THE NO.1 SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

Kimberley CHAMBERS

Payback

FAMILY. THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO WATCH YOUR BACK.
NOT STAB YOU IN IT.

Kimberley Chambers
Payback

Аннотация

*If you love The Butlers, meet QUEENIE! Kimberley Chambers' new novel and prequel to The Butler series is out on the 23rd Jan – pre-order now!*Family. They're supposed to watch your back. Not stab you in it.When the enemy is one of your own, the payback is twice as hard.The Butler brothers are the Kings of the East End, and their motto is 'what goes around, comes around'.In their world, family counts; so when the truth about Vinny's cousin's death comes to light, it rocks the Butlers to the core. One by one, Vinny's friends and family are turning against him…Then, the unimaginable happens – Vinny's little daughter Molly goes missing. She's the one chink of light in all their lives, and the one they'd commit murders to bring back.But is it already too late for that?Is this PAYBACK?The Butlers are back in this gripping, compulsive sequel to THE TRAP.

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Dedication

In memory of a true gentleman
Richie Mitchell
1932-2009
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Prologue

Whistling 'Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah', Trevor Thomas felt as happy as a pig in shit as he walked the mile-long journey from the pub to his mother's house.

As a lad, Trevor had never truly appreciated the sights, smells, atmosphere, or community spirit of the East End of London. But after years of living in Yorkshire, he sure did now. Had it not been for his good fortune on the football pools, Trevor would probably still be stuck in a loveless marriage in Leeds. Twenty-four thousand pounds was a hell of a lot of money and there was no way that miserable, greedy, nasty bitch he had got saddled with was going to get her mucky paws on his windfall. Leaving his four kids behind was a small price to pay if it meant him keeping all the money to himself. Only his mum knew about it. She had hidden it under her floorboards to keep it away from prying eyes.

What Trevor did not realize as he stopped to chat to an old pal before continuing his journey was that his run of good luck was about to come to a very abrupt and gory end.

Vinny and Michael Butler were sitting in a white Ford Transit van. Michael was in the back, Vinny in the passenger seat as though he were waiting for the driver of the vehicle to return. Both were wearing dark hooded tracksuits to hide their identities, and seeing as they only ever wore the finest designer suits

and drove top-of-the-range cars, Vinny doubted even their own mother would recognize them.

'This could be him now, bruv. Nope. Hold your horses, it isn't.'

'I hope he fucking hurries up, Vin, because our alibi will be blown sky high if he doesn't.'

'Stop panicking. We've got stacks of time. Like I told you, you've no need to get your hands dirty at all, Michael. Hold up! Speak of the devil and it appears.'

Still whistling the song he could not get out of his head, Trevor spotted the two tall men in hooded tracksuits leap out of the van. Apart from wondering if they were boxers who had been training at the gym, he thought little of it until they grabbed him from behind.

Before Trevor could shout for help, tape was placed over his mouth and he was chucked into the back of the van like a roll of old carpet. As one man expertly tied him up, the other leapt into the front and drove the van away.

Eyes wide with a mixture of fear and shock, Trevor now wished he had listened to his mother's words of wisdom. 'As much as I love and miss you, it's not safe for you to be living back in the East End, son. That Vinny Butler is a real force to be reckoned with now, and he won't have forgotten what you did to him. He isn't the type of man to let bygones be bygones.'

As the van trundled along, Trevor shuddered as his abductor took his hood down. Vinny had been fifteen, Trevor nineteen, when he had eloped to Leeds with Yvonne. But even at such a

young age, Vinny had already carved out a fearsome reputation back then. That was why Yvonne had insisted they left the area. How Trevor now wished he had never clapped eyes on Yvonne Summers.

'Not the greatest choice of song for you to be whistling, was it, Trevor? Because, my oh my, your day is going to be anything but fucking wonderful,' Vinny chuckled as he ripped the tape from his victim's mouth.

It was quite dark inside the back of the van and it wasn't until Vinny switched on a big static torch like the ones workmen used that Trevor could properly see the man whose girlfriend he had stolen all those years ago. With his mop of thick black hair Brylcreemed back, and his menacing eyes that were a piercing shade of bright green, Vinny looked even scarier in the light than the dark.

'What you gonna do to me? Please don't hurt me, Vinny, I beg you. I know what I did was wrong and I am very sorry, but I swear if you let me out of this van, I'll do anything you say. I'll even move away again, if that's what you want. On my mother's life, I will.'

Vinny could not help but grin. He had waited years for this moment, and intended to enjoy every second of it. Trevor had lost all of his hair, had yellow teeth, and reminded Vinny of a fly stuck to one of those sticky tape traps his mum had in her conservatory that was desperately trying to untangle itself. 'If I was a forgiving man, I would let you jump out of this van right

now. Unfortunately for you, Trevor, I am not.'

'Please, Vinny, I'm beggin' you not to hurt me. It will be the end of my mum if you do. She has a lot of respect for your mum and aunt, you know. She was gutted over Roy and Lenny's deaths – she's ordered some lovely flowers for their funerals. And I remember your dad well. I used to buy my cigarettes and booze off him once upon a time,' Trevor gabbled.

'So, where is the slag now? Did you marry the manipulative deceitful whore?' Vinny spat. Yvonne Summers had been his first and only true love. Two years older than him she was, but even at fifteen, Vinny had known how to earn a bob or two and had treated that girl like a princess. Jewellery, clothes, hats, shoes – he had lavished Yvonne with expensive gifts. And how had she repaid him? By running off with the skinny little weasel of a man who was currently snivelling while resembling a trussed-up turkey.

Tears of pure fright streaming down his cheeks, Trevor nodded. 'Yeah, we got married and had four kids. Yvonne is still in Leeds, I think. I can give you the address if you want?'

'So, what you doing back here?'

'We split up and I had nowhere else to go. If you want Yvonne back, you can have her, Vinny. I don't mind, honest.'

'Want her back! You having a laugh at my expense, Trevor? Wrong words, mate, wrong words,' Vinny spat. He opened the tool bag next to him and pulled out a pair of pliers.

'No, please God, no,' Trevor screamed, wetting himself with

fear as Vinny inserted the pliers into his mouth.

Vinny was no qualified dentist and as Trevor's screams echoed around the van, Michael winced and turned the volume of the radio up.

By the time the Butlers reached their destination, a narrow rural lane that led to nothing but a metal gate in East Hanningfield, Vinny was splashed with blood, and after passing out Trevor was now untied, awake again and rolling about the floor in obvious agony.

'Stop crying, you fucking wuss. Man up,' Vinny ordered, giving his now toothless victim a sharp kick in the head.

Michael parked up next to the Datsun Cherry they'd left there that morning. Even the full volume of the radio had not been able to drown out Trevor's howls.

'Let's just get the job finished, Vinny. The quicker we get away from here and back to Whitechapel, the better.'

Vinny took the small axe out of the tool bag. 'You better go for a walk for five minutes, Michael. I doubt you have the stomach to watch what I am about to do.'

'Don't be insinuating I'm some pussy, Vinny. If I was, I wouldn't be here with you. Just do what you've got to do, and get your skates on.'

Trevor was in too much pain to scream when Vinny dragged him out of the van by the legs. Instead, he whimpered like an injured dog and curled up in a foetal position, covering his head with his hands. He now knew how animals must feel when they

were being led inside the slaughterhouse, and he just wanted death to come quickly so the pain would go away.

Vinny Butler had a different plan. In some countries it was classed as normal to chop the hands off thieves. 'Be a good boy now, Trevor. Hold your right hand out for Uncle Vinny.'

Sobbing his heart out, Trevor did as he was told. His mother and his winnings flashed through his mind. He was never going to get the chance to spend that now, was he? And he would never see his kids again.

'Sure you wanna watch this, David?' Vinny joked. Michael bore a strong resemblance to the popstar David Essex. Even had the same cheeky grin. Vinny had thought it hilarious when his brother got chased down Petticoat Lane market by a crowd of screaming tourists the previous Sunday.

Michael did not want to watch what Vinny was about to do, but there was no way he was going to admit that. 'Just fucking hurry up, will you? And if you ever call me David again, I'll be pulling *your* teeth out with pliers.'

Trevor let out a blood-curdling scream as the axe tore into his wrist, then seemed to lose consciousness.

'Those thieving hands of yours had to come off, didn't they, Trevor? Won't be stealing anybody's girlfriend now, will you? Nobody messes with me, and I mean nobody,' Vinny hissed, his face spattered with his victim's blood.

Trying not to throw up, Michael felt a shiver travel down his spine as he heard the rustling of nearby leaves. 'Did you hear that

noise, Vin? I heard something coming from the bushes.'

'Probably a hedgehog or a fox. This axe is shit. It's blunt,' Vinny complained, as he continued to hack away at Trevor's flesh.

Averting his eyes from what reminded him of a scene out of a horror film, Michael heard another noise, turned around and nearly shit himself as two pairs of eyes met his. 'Jesus fucking wept! I nearly had a heart attack then. There's cows watching us, Vinny.'

'Well, I doubt they'll be ringing the Old Bill to give a statement,' Vinny replied, laughing at his own wit.

'It ain't funny, Vin. Giving me the heebies, this place is. Let's set fire to the van and get out of here.'

Vinny glanced at Michael, a manic glint in his eyes. 'Not until I've finished chopping the thieving cunt's hands off. He needs to be taught a lesson, taking other people's possessions.'

'But he's already dead by the looks of it. He isn't going to know whether you chop his other hand off, is he? I tell you what, give me the poxy axe and I'll do the honours. You sort out the fire – and whatever you do, don't leave anything lying about.'

Unlike his brother, Michael had never murdered anyone and the bile rose in his throat as he heard a whimper come out of Trevor's mouth then saw his eyes flicker open. 'Oh Jesus,' he mumbled, dropping the axe in horror. He then took a deep breath, reluctantly picked the axe back up and started to chop at the man's left wrist. Vinny would never let him live it down

otherwise.

Flesh and bone was harder to chop through than Michael had thought possible. But by the time Vinny had tidied up after them and doused the van in petrol, both hands had been severed and Trevor looked as dead as a dodo.

'Put them teeth on the front seat, Michael, then clean yourself up and get changed. Just chuck everything in the back of the van,' Vinny ordered.

As strong as an ox, Vinny lifted Trevor's body into the back of the van by himself. He then chucked the hands and tools in, before joining his brother in getting cleaned up. They had come well prepared; the Datsun's boot held soap, water, towels and a change of clothes.

'Trevor's still alive, you know. Amazing how people die from slitting their wrists, yet you can chop their hands off and they don't die immediately,' Vinny said.

'Well, he won't be alive for much longer. I'm gonna throw all this clobber in the back. Where's your gloves? Check all round, bruv, make sure we haven't left anything lying about.'

For the first time in his life, Vinny Butler wondered whether Michael might actually be in the same league as him. He'd always been closer to Roy, who'd been a great sibling and sound business partner, but had never really possessed that killer instinct – until it came to putting a bullet in his own brain. Today, however, Michael had surprised and impressed Vinny immensely.

Before Vinny lit the kingsize match, he gave a little sermon.

'Bye bye, Trevor. I hope the slag was worth it. May your soul rot in hell, you pilfering worthless wanker.'

The explosion was clearly audible as Michael drove at top speed down the narrow lane. He glanced at his brother in the passenger seat. 'What you gonna do with the teeth?'

Vinny grinned. 'Flick them out the window along the A13. One by one, of course. Be a bit like when we used to flick pebbles at people as kids.'

It was twenty minutes before closing time when Vinny and Michael casually walked into the Blind Beggar. Both men were suited and booted and reeked of expensive aftershave as always.

'Vinny, Michael, let me get you both a drink. Me and the missus were so upset to hear about your Roy and Lenny. Great lads, the pair of them, and they will be sorely missed,' Big Stan said in a sombre tone.

Vinny and Michael rarely ventured into the Blind Beggar. As they had hoped, the pub was fairly busy and already they were the centre of attention with all eyes on their grand entrance. 'I'll get the drinks, Stan. Ask around and see who else wants one,' Vinny said.

'Who shall I ask?'

'Everybody. Just tell 'em I'm buying.'

When Stan toddled off to obey orders, more well-wishers came over to speak to Vinny and Michael, including the landlord. 'Afters isn't a problem, lads. You just say the word if you fancy a late drink.'

'Actually, that is very much appreciated. Been stuck in that club all day, me and Michael have, and after everything that's happened, we're currently sick of the sight of the place.'

It was a good ten minutes or so before Big Stan wandered back to inform Vinny that the round had come to eighty-seven quid. 'It would have been cheaper, but Bobby Jackson ordered a pint for himself and his pal, plus a large chaser each,' Stan added.

Seeing his brother's eyes glint dangerously as he turned to see where Jackson was, Michael grabbed hold of him. 'Not tonight, Vin. We've had enough drama for one day,' he whispered.

'Big Stan should never have asked him. It's common knowledge that I hate the cunt.'

'But you did say ask everyone, so you can't blame Stan. It's only a poxy drink.'

'I'd like to go over there and ram that glass straight down the back of his throat,' Vinny hissed.

'I'm sure you'll have other opportunities to do that. For the time being, let's just forget about Jackson and chat nicely to the locals. That was the whole point of us coming in here, yeah? We need to act normal, you said. Well, that does not include ramming glasses down the customers' throats, does it?'

'Yeah, you're right,' Vinny replied. He then settled back to watch his brother charm the locals as though he did not have a care in the world.

After leaving East Hanningfield, they had dumped the Datsun not too far from Hackney Marshes, set fire to it, then jogged

through Victoria Park in the second set of hooded tracksuits and trainers they had worn that day.

Nobody had seen them sneak into the back entrance of the club, and there was no way they could have been recognized while running through the park. They both had their hoods up the whole time and it was pitch-dark.

Sick of people rambling on about the funerals, Vinny led Michael over to a table. 'I just want you to know that I really appreciate what you did for me today and I won't forget it. You've got a cool head on you, bruv. We are definitely cut from the same cloth.'

Michael shook his head. 'I'm not like you, Vin, and I never will be. You thoroughly enjoyed yourself today – I didn't. If you want the truth, I hated every second of it.'

'So why did you agree to help me then?'

'Because you're my brother, and with Ahmed in hospital, you had nobody else to ask. Nobody you could trust, at any rate. As Mum always drummed into us, once a Butler always a Butler.'

CHAPTER ONE
Autumn 1976

Queenie Butler opened her front door and cursed the latest downpour. The hottest summer on record was now just a distant memory, but the weather was the least of Queenie's problems.

'Don't put that up in here. You always said it was unlucky to put a brolly up indoors,' Brenda reminded her mother.

Glaring at her daughter, Queenie ignored her wishes. 'As if we could be any more bastard well unlucky, Bren. Our family has had the heart ripped out of it already, so excuse me for not being overly superstitious these days.'

'Where you going?'

'To check on Vivvy again, and while I'm gone I want you to have a bath, young lady. You ain't seen soap or water for three days, you dirty little mare. I expect Roy and Lenny's send-off to be perfect tomorrow – which includes you making an effort to smarten yourself up.'

Umbrella in hand, Queenie made the short journey to her sister's house next-door-but-one. She let herself in with her own key. 'Cooey. Where are you, Viv?' Queenie fully expected her sister to be sitting in the lounge staring aimlessly out of the window as she had been for the past few days since hearing about the car crash that had killed her only son.

'I'm up here.'

Queenie hurried up the stairs and found Vivian in Lenny's room, sorting through his things. 'What you doing?'

'What does it look like I'm doing? I'm clearing Lenny's room out. The dustmen come in the morning.'

Shaking her head in disbelief, Queenie sat down on the edge of Lenny's bed. Her nephew's nickname had been Champ and how very apt that had been. Starved of oxygen at birth, Lenny had overcome his disabilities and grown into a fine young man. His mental age might have been less than his years, but that hadn't stopped Lenny being loved by everybody. He really had been a special lad. 'Viv, please don't chuck his stuff away, love. You're not thinking rationally at the moment and I know you're going to regret what you're doing. Why don't we go downstairs and have a nice cup of tea, eh?'

Ignoring her sister's suggestion, Vivian yanked open a drawer and angrily tipped the contents onto the floor. Mumbling obscenities, she then began to put her son's belongings into a dustbin liner.

Queenie's eyes welled up. 'Viv, I really need you to snap out of this silly behaviour. I've lost a son too, remember.' Queenie had given birth to four children, and her middle son, Roy, was being laid to rest tomorrow after taking his own life. Wheelchair-bound since 1971 after a shooting outside the nightclub he owned, he'd suffered a miserable existence the last five years, finally ending it all by blasting himself in the head with a gun.

'But you've got three other kids, and your grandchildren. Hardly the fucking same, is it?' Vivian spat.

Queenie bowed her weary head. At forty-nine, she was three years older than Vivian. Both women were thin, had deep facial wrinkles due to their love of cigarettes and the sun, and with their dyed blonde hair and similar features, were often mistaken for twins rather than sisters. This past week, however, Queenie had felt as though she did not know her sister at all. Grief did strange things to people and Vivian was acting stranger than most.

'How can you say such a thing, Vivvy? No matter how many kids or grandchildren I have, nothing takes the pain away of losing my Roy. I'm equally upset about Lenny, he was like a son to me too, but I watched my Roy suffer for years. At least your Lenny led a happy life.'

Her face contorted with anger, Vivian stood up and flew at her sister. 'Get out! Go on, get out of my house.'

Being pushed and prodded was not something Queenie would usually allow, but she knew her sister didn't mean it. It was the grief that was making her doolally. 'Please let's not argue. The funerals are tomorrow and our boys deserve the best send-off ever. If they're looking down at me and you fighting, they'll be devastated.'

'Looking down! Looking fucking down! Don't make me laugh, Queen. There is no bastard heaven. If God existed, why would he have taken my Lenny away from me, eh? It's all a load of old bollocks.'

Desperate to give his brother and cousin the best send-off the East End had ever seen, Vinny Butler had spent the day preparing for the wake. The nightclub he part-owned with Michael had now been transformed into a shrine for their dearly departed.

Satisfied that his mum and aunt would approve of his handiwork, Vinny poured himself a drink and flopped onto one of the leather sofas. It had been three days since he and Michael had disposed of Trevor Thomas and there had not been any mention of a body being found or Trevor's disappearance in the news.

Vinny grinned as his brother appeared. After the car accident that had killed Lenny, relations had been strained between himself and Michael, but thankfully carrying out their plan to kill Trevor seemed to have papered over those cracks. 'You're looking particularly dapper today, bruv. That another new suit?'

'Yep. No flies on you, is there? This is the latest Savile Row addition to my ever-expanding wardrobe.'

Michael was five years Vinny's junior. Both brothers had inherited their father's jet-black hair, piercing green eyes and tall build. But they did not particularly look alike. Michael had a round face with a cheeky smile, whereas Vinny's features were thinner and more chiselled, his lips usually twisted in a sinister smirk. They wore their hair in different styles as well. Michael used far less brylcreem and had what his mum referred to as a 'short back and sides'. With their dark skin tone, both Vinny and Michael were often assumed to be of Italian or Irish descent, but

as far as they knew, their ancestors had all been cockneys.

'Well? Notice anything different?' Vinny chuckled, indicating the numerous photos of Roy and Lenny that he'd had blown up to poster-size and displayed on the walls.

'I don't know, Vin. It's a bit much, perhaps? Do Mum and Auntie Viv know you've done all this?'

'No. I wanted it to be a surprise. Why shouldn't we have photos of Roy and Champ on show? It is their special day. The one in the middle – I'm gonna keep that up after the funeral too.'

Michael stared at the photo Vinny was pointing at. It showed the three Butler brothers, and it was the last photo taken before Roy had got shot. They all had dark suits on and were smiling broadly, their arms draped around one another's shoulders. It was a lovely photo, but it made Michael feel very sad. Feeling slightly lost for words, he was relieved when the phone started ringing, giving him an excuse to turn away. 'I'll get that,' he said.

'What's up?' Vinny asked, seconds later. He could tell by Michael's face that something was wrong.

'That was Ahmed. He's out of hospital and wants to see you. He said to meet him at three at his house.'

Vinny felt the colour drain from his cheeks. This was the first time he had heard from Ahmed since the fateful night of the crash. The state Ahmed was in, Vinny thought he'd be burying his best mate as well as his cousin. 'What exactly did he say?'

'Not much. I got the distinct impression he didn't really want to talk over the phone. I did tell him you were here, but he just

said to meet him at three. What're you gonna say to him, Vin? I hope he isn't going to cause us grief. I've got Nancy and the boys to think of.'

'I know far too much about Ahmed for him to cause us any grief, Michael. Anyway, he's a mate and I'm sure once I explain things properly, he'll understand why I did what I did,' Vinny replied, sounding far more confident about the awkward situation than he actually felt.

Michael was worried. He was currently trying to win his wife back and another drama just might tip her over the edge. 'But say he don't understand, Vin?'

'Then we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.'

Mary Walker brushed her husband's lapels and gave him one final warning. Donald could be irritatingly cantankerous at times and, for Nancy's sake, Mary was determined that today must go smoothly.

'I have already promised you that I will be polite to the children, dear. But please do not expect me to welcome their criminal of a father into our home as well, because I just wasn't raised that way.'

Sighing, Mary went to check on the buffet she had prepared. Her daughter's choice of husband had caused no end of problems in her relationship with Donald over the years, and it wasn't even poor Michael's fault. It was his brother Vinny's.

Back in 1965, Mary and Donald had fulfilled a lifelong ambition by opening up their own café, set in the heart of

Whitechapel. Having spent every penny they had on purchasing and then refurbishing their dream, they worked hard to make a success of it. Business had been booming – until fate struck a terrible blow. Their son Christopher, who was only eight at the time, had witnessed a murder. The killing had been carried out by Vinny Butler, head of a local gangland family, and as soon as he realized that Christopher had witnessed the murder, he had threatened him and forced him to lie to the police.

Petrified for the safety of their children, Mary and Donald had fled Whitechapel one frosty Christmas Day. It had taken time to recover from the trauma of their ordeal, but they had thrown themselves into a new business venture, and moved on with their lives.

The past returned to haunt Mary and Donald in 1971. That was the summer when their beautiful daughter fell in love with Vinny's younger brother, Michael. The lovebirds' relationship had caused Mary nothing but grief ever since. Christopher was now a policeman, and he and Donald were dead against Nancy's choice of husband.

'How do I look, Mum? I feel ever so nervous, but I can't thank you and Dad enough for doing this for me today. I miss my boys so much.'

Mary told her daughter she looked great and held her close to her chest. Nancy had been ill recently and had ended up in hospital. Being alienated from her father and brother while trying to bring up two kids of her own was bad enough, but when

Michael insisted on taking in the son he'd had by a previous girlfriend it had proved too much for her delicate brain to cope with. That was why it had been decided that Daniel and Adam would spend their birthday at Mary and Donald's home, where Nancy was currently recuperating.

'I hope Dad loves the boys as much as you do, Mum,' Nancy said, her voice full of hope.

Mary held her daughter's face in her hands, forcing Nancy to look at her, and she smiled. Whereas she'd had contact with her grandsons since day one, Donald had never met them before. 'Now, dry them eyes. Today is going to be a wonderful day, and if your father doesn't love them boys as much as I do, I'll eat my hat.'

Joanna Preston was feeling rather melancholy. The house that Vinny had bought was lovely, but its lack of furniture made it seem as cold and lonely as she felt. Tomorrow would be Joanna's eighteenth birthday and for the first time since the shit had hit the fan, she realized just how much she missed her family. Her mum always made a big fuss of her on her birthday, but tomorrow Joanna wouldn't be seeing or even speaking to her. Instead, she would be spending the day at a funeral for two men she didn't even know.

Sipping her cup of tea, she allowed her mind to wander back to the summer. She had been working as a cleaner at a holiday park in Eastbourne when Vinny had appeared in her life and literally swept her off her feet. It really had been a

case of love at first sight, but what Joanna hadn't realized at the time was the bad blood between her family and Vinny's. Her father was currently serving a fifteen-year prison sentence for shooting Vinny's brother – the same brother who was being buried tomorrow. Jo had only been told the truth recently.

When her mother had learned of her romance, she'd hit the roof. Joanna had then been forced to make a decision. Her family or Vinny? She was so besotted, she'd chosen Vinny, and was now pregnant with their first child. Her mum had been devastated. She'd told Joanna that with her long blonde hair, slender body and beautiful blue eyes, she could get any lad she wanted. But Joanna did not want a lad. She wanted a man, and that man was Vinny.

Moving to Whitechapel had proved to be a bit of an eye-opener for Joanna. She had spent the early part of her life living in South London, but barely remembered that. Tiptree and Eastbourne were the only other two areas she had lived in, and Whitechapel was so very different. The air reeked, the pavements were littered with rubbish, there was graffiti everywhere you looked, and it was very multi-cultural.

'You OK? Hasn't that sofa come yet?' Vinny asked, snapping Joanna out of her daydream.

'No, it hasn't. Vinny, when can I start work at the club?'

Vinny crouched down next to the armchair and began to sweet-talk Joanna. When she had been working at the holiday camp, he had promised her a job as his secretary. That offer had

merely been intended to entice her to London. He didn't love her; neither did he want her working for him. Their whole relationship was based on revenge. Vinny hated Joanna's father with a passion and would do anything to get even for what he'd done to Roy. Absolutely anything.

Michael Butler felt as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders as he drove towards Nancy's parents' house. Being the only one, bar Ahmed, who knew that Vinny was responsible for Lenny's death was preying on his mind. On top of that, his wife had temporarily left him, and he was currently trying to bring up his three sons alone. Trevor Thomas was another worry. Say he and Vinny had left some kind of evidence at the scene? A long prison sentence did not bear thinking about.

Thankfully, Lee was at school today. It was him moving into their family home that had tipped Nancy over the edge. Lee's mum and gran had died in a car crash a few months ago, so the poor little sod had had nowhere else to go.

'Dad, we want you to come to our birthday party with us, don't we, Adam?' Daniel said.

Michael bumped the car up on the kerb and switched the engine off. As fate would have it, both his sons were born on the very same day. Daniel was four today, Adam two, but there was no way Michael could join in the celebrations. Although they were yet to be properly introduced, Nancy's father hated him.

Michael locked the car door, grabbed his sons by their tiny hands, and led them up the pathway. It was Mary who answered

the door, as he guessed it would be. 'Any chance I can have a quick word with Nance, Mary? I miss her so much.'

Mary squeezed her son-in-law's hand. She liked Michael, she really did, but it had taken all her strength to force Donald to allow their grandsons into the house. She couldn't push the issue any further by extending the invitation to Michael. 'Not today, love, but Nancy is on the mend. I can promise you that she'll be ready to see you again soon.'

Closing the door on Michael she led the boys through to the living room. Donald looked awkward as he came face to face with his grandsons for the very first time. Both were dressed in matching beige suits, had jet black hair, bright green eyes, and looked nothing like anybody in his family.

'Are you our granddad? We've been wanting to meet you for ages. My name is Daniel and this is my brother Adam,' Daniel said politely.

Donald Walker was not usually a man of emotion, but when his youngest grandson held his arm out in hope that his hand would be shook, Donald could not help but smile. He had always been a fan of impeccable manners. 'Yes, I'm your granddad, and I've been looking forward to meeting you too.'

Watching the bonding session unfold before her, Mary shared a smug smile with her daughter. Daniel and Adam already had Donald eating out of the palms of their hands. Gone was her miserable-looking bolshy husband. In his place was a happy, loving grandfather.

Vinny Butler walked into the room and for the first time since the accident locked eyes with the best pal he had left for dead. Ahmed looked awful, wearing only pyjama bottoms his face and body was covered in cuts and bruises.

Ahmed glanced at Vinny, his face devoid of emotion, and then turned to his wife. 'Make yourself scarce, Anna. Vinny and I have business to discuss.'

When Anna left the room, Vinny's eyes welled up with pure guilt as he tried to explain his actions on that fateful night. 'I am so fucking sorry, mate. No way would I have left you if I had thought you were still alive. I really thought you were a goner.'

'Pour us both a Scotch, then I want you to tell me exactly what happened. I don't remember anything about that evening at all,' Ahmed lied. He could sense that Vinny was nervous and so the bastard should be. Making it awkward without being too nasty was exactly how Ahmed had planned this conversation.

Vinny took a large gulp of his drink. 'Do you remember going to the whorehouse in Dalston?'

'Nope.'

'Well, me and you were three sheets to the wind when we got there. We'd been boozing all night at the club. Champ overheard us saying where we were going and begged to come with us. Anyway, we had a great time and I offered to drive your car home. I'd sobered up a bit by then. But as I was driving, some van came towards me with its full beam on. I was momentarily blinded, which is why I lost control. We smashed into a building,

but it was the left-hand side of the car that took all the impact. That's where you and Champ were both sitting.'

'Carry on,' Ahmed urged.

Reliving the awful experience was something Vinny would rather not be put through, but what choice did he have? A thorough explanation was the very least he owed Ahmed. 'Well, I hit my head against the steering wheel and it dazed me for a minute or so. When I came to and looked at you, there was a big piece of metal sticking out of your chest and a small piece in your head. There was blood everywhere. I checked for a pulse and couldn't find one, then I got out the car to see if Champ was OK. The crash had almost fucking beheaded him. It was awful, the worst thing I have ever seen in my life. I checked you over once more before I left the scene, but I was positive you were dead. I would never have left you to die, you have to believe that, mate.'

Ahmed took a sip of his drink. He had nearly died and had only got out of hospital the previous day. 'So, was you thinking straight when you legged it?'

'My mind was all over the place. I was devastated, Ahmed, about you and Champ. It was like a bad fucking dream.'

'What I cannot understand is how a devastated man would move his best pal's body into the driver's seat to avoid taking the rap himself. That is a callous, cowardly act in my eyes.'

'I just panicked. It weren't the Old Bill I was bothered about, it was my mum and aunt finding out I'd been driving the motor. If they thought it was me who'd killed Champ, they would both

disown me. What did you say to the filth? I wouldn't blame you if you dobbed me in it. It's no more than I deserve.'

Ahmed chuckled. 'I am not a grass, Vinny. It was my car that was written off and I was found behind the steering wheel, so you wasn't even a suspect.'

'Have you been charged with anything?'

'No. I had internal bleeding, therefore needed an emergency operation. I was questioned, but there was no proof I had been drinking because my blood test ended up on the missing list.'

'Well, I'll buy you a new car obviously, and thanks for not saying anything. My mum and aunt are absolutely broken-hearted as it is. Roy's dead as well. Shot himself in the head right in front of me. This past week has been the worst of my life.'

'It's not exactly been my best, Vinny.'

'I know it hasn't, mate. So, what happens now? I'll understand if you don't want to be my business partner any more,' Vinny said. Michael was his partner in the legit business, the nightclub, but Ahmed had been his partner in the drug trade. Thanks to their astute business brains the two of them had built up quite an empire over the past few years, and the bulk of heroin and cocaine currently available on the streets of London was their merchandise.

Ahmed forced a smile at the man he now hated so very much. 'I was not happy that you left me for dead but now you have explained yourself, I can understand why you did what you did. I am willing to let bygones be bygones.'

Relieved, Vinny hugged his pal. 'I will make it up to you, I swear.'

'I know you will. Now, if you don't mind, I'm very tired and could do with some sleep. When is Champ's funeral, by the way? Such a shame, he was a good kid.'

Vinny nodded, his face etched with grief. 'The funeral is tomorrow. We're having a joint one, burying Champ and Roy together.'

'What time and where?'

'The service is at St Leonard's at two. You can't come though, mate. You don't look well enough and my mum and aunt will go apeshit if they see you there. They think you were driving, remember?'

'And what about Michael?'

'He knows the truth. I told him it was me.'

'Well, that's OK then. I loved Champ, Vinny, and I am determined to pay my respects to him. I don't care if your mum and aunt hate my guts. I and God know that Lenny's death had sod all to do with me, remember?'

Aware that Ahmed was being sarcastic, Vinny shrugged. 'OK, but try and stay out of my mum and aunt's way. I'll smooth things over in time, but it's all too raw at the moment.'

When Vinny said goodbye and shut the door, Ahmed smirked. He had no intention of staying away from Queenie and Vivian. He intended to make life as difficult for Vinny as he possibly could from now on. As for the Judas cunt thinking he had been

forgiven, there was more chance of hell freezing over than that ever happening.

Thanks to Vinny, he had endured internal bleeding, three broken ribs and forty-two stitches in his face and stomach. Scars would heal, but Vinny's betrayal wouldn't. Every time he looked at those scars, Ahmed would be reminded of what his so-called best friend and business partner had done to him.

When Ahmed had first woken up and learned what had happened, his head and heart felt weighed down with feelings of shock and disappointment. Not any more though. Over the past few days, those feelings had been replaced by fury and an urge to get even.

Vinny Butler had disrespected him in the worst possible way. Moving his body into the driver's seat, then leaving him for dead was an act of evil that Ahmed could never forgive or forget.

Ahmed grinned as he laid his head back on the pillow. The five most important things in Vinny's life were money, his liberty, reputation, mother and son. Now, what should Ahmed take away from him first? Decisions, decisions …

CHAPTER TWO

On the morning of her son and nephew's funerals, Queenie was woken up by the sound of torrential rain pounding against her window. 'Poxy bastard weather,' she mumbled as she pulled back the curtain. Funerals were miserable enough occasions at the best of times, but there was nothing worse than standing at a graveside in the rain.

Queenie Butler marched into her daughter's bedroom and yanked the blankets from over her head. It was nine days since Brenda's husband had left her. Dean had gone out for a newspaper one morning and had not come back. It had since come to light that he had cleaned out his bank account that very day. Unable to face life as a one-parent family, Brenda had moved into Queenie's with her four-year-old daughter Tara. Both were high maintenance and loved a tantrum, and Queenie just wished they would sod off home.

'Out of that pit and get yourself ready – and don't forget to wear your cross,' Queenie ordered. She and Vivian loved their gold, and always wore their big gold crosses supported by thick belcher chains for funerals, weddings and christenings in hope of impressing the vicar.

'I don't feel well, Mum. I feel sick again. Can't I stay here and look after Tara?'

Brenda had only had her pregnancy confirmed by the doctor

the previous day. Dean had really left her in the lurch and if Queenie ever got her hands on her son-in-law, she would wring his scrawny neck.

'Don't give me all that old flannel. You get your arse out that bed now, and make yourself look tidy. Not attend your own brother and cousin's funerals? Never heard such cobblers in my life. Selfish little mare you are, Brenda. Well, today isn't about you, it's about Roy and Lenny, and if you don't do me proud, I shall disown you.'

About to run a bath, Queenie heard a noise outside and looked out of the window again. 'What the bleedin' hell's she doing now?' she muttered. Vivian was dragging what looked like Lenny's bedside cabinet up the garden path, and making quite a racket as she did so.

Putting on her shoes and coat, Queenie ran downstairs and out the front door. 'Whatever are you doing? It's not even six o'clock yet. You'll wake the neighbours up, and you'll catch pneumonia in this weather.'

'I'm putting Lenny's stuff out for the dustmen. Not going to be needing it any more, is he?'

Queenie stared at her sister. When they had first learned about Lenny's death, Vivian had cried and wailed like an injured animal, but since then she had shown hardly any emotion. She had barely mentioned the funeral and Queenie found it very odd that she wanted to chuck all the poor little sod's belongings away. There was no way she could part with anything of her Roy's.

'Viv, there'll be flowers arriving soon. Leave sorting out Lenny's belongings until after the funeral. If you still want to get rid of them, I'll get one of the boys to take the stuff to the dump for you.'

'I wish you'd stop telling me what to fucking do, Queen,' Vivian spat, dumping two cardboard boxes full of toys next to her sister's feet.

Queenie looked down and immediately felt a lump in her throat. Zippy the monkey had been Lenny's favourite toy. He had carried it everywhere with him as a kid, and had always slept with it in his bed until the day he died. Queenie picked the toy up. No way was she going to allow her sister to throw that away. It should be buried with Lenny.

Michael was shocked to receive an early morning phone call from his wife. It was the first time they had spoken since Nancy had been taken into hospital. She had wandered out one evening in her nightdress and slippers and had been found by a man in an alleyway the following morning. The doctors had suggested that Nancy's odd behaviour could be down to post-natal depression, but seeing as Adam was now two, Michael found that hard to understand.

'Nance, I've really missed you, babe. The boys had a great time yesterday and were full of it when they came home. They didn't stop talking about their granddad, so I take it it all went well?'

'Yes, it went very well. My dad adored them, and I'm ever so pleased. It feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

How are you? I was so sorry to hear about your brother and Lenny. When are their funerals?'

'Today. Will you come with me, Nance? My mum and aunt are both in a dreadful way and I could really do with your support.'

Nancy sighed. She had only just started to feel like her old self again, and didn't fancy spending time with Michael's family yet. Vinny had a way of making her feel anxious, and Brenda would be bound to kick off with her over Dean going away. 'I'm sorry, Michael, but I don't feel up to attending funerals. I will look after the boys for you though. Mum said you were taking them with you and I'd rather you didn't. They're far too young to be surrounded by death.'

Michael was cross. He had cared for his sons almost single-handed these past couple of months. It also hurt him that Nancy had only called because she had wanted to have Daniel and Adam for the day. Did she not love him any more? Was their marriage over? Well, there was only one way to find out. An ultimatum should do the trick. 'Nance, I cannot believe what you just said. "I will look after the boys for you" – have you forgotten you're their mother? Look, I know you've been ill and I sympathize with that, but now you're feeling better, you need to have a think about us. I'll give you a week to get your arse back home, and if you don't, I shall start divorce proceedings. Our sons are unsettled enough as it is at the moment and I won't allow you to keep fucking them about. They miss you, I miss you, and you should be back at

home where you belong. You can't hide behind your parents for ever. As for the funeral, the boys are coming with me, end of. It's not fair on Lee if they don't.'

'I'm sorry I've been a bad mum and wife, but I have been really ill,' Nancy replied, her voice full of emotion.

'No, you haven't been ill, Nance, you've been depressed. Two different things, so my mum reckons. Don't you think I get depressed too? My cousin has just been beheaded in a car crash, Roy has blown his brains out, and I'm currently trying to run a business and bring up three kids on my own. Do you wanna swap fucking places? Listen, I've got to go now. I need to get round my mum's and the boys haven't had any breakfast yet. I meant what I said though, Nance. You've got a week to make up your mind, or we're finished.'

Joanna Preston held Vinny's arm as they strode towards Queenie's house. It had been her boyfriend's idea that she ring her mum this morning. He had said that her eighteenth birthday was as good a time as any to try and patch things up. He'd also insisted she tell her mum that she was pregnant.

'You OK? Shame your mum went off on one, but she will come round in time you know,' Vinny said. He had been dying for Johnny Preston to find out that he had got his daughter up the spout. Deborah was bound to tell him the news, and Vinny only wished he could be there to see the look on the bastard's face.

'Are all these people here for the funeral, Vinny?' Joanna asked, as they turned the corner. There was a crowd of about a

hundred or so.

'Yeah, must be. Bit early they are, though. I hope they haven't knocked on my mum's door. I told them to leave her be,' Vinny replied. His mother had insisted that, apart from family, she wanted nobody inside the house.

The flowers spread across his mum and aunt's front gardens brought a lump to Vinny's throat. The wreath he had chosen, with 'Champ' spelled out, was that big it literally shone out like a beacon.

Little Vinny was ten years old and with his black hair and piercing green eyes it was like looking at his father at the same age. Unfortunately for Queenie, her grandson had picked up many of Vinny's traits. He was obstinate, had a temper on him, and once he got a bee in his bonnet, there was very little reasoning with the child.

'I'll say this once more, Vinny. Get upstairs and put your suit on before I brain ya. I really don't need you performing today, boy. I've got enough on my plate as it is.'

When Little Vinny didn't move out of the armchair, Queenie was moving in to give him a good clout round the earhole when she heard the front door open and close. 'About bloody time too. I've had all them nosy bastards out there knocking on the door, and now your son reckons he isn't coming to the funeral,' Queenie told Vinny.

Ordering Joanna to keep his mum company in the kitchen, Vinny walked into the lounge and shut the door. 'What's the

matter, boy?'

'Don't like funerals. They remind me of my mum dying.'

Vinny crouched next to his son. Little Vinny had barely known his mother. Karen had been a stripper at the club when she'd fallen pregnant by Vinny. He'd paid her off and brought his son up with the help of his mum. When Little Vinny was five, Karen had turned up on his doorstep like a bad penny. He'd had her done away with, ordering that her murder be made to look like a heroin overdose. 'Look, boy, I know you aren't happy about me being with Joanna and her being pregnant, but I bet once your brother or sister is born, you'll be in your element.'

'No, I won't. I hate babies,' Little Vinny replied, his lip protruding sulkily.

'But it won't stay a baby for long. It will soon be old enough for you to talk to and take out. I remember sulking when your nan fell pregnant with Roy. I wanted to be the only kid. When Roy was born, I soon grew to love him – and you'll be the same when Jo's baby is born. You're my first-born, Vinny, and you're always going to be more special to me than any other kid.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really. I've always been closer to Nanny than Roy, Michael or Brenda were, and that's because I was her first-born. Number one son you are, boy. Very special that is.'

When Little Vinny grinned, Vinny ruffled his hair. 'Now, go and put your suit on.'

Vivian Harris took one last look inside Lenny's old bedroom

and shut the door. It looked bare and cold now, just like her heart felt. The dustmen must have taken away his stuff because she'd looked out of the window an hour ago and it was gone. A mass of flowers had replaced her son's belongings.

Hearing voices outside, Vivian peeked through the curtain again. 'Nosy fucking bastards. Go away and leave me alone,' she muttered. She had only ever been interested in her family. In her eyes, nobody else mattered.

Aware that somebody was staring up at her, Viv jumped away from the curtain. She poured herself another brandy and lay down on her bed. As soon as her pest of a sister left for the funeral, she planned to fall asleep and never wake up. Lenny needed her, he always had, and she was determined to be there in heaven for him. That's if the bastard place existed, of course.

When Michael arrived, Queenie Butler battled her way through the well-wishing mourners to get to her sister's house. Vivian had insisted on being left alone earlier and had promised she would knock at Queenie's as soon as the coffins arrived. She hadn't. Queenie put her key in the door, but the chain was on. 'Viv, it's me. Let me in.'

When she still received no reply, Queenie started to get angry. 'Vivvy, open this bastard door now,' she yelled.

Aware of Nosy Hilda and Mouthy Maureen staring at her, Queenie pushed past the gawping mourners and marched back to her own house. 'Vinny, you're going to have to do something. Viv's locked herself in and she won't answer the door. It's all your

fault for fitting that poxy chain lock, so best you sort it. What with your sister and son, I've had enough drama for one day.'

Vinny snatched the key off his mum, then darted next door. 'Auntie Viv, come and take this lock off please. We have to leave soon, the cars are here.'

After five minutes of begging his aunt to answer the door and receiving no reply, Vinny took a couple of steps back and booted the door open. He looked in the lounge first, then ran up the stairs.

'Go away and leave me alone,' Vivian screamed when her bedroom door flew open.

'What you doing, still in bed? We have to leave in a minute. Why aren't you dressed?' Vinny asked.

'Because I ain't coming. Nothing is going to bring my Lenny back. Why would I want all them nosy cunts out there gawping at me, revelling in my misfortune?'

Clocking the bottle of brandy on Vivian's bedside cabinet, Vinny sighed. Only his mother could sort this one out and she was going to go apeshit when she found out Viv was sloshed. He ran back to his mum's, drew her aside and told her, 'Viv reckons she isn't coming to the funeral. She's still in bed and she's slurring. I think she's pissed.'

Queenie Butler was out the door like a bat out of hell. Her black hat flew off in a gust of wind as she ran down the path, but she did not stop to retrieve it. First Brenda playing up, then her grandson and now Vivvy. Did the selfish bastards not realize

that she was grieving too?

'Is everything all right, Queenie?' asked Nosy Hilda.

'Mind your own fucking business for once,' Queenie snapped, barging past her open-mouthed neighbour. She ran up her sister's stairs and into the bedroom. 'You are going to the funeral even if I have to drag you there. Now, get your arse out of bed and get a grip woman.'

'I can't face it, Queen. My Lenny knew I loved him, so did Roy. I don't have to go to no funeral to prove that to anyone.'

Queenie ripped the blankets off her sister just as she had with her daughter earlier. 'Now, you listen to me, Vivian Harris. Get out of that bed and get yourself dressed. It's unheard of in our neck of the woods for a woman to miss her own child's funeral – and may God be my judge, you ain't gonna be the first. We're the talk of the town as it is, what with Vinny having to kick your front door in. I will not have our boys' funerals become a laughing stock, not on your nelly. Now, up you bloody well get.'

Albie Butler could feel his heart beating like a drum as he approached St Leonard's church. He hadn't spoken to Vinny since his son had threatened to kill him and he was also on bad terms with Queenie and Viv. Even his daughter and eldest grandson hated his guts.

'What's up, Albie?' Bert asked, when his brother stopped in his tracks.

'Let's wait here. Big Stan is standing outside the church and I know he'll kick off if he sees me. I told him I had cancer

that time and he bought me drinks and bunged me money,' Albie explained, truly regretting his terrible lie. He had only told his family and neighbours he had cancer so he could have contact with his children again. His deceit had backfired though. Vinny had found out and tried to blackmail him, and when Albie refused to get involved in his son's evil plan to ruin Roy's engagement, Vinny had outed his lie in front of half of Whitechapel.

'The funeral cars have arrived by the looks of it, Albie. Let's go and find your Michael. He won't allow anybody to have a go at you.'

Albie still had a good relationship with his youngest son. When Vinny had forced him to leave the East End, it was Michael who had driven him down to Ipswich to start his new life. Moving in with Bert had been a blessing. Albie had cut down his drinking and really sorted his life out. He had even met a lovely lady. Dorothy now lived with him and Bert and she was an absolute diamond. She treated him with far more respect than Queenie ever had. His marriage to Queenie had been doomed as soon as she had fallen pregnant. From the moment Vinny was born, Vivian had taken over his husbandly duties and he had been pushed out of the family circle like an unwanted bag of old rubbish.

'Dad, I've spoken to Mum and Vinny and they've agreed that it's only right you sit in the front pew with us,' Michael said, hugging his worried-looking father.

'Thank you, Michael.' Albie's eyes filled up with tears and he was too choked to say more. He had loved Roy and was so glad his son had taken the trouble to phone him before ending his life. Their conversation had been relatively short, but bridges had been built, truths had been told, and that meant the world to Albie.

The actual service was a far cry from the typical East End funeral. Both Queenie and Vivian regularly visited their mother's grave and spoke to her as though she were still alive, but neither was particularly religious. Their lives and luck had taken far too much of a bashing for them to truly believe in God. When the vicar had visited her at home to make arrangements, Queenie had insisted that the pianist play songs rather than hymns.

'Bye Bye Blackbird' was the song she had sung to all her children to get them to sleep when they were babies, so seeing as her Roy was now asleep for ever, it seemed an appropriate choice. Lenny was a big Elvis fan, so Queenie had chosen 'The Wonder of You' especially for her nephew. Vivian had been in no fit state to have any input into the playlist, but Queenie was sure her sister would have opted for the same song, as it had been Lenny's all-time favourite. 'On Mother Kelly's Doorstep' was Queenie's final request. Both she and Vivian loved that song and had taught it to their offspring, so Queenie saw it as a fitting family tribute.

Vinny locked eyes with his father as he sat down in the pew and gave him a polite nod. Michael had agreed to cover up that it was Vinny who had been driving the night Lenny was killed on

condition that he promised to make things right with their dad. Roy had requested the same thing in his suicide note, and Vinny knew he owed it to his brothers to abide by their wishes.

'Today we are here to remember the lives of Roy Butler and Leonard William Harris,' the vicar's voice boomed.

Squeezing Vivian's hand, Queenie glanced down the pew. Albie, Vinny, Michael and Little Vinny all had tears rolling down their cheeks. Roy's ex-fiancée and her parents were seated in the opposite pew. Colleen was sobbing, but Queenie was annoyed with her. Roy's only child, Emily-Mae, was four now and she had wanted the girl to attend her father's funeral but Colleen had rebuffed the request. Queenie hadn't seen her granddaughter since Colleen had returned to her native Ireland, and she had been desperate to tell the child what a wonderful man her daddy was.

'God! What fucking God?' Vivian muttered as the vicar began sermonizing about the afterlife.

'Shush, Viv. Your voice carries and people can hear you,' Queenie whispered.

'Couldn't give a toss what people think. No God would have taken my boy from me. That's how I know he don't fucking exist.'

When the pianist played 'The Wonder of You', Vivian's anger turned to anguish. 'My baby. My beautiful boy. Mummy loved you so much, Lenny. You were my world.'

Vinny bowed his head when the vicar recited the Lord's Prayer. He had begged his brother to give a eulogy on behalf of the family, but Michael had flatly refused. 'Accidental or not,

both Roy and Champ would still be alive if it wasn't for your mistakes, Vin. The least you owe them is to stand up, be a man, and say a few words,' had been Michael's blunt reply.

After the prayer, the vicar called Vinny up to speak. Feeling physically sick, he took the piece of paper out of his pocket and glanced at the sea of faces all staring his way. The church was packed to the brim. 'My brother Roy and cousin Champ were two of the nicest people you could ever wish to meet. Both had a wicked sense of humour, especially Champ, who would have me in hysterics every day with his off-the-cuff one-liners and jokes.'

Knowing he was about to mug himself off by crying, Vinny paused. As he took a deep breath to try and compose himself, he locked eyes with Ahmed and knew he could not continue. Guilt would not allow him to do so. 'I can't do this. I'm sorry,' Vinny said, handing the piece of paper to the vicar.

When her tearful son sat back down, Queenie bravely stood up. 'I would like to say a few words and I don't need no piece of paper.'

She turned to face the mourners. 'Roy and Lenny's passing has left a huge gap in all our lives, but instead of being morbid, I want to share with you some of the good times. Roy was a finicky little sod as a kid, would never eat his vegetables. I tried the old clout-round-the-earhole routine and, when that didn't work, I threatened to put him in the orphanage. Soon ate his greens after that, he did.'

Queenie paused as the mourners chuckled. She then went on

to tell other funny stories about her son, before reverting to a serious tone of voice. 'The happiest I had ever seen my Roy was when he met Colleen. Loved the bones of her, he did, and I am so glad they had a beautiful daughter together. In Emily-Mae, part of my Roy will always live on, and that is a great comfort to me. Due to his injuries, my son was not happy in the latter part of his life and I like to think he is in a better place now, God rest his soul.'

'And I hope he's looking after my Lenny for me,' a sobbing Vivian shouted out.

'Of course he is, Vivvy. You can be assured of that. Which brings me to Lenny. Such a wonderful boy, whose smile could light up a room. Never stopped laughing, that lad. I bet he's looking down on me now, begging me to tell some funny stories about him. Well, Champ – as my boys liked to call him – was a brilliant little DJ, but he would drive me and his mother mad at home by continuously playing rock 'n' roll. Thought he was Mr Presley himself, the little toerag did, and I bet as soon as God opens those pearly gates, Lenny's first question to the big man above will be, "Where's Elvis?"'

Aware that all her family were crying yet laughing at the same time, Queenie continued: 'Another of Lenny's bad habits was he used to flop his dingle-dangle out in public. Vivvy used to get so embarrassed and Lenny would look at me with a twinkle in his eye and I knew he only did it to wind his mother up. Used to flash at people he did not like, so if anybody here today had the

misfortune of coming face to face with Lenny's dingle-dangle, sorry, but you obviously was not one of my nephew's favourite people.'

Queenie told two more funny stories, then wrapped her speech up by saying, 'Rest in peace, Roy and Lenny. Your family loved you both very much.'

The service came to a close with 'On Mother Kelly's Doorstep' and it was then that Queenie finally broke down. She had tried to be so strong for the sake of her sister and family, but the tears she had been storing seemed to all flow out at once.

Vinny held his mother close to his chest. Her shoulders were hunched like those of a much older woman, and it was as though she had aged ten years in the past ten days. All he could do was stroke her hair and tell her, 'I know it's terribly sad, Mum, but Roy will be happier in heaven, I know he will.'

Michael was the first to notice the criminal element amongst the mourners. As he left the church, he tapped Vinny on the shoulder. 'Lots of faces here, bruv. I've just spotted the Mitchells, and I'm sure I saw David Fraser as well.'

The Mitchell firm, led by Harry Mitchell, were out of Canning Town. Harry's three sons, Paulie, Ronny and Eddie worked alongside him in the pub protection racket, and over the years they had built up a fearsome reputation in the East End.

David Fraser was not a man to be messed with either. Son of Mad Frankie, who was currently banged up at Her Majesty's pleasure, David came from south of the water. 'That's Sid the

Snake who David is talking to. I know him quite well. You go and find the Mitchells, Michael, thank them for coming and invite them to the wake. I'll do the same with David and Sid,' Vinny ordered.

'Vinny, why you faffing about here? We don't want to keep the vicar waiting at the graveside,' Queenie scolded. She had been bowled over by the wonderful flower arrangements Roy and Lenny had received. There had been hundreds of people standing in front of her house and a big crowd outside the club as the undertaker had walked in front of her dearly departed on their final journey.

'You go ahead with Auntie Viv, Mum. Michael and I just need to speak to a few people, then we'll follow.'

'Well, don't be too long. As I told you this morning, I expect this to be the perfect send-off.'

The moment the congregation reached the cemetery, Queenie's wish for the perfect funeral was ruined.

It had been decided that Roy and Lenny would be buried side by side in Plaistow – Bow Cemetery having stopped burials a while back, thus scuppering Queenie and Vivian's wish to have their sons buried close to their beloved mother. Among the mourners waiting for the cortege to arrive was Ahmed.

When Vivian spotted him, she stopped dead in her tracks. Ahmed was chatting to a couple of men, casually smoking a cigarette as if he didn't have a care in the world. 'Who invited that murdering bastard? I'll kill him! I will bastard-well kill him,'

she screamed as she ran towards him.

'Ruined our lives, you have. Broken our hearts!' Queenie shouted, joining Vivian in throwing punches at the man they blamed for Lenny's death.

Humiliated because the Mitchells were standing nearby, Vinny grabbed hold of his mother and ordered Michael to restrain Vivian. 'Ahmed loved Lenny, and he wanted to say farewell to him. What happened was an accident, Mum.'

'Accident! An accident! I'll give you fucking accident, sticking up for that murdering Turkish cunt,' Queenie yelled, slapping her son repeatedly around his stupid head.

'Ahmed, I think it's best you leave now. This is meant to be a funeral and it's turning into a circus,' Michael said, aware that everybody including the vicar was gawping.

'Let me at him! Let me at the evil murdering shitbag!' Vivian shrieked, desperately trying to shrug off her nephew's grip.

Ahmed held his hands up in surrender. 'I wanted to pay my respects, but I shall leave now. I am sorry if I have upset anybody.'

With Vivian and Queenie still shouting obscenities in the background, Ahmed turned up the collar of his black Crombie coat and slowly walked away, smirking to himself.

Things went from bad to worse as the vicar said a few words after both coffins had been lowered into the ground.

'What's that? What you just thrown in my boy's grave?' Vivian hissed, prodding her sister's arm.

'Zippy the monkey. He loved that toy and you put it out for

the dustmen. I thought it should be buried with him, Viv. It was always his comfort thingy.'

'Noooo! You can't bury Zippy! I want him. I want to keep him,' Vivian shrieked. Shoving the vicar out of the way, she literally threw herself on top of her son's coffin.

As every single mourner present stood frozen, open-mouthed, Queenie was the first to react. 'Do something, Vinny. Get her out of that hole,' she screamed.

Dutifully obeying his mother's orders, Vinny wished the hole could be filled with earth with him in it. His brother and cousin's expensive farewell had turned into a joke. One that the East End and criminal fraternity would dine out on for years.

CHAPTER THREE

Desperate to save face after such a public display in front of the vicar, Queenie made a point of putting on her poshest voice and personally inviting all of the neighbours back to the wake.

'You can count me out, Queen. I'm in no mood to socialize. I just want to be on my own,' Vivian told her sister, clutching Zippy the monkey tightly to her chest.

'Hold that monkey normally please, Viv. People are staring at you. You are coming back to the club. Our neighbours must already reckon you've lost your marbles after the way you threw yourself on top of Lenny's coffin, and if you don't show your face at the wake, they'll think you've lost the plot completely. Mouthy Maureen and Nosy Hilda will be the first to spread such rumours, you mark my words.'

'Like I give a shit what any of the bastards think,' Viv snarled.

'Yes, you do. You're just not thinking straight at the moment. We haven't got to stay at the club long. But we do need to show our faces, especially after today's little fiasco. That's the least we can do for our sons' memory,' insisted Queenie in a tone that brooked no argument.

Not wanting the wake to be a sombre affair, Vinny had hired a band for the occasion. Max Bennett was an old timer when it came to the East End pub circuit, and he always encouraged punters – or in today's case, mourners – to stand up and belt out

a song or two.

The professional caterers had put on a nice display. As well as the usual buffet food, there was every type of seafood you could imagine, including a dozen big tubs of jellied eels.

'Good idea of yours, getting Max in to sing, Vinny. I can't believe the amount of people that turned up. I expected a big crowd, but not quite this big. The Davisons from Charlton are here, and Freddie the Fox,' Michael informed his brother.

The Davisons were a very big crime family who ran a scrap-metal business in South London as a front for their illegal activities. Freddie the Fox was an ex-bank robber who originated from Whitechapel but had moved to the Costa del Sol after his latest prison sentence had ended. 'I've already spoken to Freddie. Bowled over that he travelled all the way from Spain just for the funeral. I feel such a mug though that I couldn't go through with the speech. And what with Mum and Auntie Viv's performance at the graveside …'

Michael put a comforting arm around his brother's shoulders. 'You should be proud of yourself today. I have never seen such a well-organized funeral in my life, and you arranged it all.'

'Did you invite the Mitchells to the wake?'

'Yeah, but they had some important business to attend to, so couldn't make it. Nice of them to attend the funeral, though, eh? Proper respectful people.'

'Old school, Michael. Eddie's the one to look out for in the future. Very charismatic and has a good head on his shoulders,

by all accounts. Much more feared than his brothers are, and his reputation is growing by the day.'

'Did they know Roy personally?'

'Only to say hello to. Roy and I bumped into Eddie, Paulie and Ronny in a bar once when you were just a kid. It was around the time we bought this gaff and they wished us good luck with it. Haven't crossed paths with them much since then, but I did see Eddie in a restaurant once when I was with Karen. We exchanged pleasantries and that was it.'

'Well, given the number of faces that turned up today, it just goes to show how highly regarded we are. Nobody is going to give a toss that you didn't give a eulogy, nor will they care what happened at the graveside. Perfect families do not exist, especially in our world, Vinny. Just hold your head high and give yourself a pat on the back for giving Roy and Champ such a great send-off.'

Not for the first time that week, Vinny looked at his brother with renewed admiration. Michael was so much more of a man without that lunatic of a wife around him.

Determined to restore her family's credibility, Queenie Butler plastered on a false smile as she chatted jovially to the neighbours and locals. Truth be known, she did not want to be at the wake any more than Vivian did, but she was determined to act her way through it.

Spotting old Mr Arthur heading her way with his medals pinned proudly on his suit jacket, Queenie ducked out of sight.

Listening to that silly old bastard rambling on about the war was the last thing she needed today of all days. Using the well-wishers for cover, she darted back to the table where Vivian was sitting with Joanna.

'Brenda is the bane of my life, honestly. Only caught her necking alcohol! Silly little mare is pregnant again, and if she harms that baby, I will kill her stone dead. Sent her back to mine with the kids. Little Vinny was playing up, and Michael's three were bored.'

When neither Vivian nor Joanna replied, Queenie could not help but lose her cool. 'Say something then, the pair of you, even if it's only "arseholes". Never seen two faces look so much like a wet weekend. Best you snap out of your little sulk, Joanna, else Vinny won't be amused. I know you've got the ike because he told you to sit here while he chats to the men, but men of importance like Vinny always stand with the blokes, love. When they're talking business, they don't want their birds stood by their side, do they? It isn't the done thing.'

'Can somebody get me another sherry? I'm not walking up the bar myself,' Vivian said.

When Joanna leapt up to get it for her, Queenie turned to Vivian. 'Did you see the way Daniel, Adam and Lee greeted Albie at the church?'

'No.'

'All over him like a rash, they were. That is definitely not the first time they have met that old bastard. Michael must have taken

them to visit him behind my back. I asked Michael outright, but he reckons the boys were just excited because he'd told them Albie was their granddad. I told him not to insult my intelligence. Do I look like I just got off the banana boat?'

'Is Albie here?'

'No. Went straight home after the funeral with that drippy brother of his. Wouldn't have had the guts to come here after the terrible lie he told. I'm surprised the arsehole even had the front to turn up at the funeral.'

'This is all we fucking need,' Vivian mumbled, as Mr Arthur sat down in Joanna's chair.

'Sorry to bother you, ladies, but I just wanted to pay my respects to you in person and say how very sorry I am for your loss. I also wanted to tell you—'

Before Mr Arthur had a chance to finish the sentence, Queenie cut him dead. After excelling herself being polite to people who got on her nerves all day, she'd reached the point where she'd had enough. 'If it's about your war escapades, Viv and I really aren't in the mood to listen to such cobblers today.'

Mr Arthur looked hurt. 'I just wanted to tell you about Jeanie Thomas, Queenie. I know you chat to her on her stall sometimes.'

Jeanie Thomas was the mother of Trevor who had run off with Vinny's first love, Yvonne. At the time, Queenie had been that annoyed she had vowed never to speak to the woman again. But Jeanie was such a nice lady, Queenie hadn't been able to stay angry with her for long. What had happened was hardly her fault.

'I've not been down the market lately. Not dead, is she?'

'Jeanie's in a terrible state, Queenie. Her son moved back to the area recently and he's disappeared off the face of the earth. Been missing days now he has, and Jeanie thinks that something terrible has happened to him.'

Vivian, who had kept quiet until now, suddenly piped up: 'Whatever has happened to Jeanie's son cannot be any worse than what happened to mine and Queenie's, can it? Now sod off and leave us alone.'

When Mr Arthur scuttled off like a naughty schoolboy, Queenie turned to Viv. 'I bet Trevor's disappearance has something to do with Vinny. Both he and Michael went on the missing list earlier this week and I had to look after Michael's kids, didn't I? I had no idea Trevor had moved back to the area. Jeanie never mentioned it.'

When Joanna reappeared with two glasses of sherry, Vivian knocked hers back and then stood up. 'It's breaking my heart looking at Lenny's photos on that wall. I need to get out of here.'

'Wait ten minutes and I'll come with you,' Queenie said.

'No. I did what you asked and came back here, now I want you to do as I ask and leave me in peace for the night. I need to be alone to collect my thoughts. I'll see you in the morning.'

Clutching Zippy the monkey in her hand, Vivian left the club. Once outside, she held the toy to her nose. She had always begged Lenny to let her wash it, even scolded him and told him he would catch diseases if he didn't do as she asked, but she was glad now

that Lenny had refused, throwing a tantrum every time she asked. The monkey had her son's scent all over it. Closing her eyes, she whispered, 'Not long now, boy, and Mummy will be there to take care of you. You just behave yourself until I arrive.'

Vinny Butler was having a chat with David Fraser when his mother rudely poked him in the arm. 'Me and you need to have a little chat, now!'

Annoyed that she had shown him up yet again, Vinny gave his mother his coldest stare. 'Mum, this is David Fraser. Mad Frankie's son.'

Putting on a completely different tone to the one she had just used, Queenie smiled at the handsome dark-haired chap and held out her right hand. 'Lovely to meet you, David. How is your father?'

'He's doing OK, thanks. Giving the screws the runaround as always. I'll be visiting him again next week.'

'Well, do give him our regards – not just from me but from all of my family.'

'Will do. I have to make a move now, Vinny. I've got to be somewhere. Look after yourself, and tell your brother I said goodbye.'

Vinny shook David's hand, then waited until he walked away before tearing into his mother. 'Do you get off on embarrassing me or something? The Mitchells were stood by the graveside when you and Auntie Viv made a show of me earlier, now you've just spoken to me like I'm a ten-year-old child in front of David

Fraser. Cheers for that, Mum. He must think I'm some right mug.'

'I didn't know it was Mad Frankie's son, did I? I didn't even know you knew the Frasers.'

'There's lots of things you don't know about me, Mother. Just try not to make me look a fool in front of people in future, eh? And drop the silly posh voice, it really doesn't suit you.'

Queenie was not one to be told off. 'And would one of those things I don't know about be Trevor Thomas, by any chance? Don't you even think about lying to me, because I knew you and Michael were up to something earlier this week. Never going to be able to look poor Jeanie in the eye again, am I?'

'I have no idea what you're on about, Mum. I haven't seen Trevor since he ran off with that slag, Yvonne.'

'Swear on my life,' Queenie demanded.

Before he could speak, Michael ended the conversation by grabbing Vinny's arm. 'Bobby Jackson's only had the nerve to show up. Shall I throw the cheeky bastard out, or do you want to do the honours?'

Vinny's lip curled into a snarl. He hated Bobby almost as much as he had despised his father. 'Where is he?'

'Stood at the corner of the bar. Christ knows how long he's been here. I reckon some idiot left the main door open and he just wandered in.'

Usually, whenever the club was open Pete and Paul were on the door, but because they were lifelong friends of Roy and

extremely fond of Lenny too, Vinny had given them the day off to enjoy a good drink at the wake like everybody else. 'He's overstepped the mark this time, bruv. We can't let this go, we'll be a laughing stock.'

Michael nodded. The whole of Whitechapel was aware of the bad blood between Vinny and Bobby, therefore he'd have to be taught a lesson for taking such a liberty.

'What's going on?' Queenie demanded. She could barely hear herself think over Big Stan's rendition of Johnnie Ray's 'Cry'. Talk about murdering a great song.

'It's nothing to worry about, Mum. Just an uninvited guest, that's all. Go and sit back down with Joanna and keep her company for me. I'll be over with some more drinks in a minute,' Vinny ordered.

Bobby Jackson had been out on one of his little benders. He had celebrated his thirty-fifth birthday the previous day and ended up pulling some bird in the Ilford Palais, so he was still in yesterday's clothes. He'd been on his way home when he had spotted the door of the club open, and unable to resist the lure of free alcohol, Bobby had decided to sneak in. The worst Vinny would do was chuck him out, surely?

A sucker for a pretty face, Bobby was busy chatting up one of the barmaids and did not see Vinny creep up behind him. 'You're not the first to say I look like Les McKeown. I get it all the time, I do,' Bobby chuckled.

'Well, you won't be looking like Les by the time I finish

with you – you'll be looking more like a fucking corpse,' Vinny hissed, grabbing Bobby by his long brown hair and dragging him backwards towards the exit.

Having gone to a lot of trouble to model his look on the lead singer of the Bay City Rollers, Bobby was more worried about his appearance than anything else. 'Mind me barnet, will ya? The door was wide open. I didn't gatecrash, honest I didn't.'

Max was singing 'New York, New York', and lots of the mourners were in a circle on the dancefloor doing that stupid dance where you put your arms around one another's shoulders and kick your legs from side to side.

Vinny smiled at Nosy Hilda as he dragged Bobby past her feet. 'Nothing worse than a pisshead who turns up at the wake in jeans, is there? Didn't even have the nous to wear black. I don't know what the world is coming to these days, Hilda. No respect for the dead any more.'

Not one person said a word as Vinny dragged Bobby outside. Nobody followed either. It was none of their business and anybody with even half a brain knew not to interfere.

Joanna Preston was worried. Following Queenie's stare, she had just seen Vinny drag a man out of the club backwards. 'Should we go outside and make sure Vinny is all right, do you think?'

Queenie glared at Joanna. 'Are you tuppence short of a shilling or something? I told you earlier that men like Vinny do not want or appreciate their birds sticking their oar in. How old are you

again?'

Joanna's eyes welled up. She was having her worst birthday ever. 'I'm eighteen today, and I was only trying to help.'

Feeling a bit guilty, Queenie softened her tone. She'd had no idea that it was Joanna's eighteenth birthday. Vinny had failed to mention it. 'Sorry if I was a bit abrupt with you, love, but it's only for your own good. Did you notice how all these people inside the club, including myself, ignored Vinny dragging that man outside?'

Joanna nodded.

'Well, that's what you've got to learn to do. Hear no evil, see no evil – you get what I'm saying?'

If there was ever a moment when Joanna wondered if she had bitten off more than she could chew, then that moment was now. Did she actually know Vinny Butler at all?

Down the side of the club was a small alleyway where the bins were kept. 'What you gonna do to me? I've already said I'm sorry, Vinny. I didn't do anything wrong in the club. Please just let me go home.'

'You did do something wrong, Bobby. You disrespected my brother and cousin by turning up at their wake smelling like a brewery and dressed like a cunt. You also disrespected Michael and myself by entering our club,' Vinny said, grabbing an empty vodka bottle out of a nearby bin.

Flinching, Bobby put his hands over his head to protect himself. He already lost a clump of hair, he'd felt it rip out as

Vinny dragged him along the floor. The next thing he knew, Vinny smashed the bottle against the wall, yanked Bobby's head upwards by his fringe, then stabbed the jagged edge deep into the left side of his face.

'You bastard! What you done to me?' Bobby yelled as blood began to spurt out of his face at a rapid pace.

'Think yourself fucking lucky I've only scarred you, because I am telling you now, you ever cross my path again, Jackson, I will kill you stone dead.'

CHAPTER FOUR

Queenie put her coat on over her nightdress. It was the middle of the night, but she had to check on Vivvy. Sleep was out of the question until she'd put her mind at rest.

Vinny had organized a locksmith to mend the lock and remove the chain from Vivian's door, so Queenie was able to let herself in with her own key. She poked her head around Viv's bedroom door and was alarmed to see the bed empty. 'Vivvy, where are you?'

The answer to Queenie's question came when she opened Lenny's bedroom door. Her sister was laid out like a starfish, face down, on the centre of his bed.

'Vivvy? Wake up, sweetheart.'

After a couple of minutes of prodding and poking, Queenie tried to move her sister. It was then she saw the empty tablet container. Panic-stricken, she let out a deafening scream.

Vinny Butler woke up at midday with the headache from hell. The phone had been ringing all morning, but he had felt incapable of lifting his bonce off the pillow.

Picking up an empty glass, he filled it with water and downed it in one. Since Lenny and Roy's death, he had kept his promise to Michael and stayed off the coke. Trouble was, before he had snorted the shit he had been able to hold his drink, but now he couldn't. After cutting Bobby Jackson last night, he had got well

and truly hammered.

When the phone rang again, Vinny staggered into the lounge to answer it. 'Slow down, Mum. I can't understand you. What's happened?'

'It's Vivian. She's tried to kill herself.'

Ahmed Zane sat down opposite his cousin in the small restaurant situated just off Tottenham High Road. The establishment had been funded by Ahmed. Burak ran it, and the two men split any profits straight down the middle. 'How's business?' Ahmed asked.

'Good. It's been busy lately. How's that loyal friend of yours? You seen him yet?'

Ahmed told him about Vinny visiting him at home, then filled him in on what had occurred at yesterday's funeral.

'So, what happens now? I am still on good terms with the Finsbury Park lads. Do you want me to sort something?' Burak asked. He was livid at the way Vinny had treated his cousin, especially after the loyalty he and Ahmed had shown him. Burak had got himself involved in three murders on Vinny's behalf in the past: Karen, the mother of his son, Kenny Jackson and Terry Smart had all had their lives ended prematurely thanks to Burak and his Finsbury Park pals helping Vinny out in return for a substantial amount of cash.

Ahmed took a sip of his Scotch and swilled the drink around in his mouth before swallowing it. 'Killing Vinny does not satisfy my lust for revenge. I want to ruin him, take away everything of

importance in his life, then watch him suffer.'

'You mean his son? His mother? I can sort that for you.'

Ahmed shook his head. 'We'll let the family live for now. Money, his reputation and his freedom are the other most important things in Vinny's life, and those are the things, if taken away, that will hurt him the most. I plan to strip him of all three.'

'How?'

'Not sure yet, but I will find a way. First though, I must be patient. If things start to go wrong now, Vinny will become suspicious. I need him to relax, assure him that I hold no grudges before I strike. Vinny Butler is a clever man, but he is not as clever as me. He who laughs last, laughs the longest, Burak, and that shall be us.'

Nancy Butler was sitting in silence at the dinner table. Her brother was rambling on about his job again, and even though Nancy was pleased that being a policeman obviously suited Christopher, she found the daily conversation ever so repetitive and tedious.

When Christopher began bragging about receiving praise from his boss yet again, before he could actually recite the conversation word for word, Nancy butted in: 'Isn't it about time you found yourself a girlfriend, Christopher? I think it would be good for you to have something else in your life other than work.'

Mary stopped chewing her food. Nancy and Christopher had always been so close as children, but not any more.

'You've got more front than British Home Stores, Nancy. How

dare you comment on my life when you've made such a mess of your own? You should think yourself lucky you have a roof over your head, after the way you've treated us in the past, eh, Dad?'

'Your brother is right, Nancy. He'll have plenty of time to charm the ladies once his probation period has finished. His career should come before anything else, and if he stays focused, he will climb that ladder to the very top,' agreed Donald.

'And when I get to the top, I shall arrest all the scumbags in this world, like your husband and his family,' Christopher added.

Nancy stood up.

'Where are you going, love? Sit back down and eat your dinner,' Mary urged.

'I'm going to ring Michael. We had a heart-to-heart the other day and he told me a few home truths. He said the boys were unsettled and I should be back at home taking care of them. He's right, Mum. My sons need me and I can't stay here for ever.'

'But I thought you'd left Michael for good?' Donald queried.

'I never said that, Dad. All I said was I wanted a break from him to sort my own head and problems out. It isn't Michael's fault that I've suffered from depression. He has always been a good husband. I shall make sure I bring the boys to visit you regularly, if that's OK?'

Donald would have been more inclined to argue with Nancy's decision had it not been for his grandsons. Since meeting Daniel and Adam, Donald had felt so much happier in himself, and he couldn't wait to spend more time with them.

'Once a gangster's moll, always a gangster's moll,' Christopher said cockily.

'Shut up, you,' Mary ordered her son. She then turned to Nancy. 'Go and ring him then, love. You owe it to them boys to make your marriage work, and I'm sure now you're feeling better, it will.'

Queenie Butler sat down next to her sister's bed and squeezed her hand. The quick reaction by medical staff, plus the help of a stomach pump had saved Vivian's life.

'Why isn't she talking to us, Mum?' Brenda asked.

'Because she's ill, that's why. Now, I reckon you should take Tara home, Bren. She's obviously bored and I don't need her whinging around me. I doubt Viv does either. Go on, off you go.'

As Brenda left the small ward, Dr Baker walked in. 'I got here as soon as I could. Sorry to hear about what happened. How is our lovely patient?'

Vinny led the family GP outside and gave him a rundown of his aunt's recent behaviour. He then begged the doctor to prescribe some stronger drugs.

'I'll be honest with you, Vinny, nothing I can prescribe is going to work. Your aunt has suffered a mental breakdown due to grief. She needs professional help of the twenty-four-hour kind.'

'What you trying to say? I ain't having her put in no loony bin, if that's what you mean.'

'A "loony bin", as you so politely put it, is the only place where your aunt is going to get the correct help for her condition. If she

returns home in her current mental state, what's to say that she won't make another attempt to take her own life?'

'Me and Mum will look after her.'

'Oh, don't be daft, Vinny. You have a club to run, and if your mother takes on the burden of watching over Viv day and night, then she might end up suffering a breakdown herself. She's grieving too, the poor woman. I'm sorry to be brutal with you, but I insist your aunt be hospitalized. I am very fond of Vivian and I would never forgive myself if I sanctioned her as well enough to go home, then disaster struck. My conscience won't allow it.'

Reluctantly, Vinny agreed with the doctor. His mum wasn't going to be happy, but he would break the news to her gently. Vivian's welfare must come first.

Michael put the phone down and walked into the lounge. All three of his sons were giggling away at the *Muppet Show*.

'Look, Daddy, look,' Adam urged, pointing at the TV.

Michael grinned. Lee had settled in exceptionally well and he was thrilled by how close the three boys had become. 'Guess who's coming home tomorrow?'

Daniel shrugged.

'Well, come on, guess,' Michael urged.

'Mummy?' Daniel asked.

'Yep. Are you looking forward to Mummy living with us again?'

When neither Adam nor Lee replied, Daniel thought that it was his duty to do so. He had missed his mum when she had first

gone away, but that feeling had now worn off. His mum always seemed to be screaming or crying and he'd come to prefer the house without her. 'Suppose so, Dad.'

Queenie cried when Vinny broke the news to her on the way home. 'I can't have her going to one of them awful places, Vinny. You'll have to step in and stop it. Give you electric shock treatments and all sorts in them shitholes.'

'Mum, I can't stop it. Dr Baker knows what is best, we don't. I know you want to care for Auntie Viv, but she really does need professional help. We have to do whatever it takes to get her better, and if that means her going away for a bit, then so be it. I promise you faithfully, wherever she goes, I will take you to visit her regularly.'

'But what about the neighbours? Them nosy load of bastards will have a field day discussing Viv being carted off to the funny farm. No, Vinny. I'm not letting her go. She'll never live the shame down.'

'Fuck the neighbours! Surely Auntie Viv's health is more important than what they think? Anyway, we don't have to tell them. We can say that she's gone to stay with a friend in the country to recuperate.'

Queenie looked at her son as if he had gone mad. 'But she ain't got no friends. And you know how rumours spread, we'll never be able to keep it quiet … unless we just keep it between me, you and Michael. Bren can't be trusted. Got a mouth as big as a shark when she has a drink. The kids can't be told either. Little

Vinny is bound to tell Ben Bloggs, and I don't want him telling his whore of a mother or thieving old gran.'

'Calm down, Mum. Nobody will know bar me, you and Michael, I promise.'

Queenie didn't answer. She was too busy staring at the object on her front lawn. 'What's that, Vinny? Is it more flowers?'

Vinny could see better in the dark than his mother and he saw that the flowers were shaped in what looked like a gun. 'Yeah, it's flowers. Somebody must have got the day wrong. You go inside and put the kettle on, Mum. I'll bring these in.'

He went to the arrangement and crouched down, his heart beating faster than its usual pace. The flowers were a mixture of red and white, which his mum hated. She always said it was the sign of blood and bandages and swore it was unlucky. The flowers were made up in the shape of a pistol and Vinny looked at the attached card with trepidation. He was right to be wary. The words read 'YOU ARE NEXT'.

'What you doing out there, Vinny?' Queenie shouted from the house.

Vinny hurriedly stuffed the flowers in the boot of his car, then darted inside the house. 'The flowers aren't for us, Mum. They were delivered to the wrong street. I'm going to drop them off at the right address on the way home.'

'Thank Christ for that! They looked red and white. That's all we need – more bad luck.'

He tried not to let on, but Vinny was feeling physically sick.

Because the flowers had been left on his mother's front lawn it was hard to say whether the message was meant for her or for him. Ahmed popped into his mind, but Vinny quickly dismissed the thought. Even though Ahmed had forgiven him a bit too easily for his liking, he was sure that a stunt like this was not his pal's style. If Ahmed planned to harm him, he certainly wouldn't be issuing any warnings. Perhaps Bobby Jackson had sent them? But Vinny doubted it, given the damage he'd done to Bobby's face and his threat to kill him. Jackson was a mouthy, gutless piece of shit just like his father had been. The only other suspect Vinny could think of offhand was Johnny Preston. The fact he was in prison wouldn't have stopped him asking somebody to send the flowers, especially once he'd found out Joanna was pregnant. Well tomorrow Vinny would visit every florist in the vicinity to try and find out who the culprit was.

'What's the matter with you? Been struck dumb?'

Vinny recovered himself and fished in his pocket. 'No. I have something for you, Mum. You've had so much on your plate, I thought I'd wait until after the funeral to give it to you.' He produced a white envelope and handed it to her.

'Who's it from?'

'It's from Roy, Mum.'

Unaware that he was currently on Vinny Butler's mind, Johnny Preston sat down opposite his ex-wife in the visiting room. Deborah hadn't changed her name after their divorce, which was just as well as Johnny had recently proposed again, and she had

accepted. 'How's things, love? Did you hear from Jo?'

Deborah felt sick with worry. Johnny had been adamant that Joanna would ring home on her eighteenth birthday, and he had been right. Now all she had to do was break the awful news to him.

'Well?' Johnny asked, his voice overloaded with impatience.

'Yes, Jo rang me, Johnny. She said she missed us both and wanted to build bridges.'

Johnny grinned. 'Well, that's a start, ain't it? Before you know it, she'll see that no good prick for what he really is, Deb.'

Deborah squeezed the hands of the man she loved so very much. Johnny had once been a South London gangster, was in the know, so would hear the news anyway. Surely, it was kinder and better coming from her? 'John, love … Jo's pregnant.'

The breakfast in the Scrubs wasn't the best and Johnny immediately felt his rise to the back of his throat. Moments later, he was violently sick.

Michael Butler was doing his best to tidy up in preparation for Nancy's homecoming when the doorbell rang.

'Dad, it's Uncle Vinny,' Lee shouted out.

'What's up?' Michael asked. It was unusual for Vinny to turn up at his house without prior warning.

Vinny gesticulated for Michael to follow him outside. 'I didn't want to speak on the phone for obvious reasons. But I thought you should know that the van's been found.'

'How do you know?'

'I caught the back end of a news bulletin. We picked a good spot there as the farmer only discovered it yesterday morning. Try not to worry because even if Trevor has been reported missing, no way will the Old Bill be able to confirm it's him after my dentistry work. I used gallons of petrol and all that will be left of the cunt is his ashes and some fragments of bone,' Vinny chuckled.

'It ain't no laughing matter, Vin. Say the Old Bill do come sniffing around?'

'And why would they do that? Nobody bar me or you knows that we were watching Trevor's movements and there's sod all to link us to East Hanningfield. Stop panicking, for Christ's sake, Michael. As I've said all along, the filth will not be able to identify Trevor, you mark my words.'

When Bobby Jackson strolled into the Blind Beggar, the pub immediately fell silent. Most of the customers had gone to Roy and Lenny's funeral, then the wake afterwards, and the few that had not were well aware of Bobby being dragged out of the club by Vinny. News tended to spread like wildfire in Whitechapel, especially when the Butlers were involved.

'What you lot staring at? Haven't you ever seen stitches before?' Bobby shouted out, before marching over to the corner of the bar where his pal Micky was.

'Jesus, Bob. That's gonna be some scar you're left with there. I heard what happened. Whatever possessed you to set foot inside the Butlers' club?'

'I was pissed and the door was open. Unlike you and most of the mugs round here, I ain't frightened of the Butlers. Fronted Vinny outside, I did. Called him every name under the sun and I told him I knew he'd done my old man in,' Bobby exaggerated.

'How many stitches you had?' Micky shook his head. 'I'm sure you've got a death wish at times, mate.'

'Thirty-odd – and don't you be worrying about me, Mick. I'll strike one day and when I do that cunt Vinny won't know what's hit him. He'll get his comeuppance, you wait and see.'

Queenie waited until Brenda, Tara and Little Vinny had gone to bed before she sat down and opened Roy's letter. She had honestly thought her son had left this world without saying a proper goodbye to her and was so chuffed to discover that he hadn't. Taking a sip of her sherry and a deep breath, Queenie rested her eyes on the page.

Dear Mum

I know if you are reading this letter then my plan and wish to die have been successful. I must explain why I did what I did, and I pray that you will understand.

I could never cope with being confined to a wheelchair from day one, and being paralysed down one side of my body was so awful. Even my face looked terrible where my mouth had dropped and I felt like a freak.

It made me bitter and I know I was nasty to people. Often in the night, I would dream of working at the club and being the man I used to be, then I would wake up and remember that I

would never be that man again …

Queenie put the letter on the arm of the sofa. Her tears were dripping onto it, and she didn't want it ruined. She wanted to treasure it for ever.

Five minutes and another sherry later, she found the strength to continue reading.

You were so lovely and kind every time you came to see me, Mum, and so was Auntie Viv. You deserved so much better than spending the rest of your lives worrying about and visiting some miserable bastard like me. Colleen and Emily-Mae both deserved more too, which is why I set them free.

I have forgiven Vinny, Mum, as not only do I want to rest in peace, I also know it is what you would have wanted. It was down to his past mistakes that I got shot, but he never pulled the trigger on the gun, so I could never truly hate him. It just used to make me angry when I saw him casually walking towards me in those smart suits, as I so craved to be able to do the same again myself.

Before I end this letter I want to ask a few favours from you. Firstly, I want you to be nice to my dad from now on. I know he was a bastard to you years ago, but he isn't a bad man. I think he just felt very left out because Auntie Viv was always at the house, which is probably why he turned into a drinker and a womanizer.

Secondly, I want you to make sure Emily-Mae gets her inheritance. I still have quite a sum of money in my bank account and I want every penny to go to her when she is sixteen. I know Colleen has a new man now, but that does not alter my wishes.

Emily-Mae is my daughter and I want to be the one to support her when she leaves school.

And last but not least, I want you to promise me that after reading this letter you won't be sad any more. You have always been the strong one of the family and they all need you – Vinny, Michael, Brenda, Auntie Viv, and especially Champ and Little Vinny. You must be happy, Mum, please don't cry any more.

Until we meet again,

Your loving son,

Roy xxx

Queenie put the letter down beside her and cried more than she had ever cried before.

CHAPTER FIVE
Spring 1977

Hearing the wonderful voice of Barbra Streisand enhance the radio airwaves, Queenie Butler turned up the volume. Chart music had been wonderful back in the fifties and sixties, but apart from the likes of Barbra, Queenie hated it now. The charts were full of disco music, and as for that punk rubbish, she could not even understand what those vagrant-looking creatures were singing.

Queenie sat down on the armchair and sipped her tea. 'Morning, boys,' she said to the photo that now took pride of place on her lounge wall. She didn't have many photos with just Roy and Lenny in them, but this one was a beauty and she'd had it blown up.

The farewell letter Roy had written her had helped Queenie cope with his death. She had always known how unhappy he'd been after the shooting, though she'd never wanted to admit it. The letter had helped her face facts, and if she were honest it was a relief knowing her son wasn't suffering any more. Lenny's death, however, was a different kettle of fish. That boy had died way before his time and, unlike Roy, he had been a happy little soul. Queenie was amazed Vinny hadn't yet sorted that Turkish bastard out, but her son assured her he planned to and was just

biding his time. Queenie would never be able to rest until that day came. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth had always been her motto.

When the phone rang, she answered it and smiled as she heard the sound of her sister's cheery voice. Vivian's recovery had been a long and winding road, but she was more than on the mend now. For the past seven months she'd been residing at Goodmayes Hospital – or West Ham Borough Asylum as it used to be known, which Queenie could never understand as it wasn't even situated in West Ham.

'Not long now, Vivvy. Five days and you'll be back in your own bed,' Queenie reminded her sister. Vivian had her three-monthly review this coming Wednesday, and the doctor had already told Queenie and Vinny that Viv was ready to return home.

'Oh, I can't bloody wait, Queen. Nutty Nora's been at it again. Yesterday she was a bestselling author and today she's a famous film star. Been flouncing around in her nightie this morning quoting lines from *Sunset Boulevard*.'

Queenie chuckled. Now that Viv's humour had returned, the pair of them could share a right old giggle at the expense of some of the other patients.

'How's Bren and the baby doing, Queen? No news on Vinny's little 'un yet, I take it?'

'No, no news. Jo is long overdue now. She has another hospital appointment on Monday and I reckon they'll keep her in and start her off. She can barely move and feels ever so uncomfortable, the

poor little cow. Vinny said she's been having trouble sleeping as well. Bren's OK. She came out of hospital yesterday and is going to stay here for a week or two before she goes home. Tommy's a gorgeous baby, Viv. Big fat cheeks, arms and legs. You wait until you see him. Happy little soul he is, too. Rarely ever cries. Shame the same can't be said about the other one,' Queenie said, referring to her sulky granddaughter.

'Has Bren mentioned Dean lately?' Vivian asked. It had been over seven months now since her niece's husband went out for a newspaper and never returned.

'Not since the birth, but I can tell she's missing him. That's why I suggested she stay here for a while. Not going to be easy for her, bringing two up on her own. If I ever find out where that Dean Smart is, I swear I will pay him a visit and string him up by the bollocks. How a man can walk away and leave his kids is beyond me.'

'Well, my Bill did,' Viv reminded her. 'What time you coming up to see me today? Will you be on your own?'

'Yes. Michael's going to drop me off and Vinny said he'll pick me up. I'll stop at Mum's grave and put some fresh flowers down, then I'll come straight to you. About two-ish, I reckon. I've written out a list of ideas for the street party. We'll go over it together and you can add to it. I want our contribution to be better than anybody else's, Viv. Vinny suggested setting up a music system in the front garden so we can play all the old wartime songs.'

Vivian smiled. She loved a sing-song and a royal celebration. The Queen's Silver Jubilee was just what the doctor had ordered for her imminent homecoming.

Little Vinny Butler was currently in the doghouse. A fortnight ago, he and Ben Bloggs had broken into the general store run by the Indians along the High Street. The robbery had not been successful. An alarm had gone off and, even though the lads had scarpered quickly, the police had caught them hiding in an alleyway shortly afterwards with their hoard of stolen cigarettes.

Queenie Butler had gone apeshit when the police had knocked on her door in the middle of the night. Not only had her grandson lied to her about his whereabouts, he had also robbed a store that she used regularly.

The following morning, Queenie had rung her son to inform him Little Vinny would not be living with her any more. She had also marched the boy round to the Patels' shop to make him apologize in person and offer his services to do any odd jobs on a Saturday for the next year.

'Dad, please can I go out and play? I won't go far and I'll behave myself, I promise,' Little Vinny begged.

'No, son. I have to pop out in a bit and I need you to stay here and look after Jo for me. The baby might come anytime now, and Jo can't be left alone.'

'But I don't want to stay 'ere with Jo, and I'm sick of hearing about the baby. I don't like living here. I want to live with Nan again.'

'Well, you should have thought of that before you robbed Mr Patel's shop. Your nan won't have you back, so best you get used to living here and start treating Jo with a bit more respect. Fucking rude you were earlier when she made you that sandwich. I want you to apologize to her.'

Unable to control his temper, Little Vinny punched the wall. He and his dad used to be so close once upon a time. Not any more though, and Little Vinny rued the day his dad had met Joanna Preston. In fact, he wished she would die.

Ahmed Zane met his cousin at their restaurant in Tottenham. Being Sunday lunchtime, the gaff was packed, so Ahmed followed Burak into the small office.

'What's that?' Ahmed asked, clocking an unlabelled bottle.

'Raki. I found us a new cheap supplier. Taste it.' Burak poured a glass and handed it to him. 'So, how's it going with Vinny?'

'OK. Since I started making more of an effort to spend time with him, he's more like his old self. He still won't touch any cocaine though, which is a damn shame. He was a lunatic on that stuff and would have had a really bad habit by now. It would have been so much easier to pull the wool over his eyes if he was permanently high like in the old days.'

'Why don't you try snorting in front of him?' Burak suggested. 'Lay a big mound out so he can't help but be tempted. Once an addict, always an addict.'

'I've already tried that. Reckons he won't touch it because he promised his dead brother he wouldn't. He's acting all saintly at

the moment and doesn't even want to visit the whorehouses. He says it isn't right because he has a new baby due any day.'

'And what about his surprise gifts? Has he received any more of those?'

Ahmed shook his head. Vinny had not told him about the pistol-shaped flower arrangement until two weeks after the event. That was how Ahmed knew that his pal was wary of him now. Had the incident happened before the car crash, Vinny would have told him immediately.

The flowers had sod all to do with Ahmed, which meant somebody other than himself obviously had it in for Vinny. His car had recently been vandalized too, and the front of his club daubed with threatening and obscene graffiti. 'I think it is time to put our real plan into action. As soon as the baby is born, I will make a fuss of the child. Then, we will start stitching its cunt of a father up good and proper. Those who sin must pay for their wrongdoings, Burak.'

'Get away from us. Go on, go away,' Vivian ordered. Mad Malcolm had a habit of staring at her and Queenie while trying to listen in on their conversations.

'Gives me the fucking willies, he does,' Queenie said when Malcolm slunk away like a scolded puppy.

Vivian laughed. She still missed her Lenny like mad, always would, but it was so nice to be able to smile and feel normal again. Some parts of the past seven months were a complete blank to Viv, especially around the time she tried to kill herself

and first arrived at Goodmayes. There was no point crying over spilt milk, but Viv could never forgive herself for certain things. How could she have put Queenie through her attempted suicide and chucked all Lenny's things away? She must have been really ill to do either.

'I've been thinking, Queen. Can we go down to Kings on the first weekend I'm out? I would love a game of bingo and an hour or two in the amusements. I wonder if that handsome Mike is still running the arcade?'

Queenie squeezed her sister's hands. Vinny had been trying to entice her down to Eastbourne ever since the holiday park reopened in April, but Queenie hadn't been able to face it. She and Vivvy had loved that place and, without her sister by her side, it just didn't feel right. 'Oh, Viv, of course we can. I am so glad to have you back. My life was empty when you were ill.'

Vivian's eyes filled up with tears. 'And I'm sorry for what I put you through. I love you, Queen, and once I get out of this funny farm I intend to live the rest of my life to the full. I know we've both lost sons, but your Roy and my Lenny wouldn't want us moping around.'

Queenie smiled. 'You bet they wouldn't.'

Michael Butler picked up the newspaper and immediately threw it back on the kitchen top. 'BURNED ALIVE' was the front-page headline and Michael could not stomach such stories any more.

Trevor Thomas's death still played on Michael's mind. Three

days after his remains were found, the police had turned up at the club asking questions. Trevor had been identified by breaks he'd suffered in his collarbone and left leg in the past. He'd also had a plate and screws put in his knee, which made him even more identifiable.

Vinny had been as cool as a cucumber when the Old Bill showed up, insisting that he had not seen Trevor since he ran off with Yvonne. 'No disrespect, officer, but I was no more than a child when Trevor ran off with my bird. I am now a man in a stable relationship with my second kid on the way. Do you honestly think I would still be bothered about some teenage love affair that happened all those years ago?'

Michael had been anything but cool, but had backed up the alibi that he and Vinny had concocted. Forensics had managed to narrow down the day the fire had been started on, and the guvnor of the Blind Beggar had verified that Vinny and Michael had been in the pub that particular evening.

Thankfully, the police hadn't returned. Michael had asked Vinny not to talk about Trevor's death any more. He did not admit to his brother that he kept having reoccurring nightmares about it. What would be the point? Vinny would only have taken the piss out of him.

Daniel and Adam running into the kitchen snapped Michael out of his daydream. 'We're going now, Dad,' Daniel said, hugging his father's leg.

Michael Butler ruffled his sons' hair and kissed his wife

goodbye. Nancy was spending the night at her parents' house with Daniel and Adam, which she now did a couple of times a month. Michael was quite happy with the set-up, as it gave him and Nancy a break from one another.

Life had been OK since Nancy came back home, but it hadn't exactly been a bed of roses. His wife was very needy and it grated on Michael that when he wasn't around to give her a helping hand she struggled with the basics of motherhood. She also treated Lee differently to her own sons, and that pissed Michael off immensely. In his eyes, if Nancy was a decent human being she would include Lee in the trips to her parents and the days out they had. She knew Lee had no grandparents on his mother's side.

'I'm looking forward to seeing the dog, Dad, but I am gonna miss my brothers,' Lee told his father on the journey to his aunt's house.

'I know you will, boy.' Lee had an aunt in Bow whom he stayed with whenever Daniel and Adam went to their grandparents, and he adored her old bull terrier, Spike.

After Michael had dropped Lee off, he got back in the car and grinned. His best pal Kevin was usually under the thumb but his wife was away visiting relatives, so today he and Kev were going out on a good old-fashioned pub crawl. Letting his hair down was just what Michael needed.

Vinny Butler was feeling anxious. He had never found out who had sent those flowers, and knowing somebody had it in for you, but not knowing who that person was, was driving him insane.

He had always been paranoid when it came to his safety and that of his family, and now he felt as though he was constantly looking over his shoulder. He had even purchased two guns recently. One was hidden at the club and the other at home, just to be on the safe side.

Vinny had completely ruled Ahmed out of his list of suspects now. Things had been a bit stilted between the two of them for a month or so after the accident, but they had since got their friendship back on track. The drug business was becoming more and more profitable by the day, and Vinny knew Ahmed well enough to know vandalizing cars and daubing graffiti was not his pal's style. Like himself, Ahmed had class, and would never resort to something so petty.

Vinny stared at the photo of himself, Roy and Michael that sat proudly on his office wall. It had been taken years ago, long before Roy's accident. 'If I were a betting man, Roy, my money would be on either Bobby Jackson or Johnny Preston pulling these stunts. What do you reckon, eh, bruv?'

Averting his focus from his unknown stalker, Vinny thought about Joanna. He had only got her up the spout to piss her father off and pay him back for shooting Roy, yet he was now really looking forward to the birth of his second child. He had dreaded the birth of Little Vinny when Karen was pregnant, but he loved being a dad and was hoping for a daughter this time around. Girls were more of a worry, but far less trouble than boys, he imagined.

Michael Butler was having a whale of a time. He was in the

Carpenter's Arms, and it had been a long time since he had really let his hair down.

'Slow down a bit, mate. You're drinking for England,' Kevin said.

'You've been sinking 'em like there's no tomorrow as well. Talk about pot calling kettle,' Michael retorted.

'Are you insinuating I is black?' Kevin joked.

Michael burst out laughing. Kev was mixed race and they went back years. When they were in their early teens there had been far fewer black faces in the East End, and whenever the pair of them came across some bigot, Kev would always lay on a thick Jamaican accent just for fun. His mum's family were white and he barely knew his father, so Michael could never work out how he managed to do the accent so well.

'What's up? Who you looking at?' Kevin asked.

Unable to tear his eyes away from the girl, Michael continued to stare at her. She was tall, dark-skinned, with long glossy hair and the sexiest body that Michael had ever seen. She was wearing high-heeled boots, a black leather jacket that had tassels swinging from the sleeves, and faded jeans.

Kevin changed seats and chuckled. 'Put your tongue away, mate, you're a married man now, remember?'

With his handsome face, cheeky grin and legendary chat-up lines, Michael had been a real player in his heyday. He had slept with so many girls his mum and aunt nicknamed him Alfie after the womanizing rogue played by Michael Caine in the film.

Meeting Nancy had changed all that, but when the girl locked eyes with him, Michael could only think of one thing.

Fucking her senseless.

Vinny Butler was dumbfounded as he listened to what Paul had to say. 'You sure it was her?'

When the doorman said he was positive, Vinny thanked him for the information, replaced the receiver, then grabbed his car keys. Seeing was believing and he needed to see the slag with his own eyes.

Joanna Preston clutched hold of the sink for support as the searing pain shot through her body again. Where was Vinny? He should have been home ages ago.

Feeling a strange sensation, she started to panic. There was water gushing out of her and it had created a puddle by her feet. Overcome by another jolt of pain, Joanna sank to her knees. 'Vinny, Vinny. I need you to ring the club, and find out where your dad is. I think the baby's coming,' she screamed out.

Little Vinny was sitting on his bed listening to this week's chart countdown. Debating whether to respond to Joanna's desperate cries for help, he quickly decided against it. Instead, he turned the volume up on his radio and sang along with Joe Tex. 'Ain't Gonna Bump No More (With No Big Fat Woman)' was such a catchy tune.

Vinny Butler's heart was beating like a drum when he pulled up outside the Three Travellers pub in Dagenham. He hated the bitch with a passion, but felt anxious and sick to the stomach at

the thought of seeing her again.

With her lithe body, long flowing hair, infectious laugh and perfect white teeth, Vinny Butler had fallen in love with Yvonne Summers on sight as a lad. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, yet the slut had used him and then tortured his mind.

His mouth bone-dry, Vinny approached the pub window. He peered through and could barely believe his eyes. 'No longer petite' had been Paul's assessment of her. Well, that was the understatement of the century. Yvonne Summers was that fat she resembled a whale that had been washed up on the beach.

In complete shock, Vinny stood rooted to the spot. He could not believe this was the same woman whose memory had taunted him for so long, but it was. The fat cow looked like she had fallen out the ugly tree and hit every fucking branch on the way down.

Hearing voices behind him, Vinny turned around. There were two teenage girls staring at him and giggling. 'You looking for someone?' one asked.

'Yeah, my mate. I don't think he is in there though,' Vinny replied.

'Well, we'll keep you company, won't we, Barb?' the blonde one said, nudging her pal.

'Not 'arf! We don't often get talent like you in the Travellers, do we, Wendy?' the ginger girl replied, smiling at Vinny.

Vinny grinned falsely, and handed the girls a tenner just to get rid of them. 'Go in the pub and order yourselves a drink, ladies. Get me half of lager – any kind will do. I'll be in in a couple of

minutes.'

When the girls disappeared, Vinny looked through the window once again. Seeing Yvonne laughing and joking with a customer, Vinny felt the urge to stroll inside and wipe the smile off the whore's face by smashing her big fat head against the bar, but he managed to resist. No way was that monster worth getting nicked over, not on your nelly.

CHAPTER SIX

Joanna Preston forgot all about the fright and pain she had endured when her baby was placed in her arms for the first time. 'Hello, I'm your mummy,' she said, crying tears of pure joy while grinning broadly.

Outside in the corridor, Vinny was experiencing a mixture of fury, guilt and panic. He was furious with Little Vinny for not keeping an eye on Joanna like he'd asked him to, and felt as guilty as hell because instead of heading straight home as promised he'd chosen to track down Yvonne Summers. And he was panicking because Joanna had been screaming blue murder and now it had all gone quiet. If something was wrong with his kid, he would never forgive himself, he knew that much.

When the door of the delivery room opened, he felt his heart race even more. 'What's going on? Everything's OK, isn't it?'

The old Jamaican midwife chuckled. 'Listen for yourself. Got better lungs than me, that child. You can go in and say hello now.'

Vinny had never been a man to show much emotion but the moment he laid eyes on his daughter, the tears poured down his cheeks. With her mop of curly blonde hair, she looked nothing like him. And she wasn't ugly, the way Little Vinny had been when he was born. She was absolutely perfect.

'Do you want to hold her? She's gorgeous, isn't she?' Joanna gushed. She had already forgiven Vinny for not being at home

when she went into labour. At the time, she'd been petrified, but somehow she managed to crawl to the phone, ring the emergency services herself and open the front door for them. Vinny had arrived home amidst the mayhem, and she knew from his face he was genuinely sorry.

Vinny kissed Joanna on the forehead, then lifted the baby out of her arms and cradled her in his. 'I am so sorry I wasn't there when your mum needed me earlier, but I promise you this, baby girl, I will never let you down again, not ever.'

Queenie and Vivian had had a wonderful afternoon together. It had been just like old times. They had shed a few tears over their wonderful sons, but then they'd cried with laughter as they relived some of their antics.

'Do you remember the time Lenny started undoing his trousers when he saw Mad Freda coming and she ran off screaming blue murder? She was threatening to tell the police he was a flasher, if I remember rightly.'

Queenie chuckled. 'He was only a nipper at the time. I'm sure he only did it because he knew we couldn't stand her. Proper little character that boy was.'

Seeing her sister close to tears again, Queenie hugged her. 'Now let's not get down in the dumps. We've had a great day and we've got the Jubilee to look forward to. We'll show them neighbours of ours how to party, Viv. And don't forget, this time next weekend we'll be down at Kings. You don't want to start getting upset now in case they keep you in this funny farm. Who

will I play bingo with then, eh?'

'I'm fine, Queen. I just have my moments and I dare say I always will.'

Pleased her sister was OK, Queenie glanced at her watch. 'My Vinny was meant to pick me up over an hour ago. I hope everything's all right. It's not like him to be this late, Viv.'

'Perhaps Jo's gone into labour. Ring him at home, Queen.'

Before Queenie had a chance to move, a nurse approached her. 'Your Vinny is on the phone, Queenie. He wants to speak to you.'

Queenie's heart leapt in her chest as she followed the nurse. Since losing Roy and Lenny, she dreaded her own phone ringing in case it was more bad news, let alone being summoned to the one in Goodmayes Hospital. Breathlessly she took the receiver and asked, 'What's up, boy?'

When her son began to gabble excitedly about the baby and how beautiful she was, Queenie couldn't wipe the grin off her face. After all the trauma and bad luck her family had suffered, life was looking decidedly rosy for them again.

Albie Butler rarely ventured out to restaurants. It seemed pointless, seeing as his Dorothy was such a good cook. But today he was sitting in a carvery in Ipswich town centre with Bert and Dorothy, celebrating Bert's birthday.

'Nice bit of lamb, eh, Dorothy? What's the beef like?' Bert asked his brother.

'Very tender,' Albie replied, before ramming another forkful

in his mouth. A moment later he froze at the sound of a familiar voice coming from behind him, then spat his beef back onto his plate.

'You OK? Did it go down the wrong hole?' Bert asked, slapping Albie on the back to stop him from choking.

Trying desperately to stop his coughing fit as the last thing he wanted was to draw attention to himself, Albie hissed at Bert to leave him alone and act normal. Hearing her distinctive squeaky voice again, Albie sank his pint. The last time he had seen Judy Preston was in 1965 when she had turned up to visit him in hospital at the same time as Queenie. All hell had broken loose when Queenie had realized that Judy was his pregnant bit on the side, and his indiscretion had ended his marriage and seen him kicked out of his own home.

Vinny and Roy had paid Judy a threatening visit and ordered her to abort his child, then shortly afterwards Judy had done a runner. Albie had been told by somebody a few years back that Judy now lived in Ipswich, but he hadn't quite believed it until this moment.

'What's the matter, Albie? You look ever so pale,' Dorothy remarked.

When he heard a child refer to Judy as Mum, Albie knew he had to get out of the restaurant. She might not recognize the back of him, but if she went to the toilet, she would be bound to spot him. The thought of coming face to face with her or a child he didn't know had existed was making Albie feel nauseous. 'I need

some fresh air, Dorothy. Please don't say my name out loud or make a scene as there is somebody on the table behind who I really don't want to see. You and Bert finish your meals and I'll wait for you in the car park.'

'Whatever is the matter?' Bert asked.

'Shush,' Albie hissed. He then darted out of the restaurant as fast as his trembling legs would carry him.

Michael and Kevin had planned to have a curry in Brick Lane after their drinking session, but those plans were scuppered when Michael returned from talking to the mystery dark-haired woman and informed Kev that he had invited her and her friend to join them.

Kevin was extremely happily married. His wife and son meant the world to him and no way was he sitting in some restaurant with two birds. 'Sorry, mate, but you can count me out. My Jemima would chop my bollocks off if I was spotted somewhere with those two. I doubt your Nancy would be too happy either.'

'Where's the harm in going for a meal? And if someone clocks us, I'll just say it's two of the barmaids from the club, or an old family friend.'

Seeing Michael and the dark-haired girl share an intimate glance, Kevin gave his pal a talking to. 'If you go for that meal with her, you'll end up fucking her, mate – then how you gonna face Nancy in the cold light of day? Think of them sons of yours. Is it worth losing them because you fancy some fresh pussy?'

'You and Jemima might still be love's young dream, but Nancy

and I haven't been that for a while, Kev. You don't know what I've had to put up with, what with her mood swings and depression. I can't even remember the last time we had sex. Weeks ago it must have been. Every time I try it on with her she reckons she's too tired or she's worried about the boys getting wind that we're at it. I'm only twenty-seven, not seventy, and I still have fucking needs.'

Not wanting to get into an argument, Kevin asked Michael what he had said to the girls.

'I just asked the usual and offered them a drink. The dark one's name is Bella, the blonde one's Sam. They live in Chelsea and are both models, so they say. Bella's twenty-one and from Italy. Sam is nineteen and from Liverpool. Please, just come for the meal, Kev? We'll share a cab home afterwards, just me and you, I promise.'

Kev downed the rest of his lager and stood up. 'I'm shooting off, mate. Enjoy your meal, and don't do anything you might regret tomorrow. If I was you, I'd concentrate on getting your marriage back on track rather than shagging young birds. Ever heard of the frying pan and the fire?'

Following Vinny's instructions, Queenie got a cab from Goodmayes, picked Little Vinny up on the way, then headed straight to the hospital. 'My oh my, she's an absolute angel. Isn't she big! How much did she weigh?' Queenie asked, as she peered inside the cot.

'She was ten pound. No wonder I had a struggle getting her

out,' Joanna replied.

'Well, you did a brilliant job, darling. Reminds me of Emily-Mae with those blonde curls. I can't wait for Vivvy to see her. We'll babysit whenever yous two fancy a day or night out,' Queenie volunteered.

'Don't you want to see your little sister then?' Vinny asked his sullen-faced son, who was loitering at the end of the bed. Vinny was absolutely mesmerized by his new addition, could not believe she already had the power to melt his heart like never before.

'There ain't no room, is there?' Little Vinny snapped. His dad was sitting next to the cot, and his nan was standing in front of it, blocking his view.

Vinny locked eyes with his offspring. 'Oh, and don't forget to apologize to Jo for sodding off upstairs and leaving her in the lurch earlier. Bang out of order you was, boy.'

'What happened?' Queenie asked, unable to tear her eyes away from her beautiful granddaughter.

Joanna knew that Little Vinny didn't like her and although she would never admit it to Vinny, the feeling was mutual. However, now Little Vinny had moved in with them, she had no option but to try to get along with him, so did her best to smooth over the situation. 'It was nothing, Queenie, honest. Anyway, Little Vinny was only in his bedroom playing music. I was in that much pain, I couldn't scream as loud as usual, so it's not his fault,' she lied. She had in fact screamed blue murder and was sure Little Vinny had turned his music up to blank out her cries for help on purpose.

Little Vinny smirked. 'See? It weren't my fault. If anyone's to blame, it's you. You shouldn't have gone out, Dad.'

As Vinny leapt up to clout his belligerent son, Queenie grabbed his arm. 'Don't hit him. He's bound to be a bit green, after all he's been the only child for years. You were the same when I had Roy.'

'I'll give him fucking green, he'll be black and blue if he carries on,' Vinny mumbled. He had no idea what was wrong with his son lately, but he was becoming a real pain in the arse. He wasn't even eleven yet, but the little bastard already had the attitude and lip of a cocky eighteen-year-old.

'Ooh, she's waking up. What you gonna call her? Best you think of a name soon,' Queenie remarked.

Vinny smiled at Joanna. They had been discussing names earlier and he was so pleased that she had finally given in to his wish. He knew how much this would mean to his beloved mother.

'We've chosen Molly, Mum.'

Queenie's eyes filled up with tears. Her wonderful mum had been called Molly. 'Sod you, you've started me off now. What a lovely gesture. Wait till I tell Vivvy, she'll be made up.'

Little Vinny giggled. 'Molly is an old pensioner's name.'

It was Queenie's turn to glare at the child. Looks-wise, Little Vinny might be the spitting image of his dad at that age, but her boy had been a saint in comparison to this bolshy little so-and-so. 'No, it's not. It's a lovely name and my mum was called Molly. Now shut that trap of yours and come and meet your little sister.'

When his nan lifted Molly out of the cot, Little Vinny decided to play along with the happy family theme. He was sick of being grounded and desperate to change that. 'Hello, I'm your big bruvver,' he said, grinning at the baby and allowing her to clasp one of his fingers in her chubby hand.

'Aw, look, they've bonded already,' Queenie remarked.

Vinny smiled at the touching scene. As her big brother, it would be Little Vinny's duty to protect Molly through life and look out for her like he had with Brenda. 'Sit on the chair and you can hold her properly.'

Little Vinny did as he was told, then inwardly squirmed as the baby was placed in his arms. Apart from wishing she had never been conceived, he felt nothing for his sister whatsoever.

Albie Butler had been honest about his past from day one with Dorothy, so she had known about his affair with Judy Preston and why he had felt the need to leave the restaurant. He had also told Bert all about Judy when he had first moved to Ipswich. 'I'm so sorry I spoilt the day. I really am,' Albie slurred yet again.

Dorothy hated seeing Albie drunk. He had a tendency to repeat himself constantly, but she could understand his need for a good drink today. He'd had a nasty shock. 'I'm going to leave you boys to it. I want to finish my book. Don't drink too much more tonight, Albie. You fell down the stairs last time you got very drunk and you know how I worry about you.'

'I won't, darling. Night night, love you.'

When Dorothy left the room, Bert turned to his brother. 'I

didn't want to say anything in front of Dorothy, but I guessed who it was and swapped seats after you left the restaurant so I could do a bit of detective work. I take it Judy was the one with the squeaky voice?'

Albie nodded.

'Well, she had two kids with her. A boy about sixteen and a girl about seven. How old would your kid be now if she'd had it?'

Counting the years with his fingers, Albie felt relief wash over him. 'Would have been about eleven now. I reckon the boy you saw was her son Mark. He was about three when I was with her, and the girl sounds far too young to be mine. You sure she weren't older than seven?'

'Eight tops, but she certainly weren't bleedin' eleven, Albie. I reckon you're in the clear, mate. Perhaps she did a runner, aborted your kid and made a fresh start?'

Albie grinned and cracked open another can. It suited him to believe that Judy had aborted his child. It made his thoughts far less complicated. Most men in his position would have turned around and confronted Judy. Not Albie though. He'd had enough drama in the past to last him a lifetime, and was happy to just let sleeping dogs lie.

Michael Butler followed Bella into her Chelsea apartment and was immediately taken aback by its opulence. He had thought she was joking when she pointed at the brand-new Porsche in the car park and said it was hers. 'Jesus, babe, this is some gaff. How long you lived here?'

'Two years. What would you prefer – red or white wine?'

'Whatever you're having,' Michael replied, looking around in awe. The kitchen and bathroom were both state-of-the-art and knocked spots off his own. The lounge was absolutely striking. It had a multi-coloured carpet, beige being the base colour, with red, blue and green circles all over. The sofas were bright red leather, and in two corners of the room stood life-size carved wooden figurines of a Romany-looking naked man and woman.

Michael opened the sliding glass door and walked out onto the balcony. The view of London was incredible this time of night. The lights of the greatest city on earth literally lit up the sky.

'Do you want to drink your wine out there?' Bella asked.

'No, I'm coming in now,' Michael replied, shutting the glass door. He sat down on the sofa. 'So, how comes if you were brought up in Italy you speak such good English? Do your parents both speak English?'

'Yes, but not in the home. My dad hired a private tutor to teach me from very young. He said it was important I learn the language. I can speak Spanish too. I must tell you something, Michael.'

'What?'

'Even though your eyes are green and your hair is darker, you really remind me of David Essex.'

Michael laughed. 'But he's got a bird's hairstyle.'

'You look like he did in *That'll Be the Day* and *Stardust*, when his hair was shorter. I loved him in those films.'

Michael took a sip of his wine and stared at Bella. He wasn't just mesmerized by her beauty; it was so much more than that. She was unlike any girl he had ever met in his life and he couldn't help but be impressed by her and her obvious wealth and lifestyle. 'So, what type of modelling do you do then?'

'I get asked to do all sorts of shoots. I've done catwalk too. I might get into acting soon. I've just hired myself a new agent.'

'Do you have to strip off and all that?'

Bella chuckled. 'I do glamour shots, but never nude. My dad is well-respected back in Italy and he would kill me if I ever went overboard. I show plenty of cleavage, but won't go topless. My dad is a proud man and I respect his wishes.'

'Well, you must be doing something right to be renting a gaff like this,' Michael replied.

'I do not rent this apartment, Michael. I own it.'

Apart from when he had lost his virginity at a very young age, Michael couldn't remember feeling so nervous around a female before. Bella was having a strange effect on him and he wanted to fuck her more than he had ever wanted to fuck Nancy or any other bird he'd known. He could tell she wanted him, but he had to be straight with her first. 'Look, there's something I need to tell you. I'm married, Bella.'

'So? I wasn't intending on proposing to you, Michael. I just want to make love with you. Let's fuck, shall we?'

Feeling his body shake with pure lust, Michael stood up and grabbed Bella by the hand. 'Where's the bedroom?'

Ignoring the question, Bella sank to her knees and undid the zip on his trousers.

Michael thought he had died and gone to heaven when she began expertly sucking his penis. No bird had ever been this forward with him in the past and it was such a turn-on, he was sure his erection was bigger than usual and his cock about to burst.

Grabbing Bella's head to stop himself from coming too soon, Michael stared at her as she let go of his manhood. Her eyes were a mesmerizingly pale blue. 'Take your clothes off,' he ordered, his voice husky with lust.

Bella stood up, pouted seductively and took her clothes off in a slow, tantalizing manner.

Transfixed by her naked beauty, Michael forgot all about his wife and kids as he ripped his own clothes off then rammed himself inside Bella as hard as he could. What followed was the most mind-blowing sexual experience of Michael Butler's entire life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Michael Butler poured himself a large Scotch and settled into one of the new sofas. The club had recently been refurbished. Gone was the old burgundy leather furniture that Vinny and Roy had originally bought in 1965. That had now been replaced with opulent green leather sofas and chairs. The walls were now covered in new orange-based patterned wallpaper, and Lenny's old DJ console had made way for a performance area to accommodate the live bands and singers they hired these days. The DJ equipment had just been a constant reminder to both Michael and Vinny that Champ was no longer with them, so they had made a joint decision to get rid of it.

Rubbing his tired eyes, Michael leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Guilt was eating away at him and he could barely look Nancy in the eye any more. As for Bella, he could not stop thinking about her. He had resisted the urge to contact her again, but that did not stop him yearning for her.

'Whatever is wrong with you? You look like a tramp and you've had a face like a slapped arse for days. You ain't still fretting we're gonna get banged up for Trevor's murder, are you? Only that's chip-wrapping now, that is,' Vinny said. This was his first full day back at the club since Molly had been born and it had been a real wrench for him to leave her.

Michael sat up and put his unshaven face in his hands.

Knowing his pal would disapprove, he had not felt able to confide in Kevin and he needed to tell somebody. 'I've done something stupid, bruv.'

'What?'

'I stayed round some bird's house last Sunday and I can't get her out of my mind.'

Vinny grabbed a chair and sat on it the wrong way round so he could face his brother. He had always hated Nancy, so this was welcome news to him. 'Well, well, well. Alfie strikes again! Don't feel guilty, bruv, not after the shit you've had to put up with. Been a crap mother and wife, has Nancy, and I just don't fall for all that depression bollocks. Auntie Viv's been mentally ill, the real deal – Nancy's only playing you. So, who is this bird then? Where did you meet her?'

Michael explained about his day out with Kev and where he'd met Bella. 'She's really beautiful, Vin, and stinking rich. I've never met a bird that could mesmerize me like she did. I stayed the night at hers and, even though I felt as guilty as hell in the morning, I had to have her again. The sex was incredible, it really was.'

'Well, if I was you I'd get straight on that blower and call her. Birds like that don't come along too often. I'll always cover for you here if you want to get your nuts in.'

'But what about Nancy?'

'What about her?' Vinny shrugged. 'This is the same Nancy that can't be bothered with or accept your eldest son, isn't it? I

rest my case.'

Johnny Preston was sitting in the visiting room opposite his ex-wife, who was now his fiancée again. She had just informed him that Joanna had given birth to a baby girl and instead of going ballistic, as he would have done in the past, Johnny was calm and deep in thought.

'Well, say something then, Johnny. You're making me feel uneasy,' Deborah urged. She couldn't shake off the memory of what had happened when he found out Joanna and Vinny were a couple. Such was his pain, Johnny had tried heroin for the very first time, taking an overdose which had very nearly resulted in Deborah losing the man she loved.

'How did Joanna sound on the phone? Did you speak to her for long?' Johnny asked.

'We chatted for about five minutes. She seemed happy enough in herself and spoke constantly about the baby. She's called her Molly and said she weighed ten pound. Obviously, Jo asked about you. She also said she'd love me to meet the baby. I refused, of course. My loyalties will always lie with you, Johnny, and I want nothing to do with that bastard Vinny whatsoever.'

Squeezing Deborah's hands, Johnny forced a smile. He had done a lot of thinking while waiting to be told his grandchild had arrived and now he had come to a decision. The thought of Vinny Butler being anywhere near his beautiful daughter still made Johnny feel physically sick, but there was sod all he could do about it so long as he was stuck inside. He didn't have that

many links to the underworld and there were only two guys he'd have trusted enough to ask for help, but both were unfortunately dead now. 'I want you to do something for me, Deb. I want you to make things right with Jo and visit her regularly.'

'What! Are you mad? I can't sit there playing happy families, Johnny. He makes my skin crawl.'

'He makes mine crawl too, but this isn't about Vinny, it's about making sure our daughter is OK. It will drive me bonkers trying to get through the rest of my sentence not knowing how Jo is coping with that bastard and a kiddie. I'm just relieved she had a girl and not a boy. At least it won't turn out like him. Please say you'll do this for me, Deb. That girl will need you, you can bet your life on that.'

Deborah reluctantly nodded. She was still angry with Joanna, but all the same she missed her, and if it put Johnny's mind at rest, it was the least she could do.

Johnny grinned. 'That's my girl.'

Ahmed Zane sat down opposite his cousin in their restaurant. He had a severe stiff neck today, a regular occurrence since the accident, but he knew he had been lucky over all.

'Is your neck playing you up again?' Burak asked.

'Yes, but it's nothing that tucking up Vinny won't cure, which is the reason for my visit today. I have set the ball rolling already. Hakan and Bora Koç are coming to London to play our two Mr Bigs. They are perfect for the role, especially Hakan. I have agreed to pay them ten grand each for their trouble, and they will

also get a two-week holiday, no expense spared. What do you think?'

Burak grinned. Hakan and Bora were old associates of his and Ahmed's from Istanbul and were more than capable of pulling the wool over Vinny Butler's eyes. 'When will they arrive?'

'I haven't booked their flights yet. We need to make sure Vinny falls for my lies first. I'm sure he will though. And seeing as he hasn't any contacts himself, he has no option but to trust me,' Ahmed replied. Vinny had never met his supplier. The guy was Turkish and would only ever deal with his own kind. He didn't trust the English.

'When will you tell Vinny?'

'This afternoon. I have a carload of presents for his baby and I am meeting him at his house at four.'

Chuckling, Burak poured them both a drink. He chinked glasses with his cousin. 'Let payback begin.'

Nancy Butler eyed her husband suspiciously. He had been acting strange all week and had just handed her a big bouquet of flowers. 'What you done wrong, Michael?'

Michael felt himself blush. 'What you talking about? I ain't done nothing wrong. Jesus, is it a crime to buy my wife flowers?'

Chuckling at his annoyance, Nancy put her arms around Michael's neck and kissed him. He had been ever so patient with her and now Daniel was at school with Lee, and her mum looked after Adam a couple of mornings a week to give her a break, she felt much better in herself.

'What you doing?' Michael asked.

'I think it's about time we made some special time for ourselves, don't you?' Nancy replied, taking her husband's hand and leading him up the stairs.

Michael felt a mixture of emotions as he stripped off and slipped into the bed beside her. He hadn't used a condom when he'd slept with Bella, and even though he'd had the sense to withdraw in time so he didn't get her pregnant, what if he'd caught a dose off her? There'd be hell to pay if he passed it on to his wife.

'What's up?' Nancy asked when he tried to insert himself inside her but struggled to do so.

Michael had never suffered with impotence in his life and he knew it must be guilt that was stopping him from getting an erection. 'I'm so sorry, Nance. I haven't been sleeping well and I think I'm just tired.'

When he went to put his finger inside her vagina, Nancy pushed his hand away. If he couldn't make love to her, then what was the point in staying in bed? Feeling as though she wanted to cry, she sat up and got dressed in silence.

Unlike the trendy café they had once owned in Whitechapel, the one that Mary and Donald ran now was just a clean, plainly furnished café. Donald had forbidden Mary to make it showy like their previous one. He insisted that they should learn by past mistakes and not bring any unwanted attention to themselves.

Donald was wiping the tables down and humming along to a

song on the radio when there was a knock on the door. 'We're closed,' he shouted out. On the two days a week that Mary looked after Adam, Donald couldn't wait to tidy up and dash home to see the boy. Nancy would pick Daniel up from school and bring him to the house too. The café was deemed unsuitable by Donald for two young boys – there were far too many dangerous utensils lying around to have the grandchildren running in and out of the kitchen.

'It's me – Freda,' Donald heard a voice shout out.

He opened the door. When they had first moved to Whitechapel, Freda was the woman who had warned them that the Butler family were bad news. At the time Donald had thought she was the local scaremonger, but he knew now she was far from it.

'Hello, Freda. How are you? Recovered from your operation now, I hope?' Donald asked politely. Freda had been in hospital when Nancy was admitted for depression the previous autumn. She had been very kind to Nancy, and Donald was grateful for that.

'I'm doing fine, thank you. Take more than a bit of cancer to kill me off. How's your Nancy now? It's her I've come to see actually.'

'She's doing well, thanks, Freda. Back with Michael unfortunately, but Mary and I see our grandsons now. Wonderful lads they are. Very polite and loving.'

'Well, they won't stay that way. If they were girls they might

have stood half a chance, but those boys will be forced into the same lifestyle as their father soon as they're old enough, you mark my words. Vinny's brat of a son is at it already. Robbed the Patels' shop recently. Smokes like a chimney as well and he's only ten. You wanna tell your Nancy all this, make her see sense before it's too late.'

Feeling dizzy at the thought of his grandsons robbing shops at the age of ten, Donald sat down on a chair. Everything Freda had said about the Butlers thus far had been proved right, so he was not about to argue with her. Nancy insisted that Michael was a legit club owner, but Donald guessed there was more to his business than met the eye. You certainly did not get a reputation like that family had by being law-abiding citizens. 'So is that what you come to tell Nancy?'

'No. I came to give her a message from my Dean. Got himself sorted now with a job and a flat, and he asked me to give Nancy his phone number. Thinks the world of her, he does. Such a shame he got with that Brenda. I'd have loved to see him settle down with a decent girl like your Nancy. I'm not allowed to see Tara any more. I'm sure that old cow Queenie put the block on it. Just had a son as well, Brenda has. Fat Beryl said she's called him Tommy. I'll never be allowed to get to know him either – my own flesh and blood. Not right, is it, Donald?'

Seeing the tears in Freda's eyes, Donald felt incredibly sorry for her. Her son Terry's body had never been found, but he had supposedly been murdered by Vinny. Dean was her only

grandchild and he had been forced to flee the area. Now the poor old dear had no family left whatsoever. 'Look, I know nothing will make up for not being able to see your family, but why don't you pop round our house for tea, seeing as you've travelled here from Whitechapel? Mary's cooking, and Nancy will be there with Daniel and Adam. You can give Nancy your message personally then, and I'm sure she will be thrilled to see you.'

Freda smiled. Because of her blunt independent nature, she had no close friends and the only creatures that were nice to her were her cats Moggers and Midge. 'Thank you, Donald. I would like that very much.'

Ahmed smiled as Vinny placed his daughter in his arms. He had never seen a newborn baby with such a mop of blonde curly hair. 'I can't believe how big she is. She really is a beautiful baby.'

'Wow, look at this, Vinny,' Joanna exclaimed as she unwrapped the last of Ahmed's gifts. It was a gold baby bangle engraved with flowers and hearts.

'Aw, thanks, pal. You needn't have bought so much stuff, but we really do appreciate it, don't we, Jo?' Vinny said.

'You haven't opened the card yet,' Ahmed reminded Joanna.

Having already unwrapped a massive teddy bear, two pretty dresses, a rattle and the bracelet, Joanna was gobsmacked when she opened the large card and saw it was full of twenty-pound notes. 'We can't take money from you too, Ahmed. You've bought Molly plenty already.'

'It's to open a building society account for her. It is the custom

in my country to give money to babies. Although I think Molly might have just thanked me by having a little dump in my arms,' Ahmed chuckled.

'Take Molly upstairs to change her, Jo. Ahmed and I need to talk business, so make yourself scarce for a bit and I'll give you a shout when we're done,' Vinny ordered.

When Joanna left the room, Vinny shut the lounge door and poured himself and Ahmed a Scotch.

'So, how's it going with you and Jo? You seem to be getting along OK,' Ahmed pried.

Vinny sat opposite his pal in his favourite armchair. 'All right, I suppose. She don't seem to grate on me as much as some birds do, and she's gonna be a good little mum. Her old man must know she's had Molly now 'cause Jo rang her mother the other day. I wonder how he's handling the news?' Vinny said, smirking sadistically.

'Have you fallen in love with Jo?'

'Don't be daft! I can't even be arsed giving her one any more. But she's the mother of my kid and I need someone to look after Molly and Little Vinny. As long as she does as she's told and don't get in my face, then we'll get along just fine. This was all your fucking idea, me moving her in in the first place,' Vinny reminded his pal.

'So, when are we going to the whorehouse again? It's been months,' Ahmed asked. He wanted to act as normal as possible in case Vinny smelt a rat.

'Soon, pal, soon. How's business? Did the last drop-off go OK?'

'Yes, it went fine, but we do have a slight problem now.'

'What?' Vinny asked, alarmed. He had always been happy to be the silent partner and let Ahmed be the active one. His mother and Auntie Viv would disown him if they knew what he was up to, so he'd kept his involvement in the drug trade under wraps, though he was sure Michael had a hunch.

Secretly enjoying the look of panic on his so-called friend's face, Ahmed took a couple of sips of his drink before explaining. 'You know Emre, my main man? Well, he has a court case coming up in Turkey for tax evasion charges. His brief reckons he is looking at a two-year sentence, and his trial starts the end of June.'

'So what we going to do? Surely Emre will leave somebody in charge while he's away?'

All their heroin and cocaine came from Emre, and they bought in such bulk now that they only needed to place an order every few months.

Ahmed shook his head. 'Emre will not trust anybody to run his empire. He would rather take a break.'

'Well, you must know somebody else we can buy from.'

'Not that I can trust like Emre. Look, how long have we been buying off him? Never had any problems with him or the Old Bill, have we? Why change something that works, eh? What I suggest we do is stock up before he goes inside. Buy enough to

last us for the two years.'

Vinny immediately shook his head. 'Fuck off, Ahmed. You pay Emre up front and I've never met the bloke. How do we know his court case story is true? He might rip us off for a fortune.'

'Of course he won't! Emre is my friend. I have known him since I was three years old. He hasn't suggested we buy two years' supply up front. He doesn't even know about it yet and for all I know he might not even be able to supply us that amount. I've spoken to you about it first. We know the gear off Emre is good. If we buy it elsewhere it will probably be cut to fuck and if we take a break while he is in prison, then you know full well that somebody will step in our shoes. We have the money to buy it, Vinny, the perfect place to hide it, so why not take the plunge? In the years we have been dealing with Emre, at least fifty times we must have given him money up front and he has never conned us out of a penny. The man is like my brother, I swear,' Ahmed said, holding his hand on his heart.

Vinny knocked his drink back and put his hands on top of his head. He and Ahmed usually parted with three hundred grand between them every three months. The gear was the proper uncut stuff, so it could be turned into millions in street value once it was mixed with other substances. It did involve a big outlay though. Vinny and Ahmed never got their own hands dirty, which meant a long line of people on the payroll, from the boys who cut the stuff right down to the two-bob merchants who punted it out in wraps on the street.

'I'm gonna need to think about this one. Is there no way you can bypass Emre and go straight to his suppliers while he's inside?'

'Are you fucking kidding me, Vinny? I know for a fact the drugs come from Nicaragua. Do you fancy a trip out there? Because I sure don't.'

Vinny shook his head, then put it in his hands. 'I've had a hectic week, mate, and I'm not thinking straight at the moment. No way I can give you a decision right now. This is something I need to sleep on.'

Little Vinny was sitting with Ben Bloggs in their den. It was a remote spot they had found about a year ago and it was what they referred to as their special place. Little Vinny had only had his going-out ban lifted the day before and even though he had promised his dad he would be good from now on, today he and Ben had stolen two bottles of cider from the off-licence along with six packets of crisps.

'I don't like the taste of this. I wish we'd nicked lemonade instead,' Ben said, screwing up his face and passing the bottle to Vinny.

Vinny didn't like the taste either. Neither he nor Ben were used to alcohol, but seeing as they had taken the trouble to steal it, he was determined it wouldn't be wasted. 'I don't want to go home. Let's kip here tonight, Ben. It will be exciting and we'll have a laugh.'

Ben shook his head. His mother wouldn't care if he didn't

come home for a week, but he knew Vinny's dad would go mad. 'You got to go home, Vin, else your old man will kick off and blame me. Then, he won't let you out again.'

'My dad don't care about me no more. All he cares about now is Molly. You should see how he is around her. He don't leave her alone. I never remember him being like that with me. He loves her more, I know he does.'

Seeing his best pal near to tears, Ben Bloggs put a comforting arm around his shoulder. 'It's only 'cause Molly's a baby, Vin. You ain't used to having brothers and sisters, but I am. I've got six of the buggers, and you get used to it. My mum barely notices me; neither does my nan, but I just go out to play to get away from them all.'

Little Vinny took another mouthful of cider. 'I wish my mum was still alive. Her name was Karen and she was lovely.'

'How did your mum die?'

'My dad said she was a drug addict, and killed herself.'

'My mum takes drugs too, Vin. I've seen her, she smokes them, injects them – it's horrible. I don't really like her much. I wish I had a dad like yours. At least he buys you nice things and cares about what you do.'

Little Vinny glared at his pal, then pushed him in the chest. 'No, he don't. Since he met that slag Jo, he's changed. All he cares about is her and Molly now. I fucking hate him and I hope Jo and Molly die in a car crash like Lenny did.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the day of Vivian's homecoming, Queenie Butler was all of a fluster. A few months ago, Vinny had treated her to a posh new kitchen. It had gold Formica counters, an electric double oven, harvest gold vinyl flooring and dark wooden-looking Spanish-style cabinets. It even had something called a dishwasher, but Queenie couldn't get on with that. No machine could clean her plates and cutlery as well as she could.

It was Vinny's idea that Vivian would like a similar kitchen, but now Queenie wished she had said no. Vinny had said it would be good for Viv if she came home to a nice surprise, but Queenie knew what an old stick-in-the-mud her sister could be at times and she was dreading her arriving home and hating it.

Going over Viv's house once more with the duster and polish, Queenie put the vase of fresh flowers in the centre of the coffee table. She had popped in every day to check on things while Vivian was in hospital and had put air fresheners in all the rooms and opened the windows regularly to keep it smelling sweet.

Remembering she had not yet dusted Viv's old grandfather clock that sat in the corner of the hallway, Queenie smiled. Another couple of hours and her wonderful sister would be out of that nuthouse and back where she belonged.

Another person in a fluster was Joanna Preston. Her mother had rung her out of the blue and said she wanted to visit. She

was travelling to London today with her friend Sandy and even though Joanna was looking forward to her mum meeting Molly, she was also very nervous. Little Vinny had been treating her like shit lately whenever Vinny wasn't about, and Joanna knew if he did it in front of her mother, Deborah would say something back and that might cause an argument with Vinny. Her mum's sudden change of heart was bothering her a bit too. Only last week Deborah had flatly refused to come and see Molly, and Joanna couldn't help wondering what had happened to change her mind.

'You OK, babe? Don't be worrying about your mum's visit. It'll be fine, I promise,' Vinny said, cupping his hands around Joanna's cheeks and kissing her on the forehead.

When Joanna tried to put her arms around his neck and kiss him properly, Vinny grabbed her wrists and chuckled. 'I've got to go out, Jo, so don't start getting me all excited.'

It was a lame excuse. They hadn't made love or even had a proper kiss in months. 'You do still fancy me don't you, Vinny? I will lose this bit of baby weight soon, I promise.'

Feeling guilty, Vinny took Jo in his arms and squeezed her tightly to his chest. When they had first hooked up he had enjoyed the sex immensely, but that was only because he was getting one over on her father. Vinny had always hated kissing, he found it too intimate, and the only sex he ever enjoyed was the really rough kind. 'I'll tell you what, how about we get the Jubilee out the way then shoot down to Kings at the weekend? My mum and

Auntie Viv will come, so they can look after Molly and we can have some us time. What do you say?'

Desperate to feel loved and wanted again, Joanna grinned. 'That sounds like a great idea.'

Nancy Butler looked at Michael in total disbelief. Not only had he tried to make love to her again this morning and failed miserably, he had just had the cheek to inform her that Daniel and Adam would not be going to her parents' street party, they would instead be going to Queenie's.

'But I've already told my mum and dad that I'm bringing the boys to theirs.'

'Well, best you untell them. You don't think I'm gonna leave Lee to spend the day with just us adults, do you? The Silver Jubilee is a once-in-a-lifetime experience and, seeing as they're so close, the boys should spend it together. I don't mind you going to your mum's party, but only if you take Lee as well.'

'And why would I want to do that? He isn't even my bloody kid, Michael. It's bad enough I have to suffer him day in, day out, without forcing my parents to suffer him too,' Nancy screamed, unaware that her sons and Lee were all ear-wigging outside.

Furious that his mother's nasty comments had made Lee cry, Daniel opened the back door. 'Me and Adam don't want to come to your party, Mum. We want to go to Nanny Queenie's party with Daddy and Lee.'

Aware that Lee had tears streaming down his face, a guilty Nancy bent down to comfort the child.

'Get away from him. You've already said enough for one day,' Michael spat, before ordering all three of his boys to play in the bedroom upstairs. Michael then turned back to his wife. 'You are one selfish cunt, Nancy. No wonder I can't get a fucking hard-on when I try to make love to you. How do you think that little boy feels, now he's heard you slate him, eh?'

Nancy burst into tears. She'd had no idea the boys were listening to her and Michael's conversation and she now felt dreadful. 'I'm sorry, Michael, I really am. I'll speak to Lee and apologize to him. It was said in the heat of the moment, I didn't mean it. Where are you going?'

Snatching his arm away from his wife's grasp, Michael stormed out of the house, slamming the front door behind him.

Vinny was quiet on the journey to Goodmayes. Shelling out a hundred and fifty grand up front to a complete stranger was one thing, but shelling out over a million was a gamble he was not sure he could take. He knew he owed it to Ahmed to trust him on this, especially after the accident, but if a million pound plus went astray it really could mean financial ruin. The club earned him and Michael a decent living, but the takings were nowhere near what they'd been raking in at their old club down the Commercial Road. It had taken Vinny a long time to become as wealthy as he was, and there was no way he was gambling his daughter's future away.

'What's up with you? And don't say nothing, because I know you like the back of my hand,' Queenie said.

Vinny smiled. 'I've had a business proposition put to me. I don't want to go into detail, but I think it's too much of a gamble.'

Queenie had never been one to pry too much. She knew Vinny had business interests other than the club and it would only worry the life out of her if she knew what they were. 'Go with your head and not your heart, Vinny. You inherited that brain of yours off me – it certainly never came from your father's genes – so use it wisely.'

Vinny pulled up in the hospital car park, switched the engine off and gave his mum a hug. 'I know I don't say it as often as I should, but I really do love you, Mum.'

'And I love you too, boy, much more than you'll ever know. Right, let's go and get your Auntie Viv and pray to God she likes that fucking kitchen.'

Hoping to break the ice quickly, Joanna opened the door to her mum and Sandy with the baby in her arms. It was a bank holiday, Little Vinny had gone out to play and Joanna was praying the little sod wouldn't come back while her mum was here.

'Aw, Jo, isn't she beautiful!' Sandy gushed.

Deborah stared at the child. She had expected it to be dark-haired and olive-skinned like Vinny and had been prepared to dislike it on sight, but Molly was nothing like her father. She was blonde, chubby and the bonniest baby that Deborah had ever laid eyes on. 'Can I hold her?' she asked, her eyes brimming with tears.

'Of course you can, Mum.'

The next hour or so passed pleasantly. Both Sandy and Deborah complimented Joanna on her house, Vinny wasn't mentioned at all unless Jo said his name, and baby Molly had them all eating out of the palm of her chubby hand.

When the front door opened, Joanna's heart lurched. Vinny had gone to pick up his Auntie Viv and said he was going to make himself scarce for the rest of the day, so Jo knew it had to be Little Vinny. It was, and he was accompanied by Ben Bloggs.

'Where's me dad?' Little Vinny asked.

'He's gone to pick your Auntie Viv up from hospital. Mum, Sandy, this is Vinny's son, Vinny, and his friend Ben.'

'Pleased to meet you both,' Little Vinny replied politely.

'Pleased to meet you too,' Ben Bloggs added.

'Jo, did Dad leave me any money? Only me and Ben are bored and we want to go to the pictures.'

'No, he didn't, but let me get my purse and I can give you some.' Jo was so relieved the child hadn't showed her up in front of her mother that she would happily have given him the contents, but instead she handed him a five-pound note.

'Cheers, Jo. Bye, ladies and Molly,' Little Vinny shouted, as he and Ben marched out of the door.

As they ran off down the road, Little Vinny waved the five-pound note in Ben's face. 'Told you I would get money off the silly slag, didn't I? Now who can we ask to get us some fags?'

Vivian stood open-mouthed as she stared at her kitchen.

'I knew it, she don't like it,' Queenie mumbled, punching her

son in the arm.

'It's even got a dishwasher, Auntie Viv, look,' Vinny said, pointing out the appliance.

All of a sudden, Vivian clapped her hands together in glee. 'It's the bollocks! I love it!'

'Thank goodness for that,' Queenie muttered.

'And we've got another surprise for you, haven't we, Mum?'

Queenie nodded. She had been worried how Viv would react on walking into the house, having to face how empty it was without Lenny, but so far she had been fine. However, Viv hadn't seen her second surprise yet and even though Queenie thought she would be thrilled, she was nervous in case it had the opposite effect and send her sister back into a depression.

Vivian followed Vinny and Queenie up the stairs and gasped as they opened Lenny's bedroom door. All his toys, clothes and other belongings that she had thrown out for the dustmen were now back in the room, including Zippy the monkey, who was perched in his usual place on the bed.

Vivian burst into tears, but they weren't sad tears, they were ones of happiness. Out of all the things she had done when she was ill, chucking her beloved son's belongings out was the thing she had regretted the most. 'Oh dear God. This is wonderful! How did you get the stuff back from the dustmen?'

Crying happy tears too, Queenie hugged her sister. 'The dustmen never took it – I did. I knew how much you would regret throwing Lenny's belongings away once you felt better, Viv, so

I rang Vinny and he collected it from mine and stored it at the club.'

'I am so relieved. This has to be the nicest thing that anyone has ever done for me. I feel like a part of Lenny is back here with me now. Thank you both so much.'

Vinny took his aunt in his arms, rocked her side to side and kissed her on top of her head. 'No need to thank us. We're your family. Welcome home, Auntie Viv.'

Nancy Butler poured herself a glass of wine and dejectedly flopped onto the armchair. She had just been upstairs to apologize to Lee and entice the boys downstairs. Lee had been understanding, but Daniel had looked at her with hatred and refused to come out of his bedroom until his father came home, which had upset Nancy immensely. As for Adam, he was far too young to understand what was going on.

Desperate to speak to somebody, Nancy debated who to phone. Her friend Rhonda had gone to stay with family and Nancy knew her mother wouldn't be very sympathetic, as she always sided with Michael when it came to Lee.

Picking up her handbag, Nancy opened her purse and stared at the phone number that Freda had given her the day before. She'd had no intention of contacting Dean, didn't think it was right now she was back with Michael, but she was desperate for a friendly ear to tell her troubles to. Freda had told her under no circumstances should she ever call Dean from her home phone, so Nancy folded the number up and put it back in her purse. She

then ran up the stairs. 'Come on, boys, get your coats on. I'm taking you out for a burger.'

Vinny walked into the club and was surprised to see Michael sitting alone with a bottle of Scotch. 'What's up with you? You had another row with Nancy?'

When Michael explained what had happened earlier, Vinny tutted and shook his head in disgust. 'You need to get rid of her, bruv, she's a wrong 'un. What about that other bird? Have you got back in touch with her yet?'

Michael shook his head dismally. He was still constantly thinking about Bella and was sure she was the reason why he couldn't get an erection with Nancy. 'If I tell you something, you won't take the piss, will you?'

Vinny shook his head, but when Michael admitted he had erectile dysfunction, Vinny couldn't help but burst out laughing. 'Alfie can't get it up! Who would ever have thought it, eh?'

'You ain't fucking funny. I wish I'd never told you. If you tell anybody else, I swear to you, Vinny, me and you are finished.'

'Calm down, you tart. I'm just messing with you. The only reason you can't get it up with Nancy is because you've met someone else. Go on, ring the other bird – what you waiting for?' Vinny asked, pouring himself a large Scotch and downing it in one.

'What you doing here so early? You got problems as well? I thought you were picking Auntie Viv up.'

'I did pick Auntie Viv up. She's back at home, loved the

kitchen, and you should have seen her face when she saw Champ's room, Michael. Bowled over, she was. As for problems, I have my fair share, trust me on that one.'

'You not getting on with Jo?' Michael asked. He had been gobsmacked when he found out Jo was Johnny Preston's daughter, and guessed that Vinny had only got with her out of some sadistic lust for revenge.

Vinny shook his head. He then admitted that Little Vinny had started to spiral out of control, and told Michael that he had found Yvonne Summers. 'You should have seen the state of the fat slag, bruv. Made me feel ill to look at her. Reminded me of a sow on a fucking pig farm.'

Michael felt his blood run cold. He knew his brother had a tendency to wipe out people who had upset him and he only hoped Vinny wasn't going to ask him to help. 'If you want my opinion, you'd be mad to bother with Yvonne now. You could lose everything if you get banged up, Vin. Is she worth it?'

Vinny took a sip of his drink. 'No. She ain't worth a wank, Michael. However, I would still like to set the fat cunt on fire and watch her go up in flames.'

Queenie and Vivian were both hard at it in Queenie's new kitchen. All the neighbours were bringing food for tomorrow's street party, but being the type of women they were, both sisters were determined that their input into the occasion would beat any other.

'Well? What do you think? Ain't lost me touch, have I?' Vivian

asked, as she showed Queenie her tray of homemade Cornish pasties.

'Oh, Vivvy, they look handsome, girl. Look at the gloss on that pastry. Do you know what, I'm amazed they didn't let you help out with the cooking in that loony bin. You could have taught that mob a thing or two.'

Vivian chuckled. The pair of them had been sipping sherry while they worked, and with Mrs Mills on in the background it was just like old times. 'I offered once, but the nurse looked at me in horror. I think she thought I was going to shove my head in the oven and gas meself.'

'Well, don't forget I told all the neighbours you've been recuperating in the country. Them nosy load of bastards will be prying tomorrow, you can bet your life,' Queenie warned her sister.

Vivian smiled. It had hit her like a ton of bricks, walking into her own home without her Lenny being there to greet her, but she hadn't wanted to show it. She might cry a few tears when she climbed into bed tonight, but she was determined not to wallow in grief again. Her Lenny had gone for good, and however many tears she cried he wasn't coming back. If being institutionalized had taught her one thing, it was that. 'Sod the neighbours, Queen. I couldn't give a shit what they think. Now, turn Mrs Mills up and let's have a singalong.'

Vinny and Michael were still having a brotherly heart-to-heart when the phone rang. 'I'll get it. You can bet your life it's Nancy,'

Michael stated.

'If it's Ahmed, I ain't here, bruv,' Vinny said.

'What's going on, Vin? That's the third time in the last two days you've made me tell Ahmed that you ain't around. I'm not stupid, so please don't lie to me. Have you got yourself involved in the drug game with him?' Michael asked, when he sat back down. He knew Vinny wasn't snorting any more. He could see it in his eyes and hear it in his speech, but he wouldn't put it past his brother to deal in the stuff. Vinny was a greedy git when it came to money. Always had been, and always would be.

Knowing he'd have to come clean to a certain extent, Vinny told him, 'It's not drugs, Michael. There's a business deal he wants to involve me in and I'm not sure about it.'

'What sort of deal?'

'Don't worry, it's nothing too serious, just a bit of a gamble. And there is a lot of dosh involved.'

'Do you want my honest opinion?'

Vinny nodded.

'If you think Ahmed has forgiven you for that accident, then you must be mad. I can see the truth in his eyes. I reckon he's trying to rip you off, and if I was you I wouldn't trust the Turkish cunt as far as I could throw him.'

Vinny took a swig of his drink. Before the accident, he had trusted Ahmed like a brother, but intuition told him that Michael might be right. Scraping together over a million in cash was a difficult enough task, but parting with it was even harder.

'Where you going?' Michael asked when Vinny stood up.

'I'm going to ring Ahmed. If he thinks he can get one over on me, then he's picked on the wrong fucking person.'

The two figures put the hoods up on their matching Adidas jackets and giggled as they approached Vinny Butler's house. Both were in high spirits, thanks to the bottle of cider they had just polished off.

Seeing a woman in a hairnet walking towards them pulling a shopping trolley behind her, the boy grabbed his older accomplice's arm and gesticulated for him to sit on the kerb alongside him.

When the woman passed without even glancing in their direction, the boy stood up. Satisfied that the coast was now clear, he held out his right hand. 'Give it to me. I want to do it.'

The boy's accomplice shook his head. 'No. This was my idea and I can throw further than you.'

'No, you can't.'

'Yes, I can.'

'Give it to me.'

Ignoring the boy's wishes, the older lad ran towards Vinny's house and hurled the brick straight through the downstairs window.

At the sound of the blood-curdling scream from inside the house, both boys then ran for their lives.

Queenie and Vivian were both cooing over baby Tommy when the doorbell rang.

'I'll get it,' Brenda said. Having moved back home two days ago, she already hated living in the house without Dean. She was hoping that, if she made herself useful, her mother would let her and the kids stay at her place for a while.

'I am so sorry for bothering you, but I didn't know where else to go. Somebody threw a brick through the lounge window and it nearly hit Molly,' Joanna gabbled when the door was flung open. She'd been in such a rush to leave the house, she'd carried her daughter in her arms.

Overhearing the conversation, Queenie darted into the hallway. Lots of women would never have forgiven their son for taking up with the daughter of a man who had virtually ended the life of one of their other sons, but Queenie was different to those shallow people. She trusted her first-born implicitly and if Joanna made him happy, then it made her happy too. 'Whatever's the matter, sweetheart?'

Joanna explained once again. 'I tried to get hold of Vinny, but he's not at the club,' she wept.

Queenie led Joanna into the lounge. 'Now you sit down, with Molly, my angel. Brenda will make you a nice sweet cup of tea and I'll ring around and see if I can track Vinny down.'

Vinny Butler rammed his rather large penis up the blonde bird's backside and grinned as Ahmed did the same to the black girl. He and Ahmed had often joked in the past that they had bonded as friends because they shared the same sadistic nature and warped sense of humour, and Vinny was pleased that their

friendship seemed to be on track once again.

When Molly had been born and he had first held her in his arms, Vinny had made a mental pact with himself to give up the whorehouses for good. Abusing females in the sometimes violent manner that he had become accustomed to did not seem morally right now he had a daughter himself. However, after Ahmed had so gracefully accepted his decision and his reluctance to part with such a massive amount of money, Vinny had felt unable to say no to his suggestion that they have a night out, like old times.

'Please do not squeeze my throat. You are hurting me,' the blonde croaked.

'Shut the fuck up,' Vinny hissed, squeezing the girl's throat even harder. He got off on inflicting pain and terror; had done since the day he beat a lad senseless in the school playground at the tender age of eight.

Vinny shut his eyes and thought of how Yvonne Summers used to look, upping the speed of his thrusts as he did so. When his orgasm arrived, it was a belter. But as soon as it was over, Vinny thought of his daughter, leapt off the bed and got dressed. 'I'll wait for you outside. It's stuffy in here,' he told Ahmed.

When Ahmed emerged minutes later, he asked Vinny why he had left so swiftly.

Not wanting to sound like a numpty by admitting that having a daughter had put him off whores, Vinny shrugged. 'I was just hot. Come on, I need a drink.'

The two of them stepped into a nearby pub and found a quiet

spot in the corner. Ahmed had known from the way Vinny had been avoiding his phone calls the last couple of days that he wasn't going to part with the dosh, so Plan B was already well under way.

'So, what happens now? Are you still going to go ahead with the deal?' Vinny asked anxiously.

'No. We are partners and in this together, which is why I have already spoken to another supplier. I think we might be able to set up a deal with them, but they have insisted on meeting you also. They are in London at the moment and have suggested we meet tomorrow evening.'

'That's fine by me. Thanks for being so understanding about the other deal, pal.'

Inwardly seething, as he had been desperate to rip Vinny off for over a million, Ahmed forced a smile. 'No need to thank me. That's what friends are for.'

In a far more upmarket part of London, Michael Butler was feeling like some stupid lovesick schoolboy as he stepped into the posh lift. Unlike the lifts in his neck of the woods, this one didn't stink of sick and piss, and the walls weren't covered in graffiti. In fact this one was so clean you could eat your dinner off the floor.

When the lift stopped, Michael could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He had tried his hardest not to ring her, he really had. But here he was in Chelsea, like a lamb being led to the slaughter.

Bella opened the door in a red see-through negligee. Being the red-blooded male that he was, Michael immediately felt his

penis jump to attention.

'Do come in, Michael. Would you like a glass of wine?' Bella asked.

Michael nodded and followed her into the kitchen. Her voice was just as sexy as the rest of her. Husky, with an Italian lilt to it.

Making sure she was showing plenty of cleavage, Bella sat at the table opposite him. 'So, what can I do for you? You said on the phone you had something to tell me.'

'I do, but now I feel like an idiot saying it.'

'Don't be shy, Michael. You weren't shy on the evening we met,' Bella said with a smirk.

Michael stared at her. Her lipstick matched her negligee and all he could think of was fucking her senseless. 'OK, I'll be honest. I can't stop thinking about you. You are on my mind every minute of every day.'

Bella took a sip of her wine. She was secretly thrilled by Michael's confession, but didn't want to show it. 'You took your time getting in touch with me.'

'I know and I'm sorry. I was just trying to fight it, I suppose.'

Bella stood up, undid her negligee and let it fall to the floor. 'I think we need to make up for lost time then, don't you?'

Michael did not need asking twice. He positioned Bella against the kitchen table and entered her like a rat up a drainpipe.

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