted, as he ran from the room and bolted up the stairs. He was desperate

for the safety of the spare room. He and Joycie hadn't kissed for years and even when they used to, there were no tongues involved. Petrified that Pat was going to come into his room, Stanley finally stopped shaking as he heard her footsteps plod past. 'Thank you, God,' he mumbled gratefully.

Terry Baldwin sat in a corridor in Harold Wood Hospital. Sally had been rushed to the maternity unit and he'd been waiting ages for some news. Putting his head in his hands, Terry cursed the day his daughter had ever set eyes on Jed O'Hara. The little shit had already robbed him of one grandchild, his beloved Luke, and if Sally were to lose another because of Jed, Terry would have no choice but to top the little bastard.

Saying a silent prayer to God that all the blood Sally had lost would turn out to be no more than a false alarm, Terry heard his name being called. He stood up and looked into the doctor's eyes.

'I'm so sorry, Mr Baldwin, but I'm afraid we were unable to save the baby. On a positive note, your daughter is stable and we have given her something to sedate her so she can get some sleep. She was, understandably, very upset, so we would like to keep her in for observation.'

Overcome by grief for the second time in weeks, Terry let out a muffled cry and slumped back onto the chair. This would be the end of his Sally and he knew it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Joycie Smith was still seething the following morning. Never in a million years would she have guessed that Stanley would ever leave for some old slapper. Her husband was certainly no Richard Gere and Joyce could not understand how any other woman would even like him, let alone fancy him.

Pacing up and down the living room, Joycie glanced at the clock on the wall. ‘What time did Dominic say he’d get here?’ she asked Joey. Patience had never been one of Joycie’s virtues and she was doing buttons to get to Orsett and confront her philandering husband and his bit of fluff.

Joey sighed. He’d been working late last night when his nan had rung and told him what had happened. She’d gone bananas on the phone and, worried about her sanity, Joey had come straight over from work. He and Dom had made plans themselves today and, as much as Joey loved his nan, he was getting a bit sick of her interfering in his life. Whenever there was a drama it was Joey she called and in Joey’s opinion, her own son Raymond got away very lightly indeed.

‘Where you going?’ Joyce shouted as Joey picked his mobile up and stomped out of the room.

Ignoring her question, Joey opened the back door and punched in a number. ‘Raymond, it’s me, Joey. Listen, you need to get over to your mum’s ASAP. Your dad’s run off with another woman and I don’t know what to do.’

‘I can’t come over. I’m with Polly and we’re on our way to visit her parents,’ Raymond said bluntly.

Joey was fuming. Who did Raymond think he was, Lord Fucking Fauntleroy? Sick of taking shit from people, Joey gave it to him good and proper. ‘Joycie might be my nan, but she’s your bloody mother. She needs you, so best you ring Polly’s parents, tell them you have to cancel, then turn your car around and get your arse over here. I’ve already lost my mum, Ray, but you’ve still got yours, so instead of avoiding her, make the fucking most of it.’

Raymond was astounded by his nephew’s little speech. Joey no longer sounded like a feminine little gay boy – he sounded just like his father.

Eddie Mitchell smiled as he ended his phone call. His plan to keep his brothers safe had worked like a dream so far. Worried that Jimmy O’Hara’s henchman would get to them, Eddie had ordered someone to give both Ronny and Paulie a pasting.

‘Don’t go too heavy, but make it look bad. Aim for their faces and make as much mess as you can without actually hurting ’em,’ had been Ed’s exact words. He’d then got word to his brothers via another inmate to tell them the score. ‘You must insist that you’re frightened for your lives and demand to be moved either to solitary or another nick. With Ronny being a cripple, the guvnor should swallow it.’

He’d also told his ally to warn them that under no circumstances must they contact him. ‘If they ring me or send me any silly fucking letters, they’re on their own,’ he said.

Ed smiled as Gina walked into the room and put her arms around his waist from behind.

‘Dinner’s nearly ready,’ she said lovingly.

Eddie turned around, tilted her chin and kissed her tenderly. He was picking Stuart up on Monday, so this was the last weekend that they’d have the house to themselves for a while.

‘After we’ve eaten, let’s have an early night, eh, babe?’

Gina grinned. ‘Only if you promise to ravish me.’

Eddie grabbed the cheeks of her arse and rubbed his rapidly growing erection against her groin. ‘Oh, I shall ravish you all right. In fact, I’m gonna shag your brains out all weekend.’

Gina giggled. She adored Eddie talking dirty to her. Her fiancé’s vulgarity was her ultimate turn-on.

* * *

Raymond dropped Polly off at her parents' house and drove towards his mother's. Joey's words had somehow struck a chord, and even though Joyce drove him mad at times, Raymond realised he should make more of an effort to be there for her.

'You took your time. I thought Polly's parents had moved over this way,' Joey said as he answered the front door.

'Essex is a big place, Joey. If you drove, you'd know that Polly's parents have moved to Loughton, which isn't exactly spitting distance from here, is it now?' Raymond replied sarcastically.

Ignoring his uncle's sarcasm, Joey began to give him the lowdown on exactly what had happened between Joyce and Stanley.

Sick of waiting for a lift, Joyce had been necking the Baileys as if it were chocolate milkshake and was now in an extremely vicious mood.

Raymond walked into the room and sat down on the sofa next to his mum. Feeling awkward, he hugged her. 'Don't worry, we'll find Dad and then he'll come back home. I'm sure this woman is only a friend, whoever she is.'

'Friend! I'll give her fucking friend. Do you know where that Orsett Cock pub is, Raymond?'

Ray nodded.

Joyce stood up. 'Come on then, let's go and find the dirty old pervert who fathered you.'

Joey glanced at Dominic and smirked. His earlier outburst had obviously hit home and now that Raymond had turned up and taken over, their weekend could continue as planned.

Eddie Mitchell smiled as he rubbed Gina's slightly swollen naked stomach. He might be fifty-three, but he didn't look it and in his mind he was still only twenty-one. He couldn't wait to be a dad again. When the twins were born he'd left all that baby stuff to Jessica, but this time he wanted to be part of it. 'So what we gonna call this little beauty then?' he asked tenderly.

Gina turned her head towards Eddie and grinned. She would be thirty-five by the time the baby was born and she had never been so excited about anything in her life before. There was a time when Gina had given up on meeting Mr Right and becoming a mother, but meeting Eddie Mitchell had changed all that. From the first moment Gina had laid eyes on Eddie, she had known he was the one and now he had made all her dreams come true.

'I like Michaela for a girl and Bradley for a boy,' Gina suggested.

Eddie pondered over her choices, then turned to her. 'I like Rosie, be a nice tribute to me mum. Michaela's OK, though. My Frankie's real name is Francesca and Georgie's birth name is Georgina, so like both of these, Michaela will be shortened to Micky. Micky Mitchell, yeah, sounds proper. I dunno about Bradley though, sounds a bit poofy to me and, as much as I love Joey, I don't want two gay sons.'

'Bradley don't sound poofy! What about Gavin, do you like that?' Gina asked.

Eddie shook his head. 'Gavin Mitchell sounds like a fucking accountant who drinks piña coladas and plays squash at weekends.'

Gina playfully punched his arm. Eddie could be such a comical bastard at times; his sense of humour was second to none. 'You pick some boys' names then,' she urged him.

Eddie propped himself up on his elbow and thought carefully. If they had a son, he wanted him to have an old-fashioned, masculine-sounding name. He hated all that trendy bollocks. 'I like Lenny. Lenny Mitchell, whaddya think?'

Gina smiled. She wasn't struck on the name Lenny, but she quite liked Rosie. 'If it's a girl, you can call her Rosie, after your mum. If it's a boy though, I choose. I quite like Aaron as well.'

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