



Love kills... so
who will end up
six feet under?

Kimberley CHAMBERS

NO. 1 *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

Tainted Love

Kimberley Chambers

Tainted Love

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*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!*Three Butlers Two weddings One funeralNobody can hurt you like the ones you love...Blood is thicker than water, love is stronger than hate – and that's the problem. When your brother has betrayed you, there's no coming back. Vinny and Michael have always protected each other and provided for the family. Together they were formidable but business always stopped at the front door. Now someone has changed the rules – women and children are fair game and one of the Butlers is going to end up six feet under. Little Vinny is battling not to follow in his father's footsteps. Sweet Sammi-Lou has just vowed 'til death do us part, but it's only a matter of time before the truth comes out about the murder he committed. Dark secrets are spiralling out of control and have the power to destroy them all for good. Is this the final nail in the Butler family coffin?

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CHAMBERS



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Dedication

In memory of my dear friend David's father.

Frank Fraser

1923–2014

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**Sometimes I feel I've got to
Run away, I've got to
Get away
From the pain you drive into the heart of me
The love we share
Seems to go nowhere
And I've lost my light
For I toss and turn I can't sleep at night**

Ed Cobb

PROLOGUE

Autumn 2001

Queenie Butler slung another of her ornaments in the box marked 'RUBBISH' and momentarily felt comforted by the sound of it shattering into tiny pieces. That's how her heart felt right now: broken and beyond repair.

Delving into a bag, tears stung Queenie's eyes as she came across the first suits she'd ever bought her beloved boys. Vinny had been about nine, Roy seven and Michael a mere toddler. So smart they'd looked at their nan's funeral. Everybody had commented on how fine they were turned out, but what was the point of keeping the bloody things? Wouldn't be needing them now, would they?

Huffing and puffing, Big Stan ambled down the stairs with yet another heavy load in his arms. 'That's the last of it, Queen. The loft's empty, love.'

'Thanks, Stan. Only remembered I had stuff up there this morning and didn't know who else to bloody ask. Thanks for always being there for me and mine over the years. I was never the perfect neighbour, I know that. Too wrapped up with me own, I suppose.'

'Don't be daft! You've always been the Queen of this street and always bleedin' will be in my eyes. Ain't gonna be the same without you and Vivvy, that's for sure,' Big Stan replied, his voice tinged with genuine sadness.

Queenie handed her neighbour a photograph. 'Remember that night?'

Big Stan stared at it solemnly. Queenie and Vivian, so happy and vibrant-looking, done up to the nines in their expensive furs. Vinny and Roy, fresh-faced teenagers, suited and booted with a menacing edge even back then. Michael and Brenda, innocent schoolchildren with their whole lives ahead of them – or so you would've thought. And young Lenny Harris, poking his tongue out for the camera. 'Course I remember it. Early sixties, was taken at the opening of the Butlers' club. Brilliant night that was, the joint packed to the rafters. Teddy Drake the comedian and Dickie doobry – what was his name? The singer.'

'Parker. Dickie Parker. Those were the days, eh, Stan? The good ol' days. Look how happy we were. Breaks my heart to think the majority of us in that photo are now dead. None died from natural causes either. Murder and bleeding mayhem killed 'em all. What did my family ever do to deserve such tragedy, Stan? Perhaps we were wicked bastards in a past life, eh?'

Big Stan's eyes welled up. 'Bless your heart, Queen. Gonna miss you, ya know. Me and the missus moved 'ere in 1944 and you were the first neighbour we ever spoke to. You were pregnant with your Vinny and I offered to carry your shopping bags. Where have all those years gone?'

'In a puff of misery, that's where.'

Awkwardly hugging the distraught woman, Big Stan mumbled, 'I wish there was something I could say or do to make things right for you, lovey. I'm truly sorry for your loss and for what happened at the wedding. Me and the missus will be attending the funeral of course and ... Well, you've got our number if you need us for anything else in the meantime.'

'You're a diamond, Stan. What's the fucking racket outside? Because if it's that scum over the road again, mood I'm in, I'll march over there and take an 'ammer to 'em.'

Big Stan looked out the window. 'Yeah, it's them. I'll have a word. When did our wonderful Whitechapel go so downhill, Queen?'

Telling Stan to pour them both a large brandy, Queenie settled herself in her armchair and waited for him to take a seat on the sofa. 'I'll tell you exactly when things went from bad to bloody worse, shall I? Now cast your mind back to the spring of 1986 ...'

PART ONE

Love me or hate me,
Both are in my favour.
If you love me,
I'll always be in your heart.
If you hate me,
I'll always be in your mind ...
Anon

CHAPTER ONE

Spring 1986

‘Sit yourselves down, boys,’ Queenie Butler ordered. Vinny was forty now, Michael thirty-six, but both obeyed their mother as though they were still small children. Respect went a long way in their world.

‘I’ll make us a cuppa. I don’t know what this bleedin’ world’s coming to, I really don’t,’ Vivian mumbled miserably.

Vinny and Michael glanced at one another. Their mother rarely summoned them to her house at such short notice these days, and it was obvious that both she and Aunt Viv had their serious heads on.

‘What’s up?’ Vinny asked.

‘Mr Arthur, that’s what. Poor old sod had his medals stolen. Inconsolable, he is. Wasn’t that long ago he was mugged, was it? That old bag Sylvie Stanley’s son was involved, by all accounts.’

‘Delhi Duncan or Ginger Kevin?’ Michael asked. All Sylvie Stanley’s kids looked very different.

‘Duncan. It was him and that loudmouth with the shaved head. The one who wears the gold chains and walks about with them two Alsatians.’

‘What loudmouth?’ Vinny asked.

‘I know who Mum means. He’s only appeared round ’ere in the last few months. I’m sure someone told me Duncan is knocking out drugs for him. The pair of ’em are hanging around the betting shop most days.’

‘And the Grave Maurice. That’s where they nicked the medals. Both were drunk and taking the piss out of Mr Arthur, asking him questions about the war. He didn’t realize they were taking the mick. Knocking on now, ain’t he? Bless him. And he’s gone deaf in one ear. Anyway, they sits with him and asks to see his medals, so he took them off his jacket to show ’em. They gave him back four and pocketed the other two, the no-good bastards. Big Stan was stood at the bar, saw what was going on and confronted them. Obviously, they denied taking ’em, said Mr Arthur was senile and he’d only shown ’em four. When Stan demanded they empty their pockets, the big thug threatened him. Said he knew where Stan and his wife lived and unless he wanted a petrol-bomb through his window, he was to mind his own business.’

‘He said fucking what!’ Vinny exclaimed.

Vivian put the tray of teas on the table. ‘Getting worse round ’ere by the day, it is. Something needs to be done about it.’

‘And this family owes Mr Arthur big time. If it wasn’t for him getting on that bus and following Jamie Preston home, we might never have got justice for Molly. Well, we haven’t exactly got our justice yet, but you know what I mean.’

‘Don’t worry, Mum. We’ll sort it,’ Vinny promised.

‘I want it sorted immediately. I think because neither of you live round ’ere any more, people have forgotten how to behave. They need reminding, and Mr Arthur needs those medals back, so yous two better get cracking.’

Michael took a gulp of his tea, then stood up. ‘Come on, bruv. Let’s go and teach some manners.’

Mr Arthur froze as he heard the hammering on his front door. Helen, his kind neighbour who often cooked him dinners and popped in for a chat would always phone him first, and he rarely had any other visitors these days.

Creeping into the hallway, Mr Arthur yelled, ‘Who is it?’ Since the mugging, he never answered the door without first knowing who it was.

‘It’s Vinny and Michael Butler. We heard what happened yesterday and wanna help ya get your medals back,’ Vinny shouted.

Vinny's deep, gruff voice was unmistakable, so Mr Arthur twisted the key. 'Sorry, lads. I don't answer the door any more unless I know who it is. Been asking the council for ages to put one of them spyholes in my door, but they haven't got round to it yet.'

'Forget the council, they're useless. I'll sort the spyhole for you, Mr Arthur. You'll have it fitted by tomorrow at the latest,' promised Vinny. 'Now, in your own time, tell me and Michael exactly what happened yesterday in the Grave Maurice ...'

When Vinny and Michael were growing up, a man would dress to impress of a Sunday. While the wives stayed at home to knock up the only decent meal most could afford all week, the men would gather in their local, all suited and booted.

Vinny and Michael were never seen in public in anything but a suave suit and expensive shoes. 'If you want to be taken seriously in life, you need to dress like you mean business. First impressions really do count,' their mother had drummed into them from a young age. So Vinny was unimpressed by the sight that greeted them as they stepped out of Queenie's front door.

'State of those shitbags over the road. No self-respect whatsoever. Gotta be in their thirties. Don't they realize how ridiculous they look in those shell-suits?'

'Obviously not, bruv. And what is it with all that gobbing over the pavement with the other mob? Is it part of their religion or something?'

'Scum, Michael. I wish Mum and Auntie Viv would move. Worries me sick, them living round 'ere now – and I certainly want better for Ava. I've offered to buy 'em gaffs wherever they want, but neither will budge. See if you can talk some sense into 'em, will ya?'

'Hello, lads. Where you off to?' Nosy Hilda asked.

'Church.' Vinny grinned.

'I take it you heard what happened to Mr Arthur yesterday? Is that where you're going, the Maurice? They're in there, you know. Just popped in for my Guinness and saw 'em. Terrible state of affairs, isn't it?'

'You toddle off home, Hilda. There's a good girl,' Michael said, checking out his reflection in a shop window.

'Nosy old bat. No wonder Mum hates her,' Vinny remarked, when Hilda did a U-turn and walked back in the direction of the pub.

Michael handed his brother a cigarette. 'Right, how we gonna play this?'

Delhi Duncan wasn't actually from Delhi, but had been given the nickname at school because of his dark skin. He had no idea where his father was from or who he was. His mother was an old lush and a whore.

'What's up?' Russ Collins asked his latest gofer. Duncan had gone white.

'The Butler brothers have just walked in. I told you to give those fucking medals back, didn't I?'

'Chill, you prick. I'll deal with this.' Russ was from Luton, had only moved to Whitechapel recently and even though he'd heard some rumours about the Butler brothers, he wasn't scared of anybody.

Vinny Butler sneered at the big old lump with the shaved head and silly gold chains. He was also covered in tattoos. Vinny hated tattoos with a passion.

Not clocking the petrified expression on his pal's face or the smirks on the regulars', Russ decided to give it the big 'un as Vinny and Michael approached. 'Fuck me, Dunc, it's the Brylcreem Boys!' he chuckled. Vinny's thick jet-black hair was Brylcreemed backwards, Michael's parted and smoothed to the side.

'Shut it, will ya?' Duncan pleaded, before nervously holding out his right hand. 'Excuse my pal. He's new to the area. How you doing, lads? Long time no see.'

The locals were in their element as Vinny went to shake Duncan's hand, then twisted it so violently, the man screamed in agony. They were all aware of what had happened to Mr Arthur and thought it was disgusting.

When Russ threw a punch at Vinny, Michael kicked him so hard in the groin the big lump fell straight to the floor. Vinny then grabbed the massive chains around the idiot's neck and twisted them tightly. 'Walk,' he ordered.

Holding his throbbing groin and going purple in the face, Russ spluttered, 'Can't walk,' in a voice that bore a striking resemblance to a Dalek's.

'Fucking crawl then,' Michael spat, before grabbing hold of Duncan and marching him into the men's toilets.

'It wasn't my idea, I swear. I told him not to take the medals. Honest, I did,' Duncan begged.

Still clutching the man's gold chains, Vinny led him into the toilet like a dog on all fours. Once inside, Vinny placed his foot on the back of Russ's head so his face was actually in the urinals. 'Where's the fucking medals?'

'I dunno what you're talking about. What medals?' Russ stammered.

Vinny stamped repeatedly on the liar's right hand.

'Me fingers – you've broken me fucking fingers!' Russ screamed. He was well out of his depth for once, and he knew it. What a shame he didn't have his Alsatians with him. Vicious bastards, were Ronnie and Reggie.

'The medals you stole off an old war hero ...' Vinny lifted him off the floor by his neck chains in one swift movement, half choking him to death.

'In my flat. They're in my flat! It wasn't my fault. I swear on my life. He wanted to pawn 'em tomorrow,' Duncan cried, no longer in awe of Russ. Russ was a pussycat compared to the Butlers and Duncan could not believe how Michael had changed. They'd been in the same year at senior school and back then Michael had been a bit of a Jack-the-lad, and popular with the girls, but he wasn't violent. Now, however, his piercing green eyes were shining pure evil. Both he and his brother had the glare of murderers and Duncan had a nipper to think about, which was why he'd been working with Russ in the first place: to provide for his son.

'You go with him and I'll wait 'ere with this prick,' Vinny urged Michael. 'And I'm telling ya now, if I don't get those medals back, you're both dead,' he vowed, treating Russ to a sharp kick in the side of his head.

When Michael marched out the pub with the visibly trembling Duncan, the guvnor and all the customers pretended not to notice anything amiss. Even Nosy Hilda looked the other way. Whatever happened to Duncan and his loudmouth pal, nobody would dare grass. The Butlers would always stick up for one of their own, and that's why they were legends.

Mr Arthur could not hide his delight when the Victoria Cross was placed in the palm of his hand. It had been one of the proudest moments of his life when he'd been awarded that, and the other stolen medal meant just as much to him, as it had belonged to his brother who had never returned from the war.

'I dunno what to say. I can't thank you enough, lads.' Mr Arthur's eyes welled up with tears. 'I really didn't think I was going to see these again. The VC's worth a lot of money, I think.'

'A word of advice, Mr Arthur. It's up to you, but Whitechapel isn't the area it once was and if I was you I wouldn't wear the VC when you go out in future. Too many chancers about these days, unfortunately. If you want, I can lock it in my safe at the club for you?' Vinny offered.

'No. I might be wary answering my front door, but I'll never let the bastards get the better of me, Vinny. If I stop wearing it, they've won the battle. I won't let them defeat me.'

Michael and Vinny glanced at one another, full of admiration for the elderly gentleman.

'I've had a word with the carpenter pal of mine,' said Vinny. 'He'll be popping round tomorrow afternoon to sort that door out for you, Mr Arthur. I told him to leave it until after half three as I know you like your lunchtime pint.'

‘Thank you so much. You really are kind. As for them other so-and-sos, they better not be in the pub when I get there tomorrow, else they’ll get some of this,’ Mr Arthur said, lifting up his walking stick.

Michael chuckled. ‘You won’t be getting any more grief off them, trust me. They’ve both been sent packing with their little tails between their legs.’

Mr Arthur smiled. ‘Good boys, yous two. Last of a dying breed.’

Vinny winked. ‘You know our motto, Mr Arthur. Same as yours in the war: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

‘Well? How did it go? Where’s Michael?’ Queenie Butler asked.

Vinny grinned. ‘Pour us a Scotch and I’ll tell you all about it.’

Queenie Butler clapped her hands with glee as Vinny related the day’s events. ‘That’s my boys! Was the Maurice banged out?’ she enquired.

‘Fairly busy. Not like the old days though. About forty-odd in there, I’d say. Nosy Hilda was there though, so you can guarantee the whole of the East End will know by now.’ Vinny laughed.

‘Well, that’ll give the tale-bearers something to dine out on for a while, eh? I am so chuffed you got Mr Arthur’s medals back. I bet he was over the moon. What did he say to you?’

Vinny repeated the conversation. ‘Touched me and Michael right ’ere, it did,’ he said, patting the skin covering his heart. ‘To think men like him and his brother laid their lives on the line and fought tooth and nail for this country, and for what? To be disrespected and end his days living in the dump Whitechapel has now become? Seriously, Mum, you have to move. Me and Michael walked along that High Road earlier and thought we were in a different fucking country. And this ain’t just about the foreigners. The newer breed of English round ’ere now are scum. State of ’em – pure shitbags.’

‘Don’t start all that again, Vinny. Me and Vivvy are quite happy living ’ere, thank you very much.’

Vinny held his hands up. ‘OK, I rest my case. But when it gets even worse in the next ten or twenty years and something bad happens, don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

When Queenie mocked her son and called him a ‘worry-pot’ she truly had no idea that one day his words would come back to haunt her, big time.

CHAPTER TWO

Michael Butler shot his load, kissed Katy Spencer on the forehead, then tumbled out of bed.

‘Do you want me to leave now?’ Katy asked awkwardly. She’d been working for Michael for the last twelve weeks, but it was only this past month they’d been a couple, so to speak.

‘Yeah, you’d better make tracks. The lads are coming in early today, and we don’t want them knowing jack-shit, do we?’

Katy put on the glittery mini-dress she’d worn the previous evening, then draped her arms around Michael’s neck. She could never get enough kisses off her man. At thirty-six, Michael was fifteen years Katy’s senior. But with his dark hair, piercing green puppy-dog eyes and cheeky schoolboy grin, he looked much younger. Katy wasn’t bothered about the age gap. She’d been obsessed with Michael since the first day she’d laid eyes on him, and her friends couldn’t believe how lucky she was to be waking up in his bed.

Michael gently released Katy’s grip around his neck. Shagging his twenty-one-year-old housekeeper/nanny hadn’t been the cleverest move he’d ever made, especially since she’d taken it upon herself to keep turning up at the club.

‘Will I see you tonight?’

‘Not tonight, babe. I’ve got a bit of business to attend to,’ Michael lied.

Katy’s expression changed from hopeful to crestfallen. ‘OK. Do you want me to ring you after the boys have had their breakfast?’

‘Yeah. That’ll be cool. And remember, keep *us* to yourself. I don’t want Lee and Daniel finding out. It’s too soon after their mum.’

Katy smiled. Michael’s words led her to believe that he was in it for the long haul. Apart from her friends, she’d told nobody. Her parents were both regular church-goers who would have a fit if they thought she was dating Michael Butler.

When Katy left, Michael sat down on the edge of the bed and put his weary head in his hands. Shagging Katy was all Bella’s fault, and Vinny’s. His brother had convinced him jumping back in the saddle would help mend his broken heart. It hadn’t worked. Fucking Katy meant nothing to him. It was just sex and would never be anything else.

Bella D’Angelo packed the rest of hers and her son’s belongings into the Gucci suitcases. She couldn’t stay in Sicily any longer. It was doing her head in and, as much as she adored them, so were her parents.

‘Mummy, will Michael be coming to see us when the plane lands?’

Bella stroked the hair of her pride and joy. Antonio would be five soon and he was a wonderful child. Polite and intelligent, her son had everybody he met eating out the palm of his hand. Apart from his dark hair and piercing green eyes, he was thankfully nothing like his father.

‘Rupert’s picking us up from the airport, darling. Mummy has lots of work to catch up on,’ Bella explained, referring to her gay PA. Rupert had been running her modelling agency while she’d been skulking in Italy.

‘Will Michael be waiting for us in Chelsea when we get home?’ Antonio persisted.

Bella forced a smile. ‘We’ll see Michael soon. Now go and spend some time with Nonna and Nonno. They’re going to miss you so very much.’

When Antonio skipped happily away, Bella felt that awful lurch in her stomach that she experienced so often these days. She loved Michael Butler with all her heart, but was dreading looking him in the eyes. Fate was a bastard at times, it really was.

‘Morning, Mum. You OK?’ Vinny Butler asked.

‘Not bad, love. Ava’s gonna play over at Susan’s with Destiny while we’re at the cemetery. We can pick her up before we go to lunch,’ Queenie informed her son.

Sneering, Vinny shook his head. 'I ain't having her going in Stinky Susan's shithole. She'll catch lice or something worse. She can come with us.'

'She doesn't want to come because she can't bring Fred. You know what a little madam she is. Had the screaming abdabs earlier when I suggested the mutt stay at home.'

Vinny chuckled. Ava was a character all right, a real chip off the old block.

Hearing squeals of delight coming from the garden, Vinny looked out the window. Ava was running up and down the lawn and Fred was chasing her. The mutt had been a great addition to the family, the perfect distraction for the kid after her mother died. Ava rarely mentioned her mum at all these days. She was far too obsessed with Fred to miss Joanna.

'The dog can come with us an' all, Mum.'

'We can't take him over the cemetery, Vin. The little sod's dug massive holes in my lawn. He'll dig some poor bastard up over there.'

When Ava spotted her father watching her, she ran inside the house. Hands on hips, her Butler-green eyes sparking with anger, she announced, 'Nanny said Fred can't come with us, so I not going.'

Vinny picked his four-year old daughter up and tickled her until she begged him to stop. He hadn't even known of her existence until a couple of years ago, had found out while he was in prison. He knew he spoilt her, but why shouldn't he?

When Vinny told Ava the mutt could join them, Queenie scolded her son. 'Why do you always give into her? She knows she can play you and that's why she misbehaves. It's me that cares for her most of the time, boy, and you're making my job difficult. Sees you as the knight in shining armour and me as the wicked old witch.'

Vinny laughed. 'I've been seen as worse, Mum. Far worse. And so have you.'

Hormonal teenagers, Daniel and Lee Butler nudged one another and giggled as Katy bent over to get the hash browns out of the oven. Daniel especially had been peeved when their father had announced that he'd employed a housekeeper to pop round every day to help out with the chores. Daniel had guessed part of her job would be keeping an eye on him and Lee. However, as soon as the boys had laid eyes on Katy they'd changed their tune.

Katy Spencer had straight blonde hair that reached her bum, brown eyes, and the longest legs Daniel had ever seen. At five foot nine, she towered over him and Lee. Both boys were besotted with her and although neither would admit it, Katy had been the focus of their first ever wank.

'Who wanted sausage and who wanted bacon?' Katy asked.

Putting his hand over his mouth to control his laughter, thirteen-year-old Daniel whispered in his fourteen-year-old brother's ear. 'She can have my sausage any time.'

When both boys laughed uncontrollably, Katy smirked and stirred the baked beans. She was well aware of the effect she had on Daniel and Lee, and found it highly amusing. She could hardly wait to see the look on their little faces when they were told she was going to be their new mother.

Michael Butler laid the flowers on his son's grave. Adam was his youngest child, and had been such a loveable kid. He'd been killed last year, messing about with his brothers running across train tracks, got his foot caught. Adam's little body had been chopped into pieces by the oncoming train, God rest his soul.

Michael glanced at his watch, then lit a cigarette. He'd wanted to sell his house to rid himself of the constant reminders of Adam, but Daniel and Lee had begged him not to. Rather than put his sons through any more trauma, Michael had taken the property off the market for the time being.

Spotting his mother and Vinny in the distance, Michael walked towards them. Today would've been his brother Roy's thirty-ninth birthday, hence the meet.

Dressed in a long black coat, Queenie Butler linked arms with her strapping sons. Lots of people had stopped her in the street, praising her boys for getting Mr Arthur's medals back, and Queenie was extremely proud of them. Vinny, her first-born, owned a gentleman's club in Holborn, while the Whitechapel club that Vinny and Roy had purchased as teenagers now belonged solely to Michael.

‘You all right, Mum?’ Michael asked.

‘I’ve had better days, boy. But what can ya do? No bringing back the dead, is there?’

The Enemy put the hood up on his sweatshirt before he got on the train. He’d been away so long, he doubted anybody would recognize him, but it was better to be safe than sorry. One of the conditions of his early release was that he didn’t travel out of Dagenham. He was currently living in a hostel there, although the nice lady at the council had promised to try and find him a flat.

Happy memories of time spent with his dad and grandparents flooded his thoughts. He never allowed himself to think about his mother any more. She’d washed her hands of him when he’d done what he did, and the Enemy was glad. She was a slag and an embarrassment to him.

When the train stopped at Whitechapel station, he leapt off and walked towards the road where Queenie and Vivian lived. His nan had despised those pair and so did he, especially Queenie. It was she who’d raised the monsters who had ruined his life, and he would now repay her in full. See how she liked her nearest and dearest bumped off for no good fucking reason. Queenie Butler would suffer all right – he’d make damn sure of it.

As proud as a peacock, Queenie Butler strutted along Roman Road market with her sons either side of her. It was rare they accompanied her here, especially on a busy market day and she was aware of the dolly birds’ admiring glances. So handsome her boys were. Stood out in a crowd wherever they went.

‘Daddy, that nasty lady nearly stood on Fred,’ Ava squealed.

‘Carry the dog for her, Mum. Me and Michael can’t exactly walk about cuddling a lapdog, we have a reputation to uphold,’ Vinny chuckled.

When her sons were suddenly surrounded by a group of people wanting to chat with them and shake their hands, Queenie could’ve burst with pride. She’d raised her boys to be somebodies in life and they’d exceeded all her expectations. Feared and respected in equal measure, Vinny and Michael were now seen as kings of the East End. The only family who could even hold a candle to her boys were the Mitchells out of Canning Town, and they were Vinny and Michael’s friends.

‘Nanny, I want a poo-poo,’ Ava announced, tugging her grandmother’s arm.

Telling her boys she would meet them in five minutes outside Woolworths, Queenie led Ava towards the nearest toilets.

‘Is my daddy famous, Nan?’ Ava enquired innocently.

Queenie couldn’t help but smile. ‘Yes, darlin’. Your daddy is a legend.’

After indulging in pie and mash for lunch, Vinny Butler suggested they leave behind the hustle and bustle of the market, and instead have a drink in the Palm Tree.

‘Not been in this boozier since your loser of a father brought me ’ere when we were courting. It’s not changed much. Got a good old days feel about it,’ Queenie reminisced.

‘Roy brought Colleen here as well. The day he proposed down the Roman, they came here to celebrate afterwards. You heard from that slag lately?’

‘Don’t call her that, Vin. Colleen is a decent girl, that’s why your brother loved her. I know you think she moved on too fast, but it was Roy who ended things with her. She was brilliant, caring for him after the accident.’

Roy Butler had been shot in the head outside his club in the early seventies – hit by a bullet that had been meant for Vinny. When he finally awoke from his coma, he’d been told that he’d never walk again. For a respected man who’d lived to walk the walk and talk the talk, it was a crushing blow. Unable to cope with his disabilities, Roy had ended his own life in 1976 – by shooting himself in the head. He left behind one child, Emily Mae, who lived in Ireland.

Michael raised his glass. ‘To a top brother and a true legend.’

Vinny and Queenie chinked glasses. ‘To Roy,’ they said in unison.

Bella D’Angelo shut her eyes, thankful that Antonio was fast asleep at last. She badly needed some thinking time.

It had been nine years ago that she first set eyes on Michael Butler, back in the spring of 1977. She'd gone to the Carpenter's Arms with a pal, and her first memory of the immaculately turned out man she would fall in love with was how much he looked like the pop star David Essex.

Their affair had been short and sweet, but so very passionate. Michael had admitted to Bella early on in their relationship that he was in love with her, but he'd still chosen to end things. He'd been married to Nancy at the time and had called it a day for the sake of his young sons.

Shortly after Michael broke up with her, Bella moved to New York to start afresh. Back then she'd been a catwalk queen herself, so there'd been no shortage of male admirers. Bella had dated many, but none had matched up to Michael. It was on one of her trips back to London that Bella had met Antonio's father. She'd been in a club up town with a friend and had spotted a guy who had reminded her of Michael. He wasn't quite as good looking, but had the same colour hair, green eyes and that same gruff East End accent.

A steamy sex session had followed in a hotel. Bella had been rather tipsy, and had totally let her hair down. It had been her idea to indulge in a bit of dirty role play. How ashamed she felt about that now.

'You OK, Mummy?'

Bella opened her eyes and smiled at her beloved boy. She was anything but OK, had even toyed with staying in Italy for good. But she could not get Michael out of her mind. Nights were the worst. His handsome face would haunt her dreams and she'd wake up happy, until remembering the party and the smirking face of the bastard who'd fathered Angelo. No way could Michael ever find out what she'd done. It would totally destroy him.

Strolling confidently into the fishing-tackle shop, the Enemy headed straight for the counter. 'I need a decent filleting knife, mate.'

The owner asked his age, then showed him half a dozen. 'That one's your best bet, but it's expensive. Like most things in life, you pay for what you get.'

'I'll take it,' he replied, taking a wad of notes out of his tracksuit pocket. He wasn't short of dosh. He'd sold cannabis resin while inside, and was continuing to do so now he was out.

Fifteen minutes later, the Enemy was on a District Line train on his way back to Dagenham. He hoped his dad and granddad were looking down from heaven and were proud of him. That's if his granddad was even in heaven, of course. Rumour had it, Vinny had put him in a cement mixer and he was now propping up the flyover along the A13. That's what Billy Carver reckoned anyway.

Turning his thoughts to his purchase, the Enemy smirked. Fish were harmless and didn't deserve to be filleted. As for the Butlers ...

CHAPTER THREE

‘Morning, Queen. Silly-boy lemon’s strutting up and down the garden again with his holster and cowboy hat on.’

Queenie chuckled. She and her sister Vivian lived next door but one to each other, and the neighbours in between them were a proper pair of notrights. They were harmless enough though and provided Queenie and Viv with hours of entertainment.

‘Got a houseful today, Viv. Little Vinny’s coming, Michael’s bringing the boys, Vinny and Ava will be here – an’ he’s invited Jay Boy and Jilly.’

‘The more the merrier,’ Vivian replied. She actually wanted to add, bar one, but chose to hold her tongue. Her and Queenie had made a pact to stop dragging up the past and instead concentrate on the future.

‘Answer that for me, Viv.’

Vivian picked up the phone, had a short conversation, then returned to the kitchen. ‘It was Michael. Albie’s had a fall. He’s OK, but Michael didn’t want to leave him today, so I said it would be all right for him to come for dinner an’ all.’

Slamming her potato peeler on the kitchen counter, Queenie turned to her sister, eyes blazing with fury. ‘I don’t want that womanizing old tosspot round ’ere, thanks very much. You had no right to tell Michael he was welcome. It’s my bloody house and it’s gonna be overcrowded as it is.’

Vivian sighed with annoyance. Queenie and Albie had split up donkey’s years ago, yet still her sister wouldn’t let bygones be bygones. ‘Make me laugh, you do. Ain’t it about time you practised what you preach? If I can be adult enough to breathe the same air as that murdering bastard of a son of yours, why can’t you at least be polite to poor Albie?’

Seething, Queenie turned her back on her sister and took her anger out on the saucepans, banging them about like drums.

‘Well?’ Vivian spat. Lenny had been her only child. A wonderful, loving lad who’d never let his learning difficulties hamper his life. Unfortunately, Lenny’s life had been wiped out at the tender age of twenty thanks to Queenie’s eldest son. Not only had Vinny Butler taken her innocent boy to a knocking shop, he’d driven them home while out of his nut on drink and drugs and smashed the bastard car to smithereens. Vinny being Vinny, he’d walked away without a scratch, but her beloved son hadn’t been so lucky. Poor little sod had been virtually beheaded.

‘Me, make you laugh! Well, let me tell you a few home truths: you make me laugh twice as bleedin’ much. “Poor Albie” indeed! You hated the bastard when I was married to him. Called him every name under the sun. I’ve met some two-faced fuckers in my time, but you’re top of that list, Vivian Harris. Molly would still be alive if that disgusting old toad hadn’t stuck his John Thomas up Judy Preston’s snatch. Now piss off back to your own house. How dare you put that vile excuse of a man before me! Me and you are finished. You’re no sister of mine.’

Michael Butler had just got out the shower when he heard the front door slam.

‘It’s only me, Michael. I happened to be passing, so thought I’d pop in to see if you or the boys needed anything,’ Katy shouted out.

Michael gritted his teeth in annoyance. Sunday was Katy’s day off and he certainly hadn’t entrusted her with a key so she could come and go as she pleased. He dressed hurriedly and bounded down the stairs. ‘Pop up the shops for me, boys. I’m out of cigarettes. Tell Bob they’re for me.’

‘I’ll go if you want?’ Katy offered. She liked to make herself indispensable.

‘Nah, they’ll go,’ Michael replied, handing Lee a fiver.

Waiting until the boys were out of earshot, Michael asked, ‘So what you doing ’ere on a Sunday? It’s meant to be your day off.’

Not prepared to admit she'd missed Michael so much that she'd driven past purposely in hope his car would be there, Katy pretended she was on her way to visit a friend. 'We're going out for lunch,' she added.

'Same 'ere. I'm taking the boys out. Was meant to be going round my mother's, until it all kicked off.'

'Oh my God! What's happened?' gasped Katy, putting her hand over her mouth for full dramatic effect.

'Oh, nothing major. My mum had a row with my aunt, that's all. You best get off then. As soon as the boys come back, I'm making tracks.'

Katy drank a mouthful of tea, then stood up. 'I might be popping to the club tonight with a friend. Please don't worry, she doesn't know about us.'

Wanting to yell 'There is no fucking us!' Michael instead nodded dumbly. Why was it men could separate love and sex yet women couldn't?

Vinny Butler laughed as his grandson tried to chase Fred around the garden. He'd mastered the art of walking, but not running yet.

'Oops-a-daisy,' Queenie said, picking the child up.

Oliver Butler held his great-granny's face in his tubby hands. 'Foo, Nana, foo.'

'He's only asking for grub again. No wonder he weighs a ton, the cheeky monkey,' Queenie chuckled. She was still livid about her sister's betrayal and harsh words, but was determined not to let the argument spoil her day.

'Give us him 'ere, Nan. I got a whiff of something nasty. It's either him or you've had the accident,' Little Vinny chuckled.

'I'll put arsenic in your dinner, you, if you carry on,' Queenie joked. She was genuinely proud of the way her grandson had turned out. He'd been a horror as a child and a teenager, causing her no end of grief, but meeting Sammi-Lou and becoming a father had been the making of him.

Vinny Butler sat next to Sammi-Lou. 'Not long until he makes an honest woman of you now, eh?'

As Sammi-Lou Allen excitedly chatted about her forthcoming wedding, Vinny listened with a wide grin on his face. His son had been an embarrassment to him as a youngster, especially when he'd gone through that skinhead stage and knocked about with that weirdo Ben Bloggs. Thankfully the lad had changed beyond recognition. He now worked with Vinny in the Holborn club and had proved himself to be an asset to the business, with an astute brain on him.

It was as well for Little Vinny that neither his father nor his grandmother had any idea that he'd done more than act up a bit and run wild during his teenage years. And there was no way Sammi-Lou would be happily making wedding plans if she knew she was marrying a child killer. And God help Little Vinny if his father ever found out that the three-year-old he'd throttled to death was his own little sister.

Michael and Albie Butler were in the Royal Oak.

'Why didn't the boys come with us?' Albie asked.

'I couldn't drag 'em away from the pool table, so I left 'em a tenner for a pizza. Keeps 'em out of trouble, that cabin I had built.'

Albie smiled. 'I'm so glad you ain't moving out of Barking, boy. I never said it when you put the house up for sale, but I wouldn't arf've missed ya.'

Michael squeezed his old man's hand. Unlike Vinny, he'd always been close to his father. Now sixty-six, Albie's once thick hair had thinned a bit over the years, but it was still jet black. He kept himself smart, always wearing a suit, and despite everything he'd been through he hadn't lost the cheeky twinkle in his eyes.

'How's Bella, son? You spoken to her lately?'

‘No, I left her alone after she said she needed some space. She rung me last week, but I didn’t call her back. Done me up like a kipper, she did. Vinny said she wouldn’t return from Italy and he was right. I don’t even believe her nan was dying. She obviously just got cold fucking feet.’

‘You don’t know that for sure and you shouldn’t listen to your brother. You know what Vinny’s like. When has he ever been in love, eh? Do what your heart tells you. Bella adored you; I could see that the night of the party. You need to call her back, see what she wanted.’

‘Bit late now. Got meself in a right pickle, I have. The boys’ nanny turned up at the club one night about a month back. I’d had a drink, she had virtually no clothes on, and ... well, you know the rest.’

‘Oh dear. Katy’s a bit young for you, isn’t she?’

‘Twenty-one. Becoming a proper pest, she is. Keeps turning up at the club, staring at me with those puppy-dog eyes. She’s got it bad, and I’m never gonna feel anything for her. After Bella, I doubt I’ll ever feel anything for a bird again. More grief than they’re fucking worth, women.’

‘Mind she don’t trap you like Judy Preston did me. Can’t you tell her that I’m gonna help you out indoors and you don’t need her any more?’

‘Not that easy, Dad. The boys adore her. It’s been good for them to have a woman pottering about the house again. I’m just going to have to let her down gently, and hope she still wants to work for me.’ He shook his head ruefully. ‘My mistake, I let me dick do the thinking instead of me brain.’

Albie chuckled. ‘Like father, like son.’

Having given birth to three sons who’d made her so proud in life, Queenie was the first to admit her daughter was a terrible disappointment. Brenda had turned into an overweight lush and a crap mother, which was probably why Queenie had bonded so well with Jay Boy’s girlfriend. In Queenie’s eyes, Jilly was the daughter she’d never had.

‘Jilly wants your mum to give her away when we get wed,’ Jay Boy whispered in Vinny’s ear as they watched the two women chatting nineteen to the dozen in front of the telly.

Vinny looked at his pal in amazement. They had first met in Pentonville prison. They’d bonded immediately, and the chirpy Liverpoolian was now Vinny’s right-hand man at the club. ‘You’re kidding me. That will make my mum’s year.’

‘Straight up. Jilly’s dad is dead and she doesn’t get on with her own mum. She told me last night she wants your mum to do the honours.’

Vinny was about to tell his mum the good news when the doorbell rang and Queenie leapt up to answer it.

‘Daddy, Fred’s being rude. He’s got his dingle-dangle out again,’ Ava giggled, tugging her father’s arm.

Hearing a commotion in the hallway, Vinny ignored his daughter and dashed to his mother’s aid. ‘What’s up?’

‘Tell Vinny what you told me,’ Queenie ordered, ushering her daughter’s tearful children into the house.

‘Mum and Dave were drunk, and they were fighting. They smashed all the furniture up. Then Mum fell over when Dave hit her and we couldn’t wake her up. We were scared she was dead, so we ran to the phone box and called an ambulance. Then we got on the train and came here,’ eight-year-old Tommy explained.

‘Mum’s head was bleeding. We was worried the police would come and take us away,’ Tara added.

Vinny glanced at his mother. Both were thinking the same thing. Neither had any time for Brenda, but she was family. Flesh and blood counted for everything and so did keeping up appearances.

Michael Butler poured another Scotch and pressed play, then rewind, then play again on his answerphone. It was the message Bella had left him last week, and he’d listened to it over and over again.

He was trying to make up his mind whether to take his father's advice and return the call when he was disturbed by a tap on his office door.

'Katy's here,' said Gerry the bouncer, sticking his head round the door. 'Said she needs to speak to you about Daniel and Lee.'

'OK, send her in.'

The club was booming to the sound of Page Three bird Samantha Fox's 'Touch Me (I Want Your Body)' as Katy walked in. Michael had no doubt that she wanted him to touch hers again. She was virtually fucking naked. 'Where's your mate?' he asked.

'She wasn't well, so I came alone,' Katy lied.

Well on his way to being slightly more than merry, Michael couldn't help but take note of Katy's pert breasts.

Aware of what the man of her dreams was staring at, Katy felt her confidence soar. 'Aren't you going to offer me a drink?' she asked, sitting on his lap and rubbing his thigh.

Michael sighed as his erection grew. What was a man to do?

Unaware that their father was currently in an extremely compromising position with Katy Spencer, Daniel and Lee Butler were currently discussing what they would like to do to certain parts of her anatomy.

'First thing I'd do is to take her bra off and suck them big titties,' Lee giggled.

Leaping off the chair, Daniel grabbed hold of his crotch making thrusting movements. 'I'd ram this straight up her, I would. Dad fancies her an' all, I think. I've clocked the way he looks at her.'

Lee shook his head repeatedly. 'No way. Dad's far too old for Katy. He still likes Bella. I honestly reckon Katy fancies me, ya know. Why else would she lean across the table like she did the other day? She even winked when she realized I'd seen her lils. That must mean something, eh?'

Daniel grabbed his brother in a playful headlock. 'You're making that up. I was sat at the table with ya, and I never saw her bazookas. If Katy fancies any of us, it's me. She well wants me to put my Hampton in her mouth.'

Laughing, Lee tussled with his brother. 'You wish. In ya dreams.'

Queenie Butler drank her sherry in one fell swoop. First the row with Viv, then Brenda getting seven bells knocked out of her. Today had been truly awful.

Not long after Tara and Tommy had arrived on her doorstep, the Old Bill had turned up. Brenda had been taken to hospital, was extremely drunk and also battered and bruised, they'd informed her.

Vinny had wanted to go straight to the hospital, then hunt down Brenda's bloke, 'Dagenham Dave' as the family called him. Queenie had known the first moment she'd ever laid eyes on the man that he was a drunken loser, just like Albie. Unable to stomach Brenda when she had booze inside her, and desperate to avoid her beloved son acting on impulse and landing himself in trouble, Queenie had insisted they visit Brenda tomorrow. It had taken some doing, but she'd managed to persuade Vinny to stay at hers tonight. He was upstairs now, settling Tommy, Tara and Ava down.

Queenie mumbled plenty of blasphemous as she poured herself another drink. On the advice of a neighbour, she'd had that drunken old priest round last Christmas. Fat Beryl was Catholic and had sworn Father Patrick could get rid of all evil spirits.

Well, the exorcism the silly old Irish bum had performed hadn't worked, had it? The Butlers were still cursed. Always had been and always fucking would be.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Enemy greeted his probation officer warmly. He'd learned how to play the system while banged up. Let the mugs think you were a reformed character and the world was your oyster.

'I've got the keys. The lady at the council said it's a decent-sized property. Near Dagenham fire station. Peverel House, to be precise.'

'Is that one of them tower blocks?'

'Yes, it is. Are you ready to view it?'

He grinned. Whatever the property was like, he'd snap the council's hands off for it. He had a plan, and once he had his own gaff, that plan would be far easier to put into action. He could almost smell the Butlers' blood.

Brenda was sitting up in bed, reading, when her mother and brother marched into the ward. She immediately threw her magazine down in annoyance. 'What do you two want?'

Queenie stared at her once attractive daughter. She had a cut on her head, a swollen lip, a black eye and looked fatter than ever. 'What exactly happened, love? I didn't know that bastard knocked you about. Why didn't you tell us?'

'Because Dave isn't a bastard and he doesn't knock me about. This was all my fault, Mum. I goaded him until he snapped.'

'That's no excuse for hitting a woman. The geezer's scum,' Vinny spat, conveniently forgetting that he'd had the mothers of both of his children murdered. Karen, Little Vinny's mum, had popped her clogs thanks to a lethal dose of heroin being forced upon her. And Joanna, Ava's mother, had been killed when her car was rammed off the road by a speeding truck. On both occasions Vinny had got away with it. He knew how to stay one step ahead of the Old Bill and had made damn sure he had decent alibis while others were paid to do his dirty work for him.

'Don't start, Vin. I hit Dave first, about ten times. I bet his face looks far worse than mine. Anyway, there's no real harm done. The nurse reckons the doctor will let me go home soon.'

'You ain't going back to him, young lady. Petrified, Tara and Tommy were, poor little mites. You need to make a clean break. It's about time you sorted your life out once and for all. You need to stop drinking, lose some bloody weight and smarten yourself up a bit,' Queenie insisted.

'Where are Tara and Tommy now?' Brenda asked.

'At mine. Little Vinny's looking after 'em. Your brother is going to rent you a flat, so you can get away from Dave and start afresh.'

'Since when have you two ever been bothered about me? I'm thirty-two, not ten, and no way are you dictating to me where I can or cannot live. I love Dave and he loves me. All couples argue, that's life. You and Dad never stopped fucking arguing, if I remember rightly.'

'That's why I chucked the old goat out. Can't see the wood for the trees, you,' Queenie hissed.

Brenda chuckled sarcastically. Ever since she was a teenager she'd had a difficult relationship with her family. Her mother especially, as she'd always favoured her precious boys over her. Even when she'd been young, Brenda had felt surplus to requirements, and that feeling had accompanied her into adulthood. It probably explained why her self-esteem was so low. 'And there was me thinking you'd slung my dad out because he'd got Judy Preston up the spout. Silly me.'

Snarling, Queenie tugged Vinny's arm. 'Come on, let's go. She's a waste of fucking space as well as an embarrassment to us. Let her go back to the tosspot and drink herself to death.'

'Hold your horses, Mum.' Vinny turned back to Brenda. 'How do you think Tara and Tommy will turn out, living in your current set-up? I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, Bren, but I wanna help you sort yourself out. Call it an olive branch. If you've got a brain, you'll take it.'

'I must be brainless then as I would rather eat dogshit than accept any help from you. Now fuck off and leave me alone, the pair of ya.'

‘Come on,’ Queenie ordered, tugging her son’s arm again.

‘You are one dumb cunt, Brenda,’ Vinny said, shaking his head in despair.

‘I’m not as dumb as you think, big bruv. I know you must’ve got rid of Karen and Joanna. Bit of a coincidence both mothers of your kids are brown bread, don’t ya think? And I’m warning you now, if you lay one hand on my Dave, I will go to the police and tell them everything. And that includes Old Jack’s lad, Terry Smart, Kenny Jackson and every other poor bastard in Whitechapel that disappeared off the face of this earth, thanks to you.’

When Vinny lunged at his sister, Queenie slapped him hard around the face to bring him to his senses. ‘She ain’t worth it, boy. Come on, we’re going.’

‘Bye bye. Thanks for the visit,’ Brenda laughed.

Pushing Vinny towards the exit, Queenie turned towards Brenda and wagged her forefinger. ‘If I had one wish, it would be I’d never given birth to you. You’re dead in my eyes, girl. Dead!’

Madam Lydia’s ability to see into the future was scarily accurate, and Bella D’Angelo felt her spirits soar when her spiritual guide predicted she would one day actually marry the love of her life. Bella totally believed in Madam Lydia. So many things she’d predicted over the years had come true. Including Vinny bloody Butler.

‘Are you sure?’ Bella mumbled.

‘As sure as I can be, my love. The image is in the distance though, which suggests the wedding is too. In the forefront is this bad man. He is tall, dark and evil. But I feel you have a hold over him in some way and deep down he is scared of you. If you confront him, he will back away.’

‘Are you sure?’ Bella repeated.

Making a strange humming sound, Madam Lydia shut her eyes, then ten seconds later opened them again. ‘Yes, he is disappearing into the distance. But you need to be the stronger person to make this happen. You need to frighten him off.’

Bella D’Angelo smiled. She had every faith in Madam Lydia, and for the first time in months knew exactly what to do. She would confront Vinny Butler, and call his bluff.

Over in Barking, Daniel Butler had the devil in him. ‘Hurry up, you tortoise.’

‘Where we going?’ Lee asked, confused. They’d been in the middle of a game of pool when his brother had dragged him out of the cabin at the end of their garden.

‘I thought we’d have a laugh. I heard Dad talking on the phone earlier. Apparently, he bumped into dear Granddad Donald yesterday and the old git didn’t even ask how we were. He crossed over the road and blanked Dad.’

‘So what you gonna do?’

‘We are gonna go in the café and wind the old bastard up. I fucking hate him now.’

‘But Mary will probably be there, Dan, and she was always nice to us. Let’s not start no agg. Dad might ground us if we do.’

Daniel grinned. ‘Don’t matter, does it? We spend all our spare time playing on the machines and pool table anyway. And if Dad grounds us, it means Katy Big Tits will visit more to keep an eye on us.’

Laughing, Lee playfully punched his brother on the arm. ‘Katy Big Tits! That’s well funny.’

‘And so will winding up Donald be. Come on, let’s run.’

Queenie Butler was well and truly on her soapbox. In Queenie’s eyes, grasses were the epitome of all that was wrong with the world today. Absolute scum, and to say she was disgusted she’d given birth to one was an understatement.

‘Calm down, for Christ’s sake, Mum. You’ll give yourself a bleedin’ heart attack if you carry on like this. Don’t get me wrong, Bren was bang out of order, but you know what she’s like. All mouth and no action. She only said what she did to stop me giving Dave a good hiding. No way would she ever go to the Old Bill. She’s trying to blackmail me, that’s all.’

‘Blackmail! I’ll give her fucking blackmail if she ever darkens my doorstep again. Repulsed with her beyond words, I am.’

‘What’s up?’ Little Vinny asked.

Ignoring his son, Vinny followed his mother into the kitchen. ‘Give Auntie Viv a knock. You need her and she needs you. Life’s too short to fall out over silly arguments.’

‘Nope. Don’t want no more to do with her neither. And it wasn’t a silly argument. Totally out of order, Viv was. Unless she apologizes and truly means it, that’s us finished.’

Vinny led his son into the front room. ‘I want you to sneak out and knock at Auntie Viv’s. Tell her Brenda’s been beaten up and your nan’s in a right old state,’ he whispered.

Little Vinny did as he was told and was back within a minute.

‘Well?’

Little Vinny shook his head.

‘What did she say?’

‘Nan’s problems have sod-all to do with her any more.’

‘Didn’t she even ask about Bren?’

‘No. She only said what I told you, then slammed the door in my face.’

Donald Walker’s face paled when he saw his unruly grandson walk in. He’d completely washed his hands of Daniel since the fiasco he’d caused at the service in honour of Nancy. ‘Hold the fort a minute, Tina. I need to speak to Mary.’

Mary Walker was in the kitchen, flipping eggs. ‘I know that look, Donald. What have you done wrong?’

‘Daniel’s just walked in with Lee. I have nothing to say to either of them. You go out front, love, and I’ll take over the cooking.’

Mary sighed. She’d also washed her hands of Daniel after learning the truth surrounding Adam’s death. It was Daniel who’d been taunting the ticket inspector and it had been his idea to run across those bloody rail tracks. An innocent, lovely boy Adam had been and had he not been so easily led by his older brother, he’d still be alive now.

‘Go on then,’ Donald urged.

Treating her husband to a withering look, Mary marched behind the counter.

‘Hello, Nanny. How’s you and that wonderful granddaddy of mine?’ Daniel sarcastically asked.

Determined not to rise to the bait, Mary smiled. ‘We’re fine, thank you. Now what can I get you?’

‘Can I have a cheeseburger and chips please?’ Lee asked politely. Mary and Donald weren’t his real grandparents as he’d had a different mum to Daniel and Adam. His own mum had been killed in a car crash when he was young, and he’d lived with his dad ever since.

Annoyed by his brother’s genuine politeness, Daniel gave Lee’s ankle a sharp kick, then slouched across the counter, placing his chin on his hands. ‘I’ll have the same as Lee. I take it this is on the house, seeing as we’re family?’

‘Of course. Take a seat and I’ll bring your food over,’ Mary replied.

‘Nah. We’ll wait ’ere, eh, Lee? We wanna say hello to our beloved granddad, don’t we?’

‘Your granddad’s out the back, cooking. Now move, Daniel, as I’ve got other customers to serve,’ Mary ordered.

‘Nah. I would rather chat to you. Any news on Mum’s body? I thought the Old Bill might’ve found bits of her washed up on the beach by now,’ Daniel said, nudging Lee with his right knee.

Mary looked at her smirking first-born grandchild in horror. Nancy’s car had been found by the coastguard at the top of Beachy Head. She’d left suicide notes for them all, shortly after Adam had died. ‘Get out and don’t you ever come back. Go on! I never want to see you again,’ Mary screamed.

Donald ran out from the kitchen. ‘Do as your nan says – scarper,’ he yelled.

Unable to stop herself, Mary burst into tears. As much as she disliked the way Daniel had turned out, part of her would always love him. How could she not when Nancy had given birth to him?

‘Make me leave, you silly old cunt,’ Daniel goaded, staring his grandfather in the eyes.

Lee didn't know what to do. He wasn't overly keen on Donald, but he'd always been fond of Mary. She was a very kind lady.

Aware of the dozen or so customers looking at him, a thoroughly embarrassed Donald lifted the hatch and grabbed hold of Daniel. 'Out now!' he yelled, dragging the lad along by his left elbow.

'Come on, Lee. Time to go. We only asked about me muvver and it's obvious the sharks ate her. Either that or she run off and she's still alive,' Daniel joked.

Hand over mouth, Mary Walker stood frozen to the spot.

Apologizing to his customers for the fracas, Donald led his wife into the kitchen. 'That boy is pure evil. Any reservations we had about our Christopher helping Nancy should be well and truly forgotten now.'

Mary nodded in agreement. 'Nancy did the right thing. That boy has a screw loose, and Michael would've driven her insane. She's better off without them.'

About to reply, Donald heard a shattering of glass and a loud scream. He immediately guessed the cause. A brick had been thrown through the window.

It was late afternoon by the time Vinny Butler finally made it to his club, having had a lousy morning. The gaff he owned was referred to as a 'Private Member's Gentleman's Club'. It was anything but. The premises were classy all right, but it was basically a lap-dancing joint with bunny girls as waitresses that catered for a clientele made up of just about every pervert who'd ever entered the legal profession. Judges, lawyers, magistrates and even the Old Bill visited the club regularly, along with a few politicians and yuppies. Thanks to these 'gentlemen' members, the club had made Vinny Butler a very rich man.

'Afternoon, boss,' said Paul the doorman. 'Jay Boy's popped out for a bit. He won't be long.'

'And Little Vinny hasn't turned up yet,' added his colleague, Pete. 'But it don't matter, as we're not that busy.'

Vinny Butler slapped his employees on the back, and explained he'd given Little Vinny the day off. He trusted Pete and Paul like family and treated them accordingly. Not only had they helped him dispose of the Turks last year, they'd worked for him since he and Roy had opened the Whitechapel club as teenagers.

'We heard a bit of news, Vin. Denny McCann kicked the bucket yesterday. Apparently it was a heart attack,' Paul informed his boss.

Vinny Butler raised his eyebrows. Denny McCann had once opened up a rival club and nicked a load of his customers. The bloke was only in his early fifties. 'Oh well, good riddance to bad rubbish,' Vinny said nonchalantly. 'Right, I'm off to the office. Got some phone calls to make.'

'Oh, that reminds me. A bird rung up earlier. Said it was urgent you contacted her, so I left her number on your desk,' Pete explained.

'What's her name?'

'Izzy.'

Momentarily lost for words, Vinny felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. She might be Bella to Michael, but she'd always be Izzy to him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Michael Butler leaned over Katy and grabbed the phone. 'Keep schtum,' he ordered. It wasn't even seven a.m. yet and whoever was ringing him at such an unearthly hour better have a damn good reason.

'Michael, it's Mary. You really need to keep those sons of yours on a tighter rein you know. Daniel is out of control and you're lucky Donald and I never called the police.'

Feeling dazed and slightly hungover, Michael sat upright. 'What you going on about, Mary?'

While Mary explained what had gone on at the café the previous day, Katy thought it would be a good idea to suck Michael's penis.

Instantly erect, Michael lay back on the pillow and allowed Katy to cheer him up while his one-time mother-in-law continued ranting. For one so young, Katy certainly knew how to give good head. He would have to jog her on soon though. The constant turning up at the club without being invited was borderline stalking.

Vinny Butler put on his black Armani suit and studied himself in the mirror. He looked mighty fine for forty and he knew it. Training regularly had bulked him up and the extra muscle suited his six-foot-two frame.

Touching his hair up with a bit more Brylcreem, Vinny thought about the phone call. She'd given nothing away, had just asked to meet up. 'We need to talk, in person,' had been her exact words.

Vinny wasn't stupid. He guessed this meet would be about Michael, yet that didn't stop his groin twitching as he thought back to that night he'd spent with her. The sex had been out of this world. She was a right raver, had made him come like a steam train. And truth be told, that was where the problem lay.

Bella D'Angelo was a dedicated follower of fashion. She had a luxury walk-in wardrobe filled with designer clothes, but today she'd decided to dress down. The thought of Vinny staring at her cleavage or buttocks made Bella nauseous, which was why she'd opted to wear a long baggy jumper, leggings and boots.

She'd tried to kill time by wandering around the local market, but had given up, unable to concentrate with the prospect of a meet with Vinny hanging over her. So Bella arrived at the bar forty-five minutes early and ordered herself a glass of wine. She'd chosen Covent Garden as it was often packed with tourists and there was less chance of anybody recognizing her or Vinny.

'Well, well, well. If it isn't the lovely Izzy. Can I get you a drink?'

Continuing to coolly flick through her *Vogue* magazine, Bella took her time looking up and replying. She was determined to have the upper hand. 'Get yourself a drink; I've already got one, thanks. And my name is Bella, so I would appreciate it if you'd address me as such.'

Slightly taken aback by Bella's cool demeanour, Vinny ordered himself a large Scotch. He discreetly watched her from the bar. He'd put money on it she was only pretending to read that magazine. He also noted she'd purposely dressed down. Not that it mattered. She was that stunning; she'd look fuckable wearing a bin bag.

Vinny smirked as he sat opposite Bella. 'This is cosy, isn't it?'

'No, Vinny. It isn't. I do appreciate you agreeing to meet me though. We need to talk about Michael.'

'Whaddya wanna know?'

'How is he?'

'Yeah, Michael's good. Gets on with life, don't he?'

'What do you mean by that exactly?' Bella asked.

'That birds come and go, you included. Handsome man like Michael ain't ever gonna be short of female admirers.'

Bella's heart lurched. She hadn't officially ended her relationship with Michael, had just told him she needed some space. No way would he be unfaithful to her, Bella was sure of that. 'Don't fucking play games with me, Vinny. You're out your depth.'

Vinny chuckled. 'You didn't mind me playing games with you when we were holed up in that hotel. Begged me to tie you up, if I remember rightly. What's changed, Izzy? Sorry, I mean, Bella.'

Hating Vinny more than ever, Bella fleetingly worried if she should come clean to her father and let him sort the situation out. She quickly decided against it though. She could never risk anybody finding out Antonio was Vinny's child. That was her secret and hers alone.

'Want another drink?' Vinny asked cockily.

'No. I want you to listen to me carefully. I love your brother very much and I will not allow you to spoil our happiness. What happened between us was a stupid drunken one-night stand. Nothing more, nothing less. I was hoping you would've realized that by now, but you obviously haven't. So tomorrow, I am going to visit Michael and tell him everything. And believe me, Vinny, I will not leave one detail out. Michael needs to know the truth.'

Vivian Harris felt like a lost sheep. It was all right for Queenie when they had a row as she had all her kids and grandkids around her, but now that Lenny was dead, Viv had nobody.

'Where's your shadow?' Terry on the fruit-and-veg stall shouted out.

'We ain't joined at the bleedin' hip, you know,' Viv yelled back. Neither her nor Queenie ever discussed family business with outsiders. The nosy neighbours would have a field day if they even got a sniff of an argument.

'Hello, Viv. I thought you were gonna just walk past me then.'

'Sorry, Albie. In a world of me own today.'

'Where's Queenie?'

'Don't ask. We've fallen out good and proper this time.'

'Not over you telling Michael I was welcome to come for dinner, surely?'

Having had a rubbish day where she'd missed her poor dead son more than ever, Vivian couldn't help her eyes welling up. 'Take no notice of me, Albie. I'm going soft in me old age.'

'How about you let me buy you a drink or two? We can have a proper chat in the pub.'

Starved of company, Vivian smiled. 'Sod it. Why not?'

Vinny Butler was back-peddalling for all he was worth: 'Look, I'm sorry for calling you Izzy and mentioning the past. I was only winding you up. If you wanna be with Michael, then be with him. But don't be telling him anything about me and you. It'll crucify him and he'll hate the pair of us.'

Enjoying the sight of the colour draining from Vinny's face, Bella shook her head. 'I have to get everything out in the open; I've always been totally honest with Michael. If I don't come clean with him about you and he finds out in the future, he will never forgive me. But if I tell him I recognized you at the party, which explains me fleeing to Italy and my behaviour since, we might have a chance to make it work. It isn't as though I've cheated on him, is it? I was single when ... you know.'

'I know my own brother, Bella, and he ain't gonna want you if he knows you slept with me. It will break his heart, trust me. Is that what you want? Michael ain't no mug. Chances are he'll kill the pair of us.'

'Admitting the truth is better than spending the rest of my life looking over my shoulder waiting for you to make snide remarks or blackmail me.'

'Blackmail you! What do you take me for?'

'Well, you're hardly a gentleman are you, Vinny? When I fled that party and Michael went to get the car, you tried to kiss and fucking grope me. I wonder how your brother will react when I tell him that?'

Vinny had an overwhelming urge to remind the sanctimonious bitch that he'd done far more than grope her on the night they'd spent shagging one another's brains out, but somehow he managed to control his temper. Michael would never forgive him if he learned the truth. Their close brotherly

bond would be ripped to shreds, for ever. 'Listen, I was out of order that night and I apologize. It was a shock seeing you and I was pissed.'

'Apology accepted, but it doesn't change anything, Vinny. Michael's family is everything to him, you know that. I can't avoid visiting your mother or family parties. Michael would know something was wrong if I didn't ever go with him, which is why I have to tell him the truth.'

'Seriously, Bella, you'll cause World War Three if you open your trap. My mum'll despise you, so will my aunt. And my brother will never forgive us. Why can't you just keep schtum?'

'Because you and I will have to socialize from time to time and you won't let go of what happened. It was meaningless sex, that's all.'

'Whaddya mean, I won't let go? Jesus, you must rate yourself, girl. I've had hundreds better than you in the sack, believe me,' Vinny lied. 'Look, let's be adult about this. You love Michael and he loves you. I want my brother to be happy in life. Let's not mention me and you ever again, and try to be civil to one another on the odd occasion our paths cross, for Michael's sake. The past is the past, we can't change that, but you can have a blinding future with my bro if you don't start blabbing your mouth off.'

'OK. But I'm warning you, Vinny, if you go back on your word, I swear I will tell Michael every single vulgar detail. Including that I only fucked you in the first place because you reminded me of him.'

Queenie Butler was feeling guilty. Vinny had given her a stern talking to yesterday. 'I feel sorry for Auntie Viv. You've got all us, but she must be stuck in her house on her Jack Jones. You're all she's got and I really feel you should be the bigger person. Give her a knock, an' tell her you wanna sort things out. That's the advice you gave me and Michael when we were at loggerheads,' her son had reminded her.

Determined to bite the bullet, Queenie picked her handbag up and marched next door but one. Deciding not to use her own key, Queenie rang the bell.

There was no answer.

Having not spoken to a soul for days, Vivian Harris was thoroughly enjoying a bit of company. She and Albie were in the Grave Maurice, reminiscing about years gone by.

'You are a funny one, Vivvy. Is that true?' Albie chuckled.

'Cross my heart, and hope to die. Pissed as farts, me father and the registrar were. Me mother couldn't spell. That's why my name's spelt like a man's. It was meant to have an i-e-n-n and e on the end. I thought you knew that story. Queenie must've told you, surely?'

'She probably did. But knowing me, I was bladdered at the time and don't bleedin' remember. You and Queen'll be as thick as thieves again soon, you know. Both as pig-headed as each other, ain't ya?'

'What will be will be. No way am I apologizing though, not this time. I've been a bloody good sister to her, Albie. Vinny kills my Lenny and she's got the cheek to throw a wobbler over a clash of words. I've even been polite to that murdering bastard of a son of hers since Christmas, purely to keep her happy.'

Aware of the twisted expression on Vivian's face and the unshed tears in her eyes, Albie leaned across the table, took her hands in his and did his best to comfort her.

In the far corner of the pub, Nosy Hilda very nearly dropped her Guinness in shock. She'd been glued to her chair watching Albie and Viv laughing and joking for the past half-hour. Now they were acting like lovesick teenagers.

Deciding to sneak out of the pub before either spotted her, Hilda grabbed her coat. She couldn't wait to tell Mouthy Maureen this bit of gossip. Albie Butler and Vivian Harris – whoever would have thought it?

Unsettled by his meeting with Bella, instead of going back to the club, Vinny Butler went on a pub crawl. To say he was seething was an understatement. Bella had come out on top today and

he knew it. But he'd had no choice other than to agree with her in case she decided to carry out her threat and spill her guts to Michael. No way could his brother find out the truth. It would almost certainly tip him over the edge.

Strolling into the brothel, Vinny was met with a look of distaste by the old madam on the desk.

'Can I help you?' she asked curtly.

'Yeah. I want the tall dark-haired bird. Monica, I think her name is.'

Aware that the last time this man had visited these premises he'd been very heavy-handed towards Monica, the madam replied, 'Monica is currently otherwise engaged. Would you like to pick another girl?'

'Nah. How about you ask Monica if she can unengage herself for five hundred quid, eh? There's a oner on top of that for you, of course.'

Scuttling away from the reception desk, the old madam returned and held her hand out for payment. 'Monica is just freshening up. I'll take all the money up front, thank you.'

Fifteen minutes later, Vinny Butler had his rock-hard penis shoved as far up Monica's back passage as it would go. She was obviously in pain from the savage way he was banging her and Vinny liked that very much.

Losing himself in the moment, Vinny stroked Monica's long dark hair. The ugly slut looked nothing like Bella from the front, but from the back she did. 'You think you got one over on me, did you, eh? Well think again,' he hissed as he pounded away like a madman. 'Nobody messes with me, nobody,' he panted.

When he finally shot his load, Vinny yanked Monica's hair back with such force he was lucky he didn't break her neck. 'Oh, Bella,' he sighed in ecstasy.

CHAPTER SIX

‘Gandar!’ cried Oliver Butler joyfully.

Gary Allen picked his fifteen-month-old grandson up and lifted him in the air. He’d been so disappointed when his teenage daughter had first told him she was pregnant, but he couldn’t imagine life without Oliver now.

‘Whaddya think of his outfit?’ Little Vinny asked.

Gary chuckled. Oliver, or Ollie as he was usually referred to, was dressed in brown corduroy trousers, leather boots, a chunky beige cardigan and a check cap. ‘Looks like a little old man. Suits him though.’

Little Vinny beamed with pride. He and Sammi-Lou both loved shopping and dressing their son up to look the business. ‘Once upon a time it was me and Sammi with wardrobes full of designer clothes, Gal. How times change, eh?’ he joked.

Times had most certainly changed. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones had been all the rage when Gary was a teenager, but now groups like Duran Duran and Wham! topped the charts. Women no longer dressed like ladies. They wore ripped jeans and their hair messy. Grown men walked around thinking they looked cool in ridiculous bright-coloured shell-suits. But in Gary’s eyes the most surprising change of all was Little Vinny. Gary had hated the lad with a passion when he’d first started dating Sammi-Lou, thought he was a total waste of space. Thankfully, the lad had proved him wrong. Considering he was still only nineteen, he’d turned out to be a top-drawer dad. He also made Sammi-Lou incredibly happy.

‘My dad isn’t meeting us now. He rung me this morning, said something had cropped up. He told me to pick the suits and he’ll get measured up for his in the next day or two.’

Gary Allen was pleased. He’d never liked Vinny Butler. Michael was OK, but Vinny had a cocky arrogance about him. Having built up his construction business from nothing, gangsters didn’t impress Gary Allen. He was a self-made millionaire through pure hard graft, so why would he be impressed by anything less?

Gary introduced his future son-in-law to his tailor, Maurice.

‘I want all the main men at my wedding to be wearing the same suit as me. My fiancée has chosen crimson for her bridesmaid dresses, so I want a similar colour and style to this, but with a waistcoat underneath,’ Little Vinny explained, showing Maurice the magazine.

‘I have another suit in that colour. Would you like to try it on for size, sir?’

‘You got one my son can try on first? I’m dying to see him in it.’

Oliver Butler’s hair was now a strawberry-blond colour, which today was Brylcreemed with a side parting.

‘Look at him, Gal. Cool dude or what?’ Little Vinny gushed minutes later, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

‘He most certainly is. Looks so grown up.’

Little Vinny crouched down and put some aviator-style dark glasses on his pride and joy. ‘It’ll be sunny in June.’

Gary Allen laughed. ‘*Miami Vice!*’

Vinny Butler was in a foul mood. He’d drunk a bottle of Scotch last night, had woken up with the headache of all headaches, missed his son’s suit fitting, and was now running late for his meet with Eddie Mitchell.

Cursing as he stubbed his little toe, Vinny punched the door that had caused his pain. Trouble was, the door wasn’t to blame. Bella was.

Vinny stepped in the shower and closed his eyes. Engulfed by hot water, he thought back to the past. Only one female had ever got under his skin in his lifetime: Yvonne Summers. When she’d

broken his heart, Vinnie had vowed never to allow himself to be cast under a bird's spell again. He hadn't, but there was something about Bella that had an undesirable effect on him, and he was sure the bitch knew it.

The Enemy had learned a lot while banged up, including the art of deception.

Today, he was back in Whitechapel dressed like a geek. He'd purchased the duffel coat, woolly hat and satchel in a charity shop. Glancing at his reflection, he smirked. He looked like a student. To carry books under his arm had been an awesome idea.

Clutching the satchel close to his side, he walked towards Michael's club. Inside the satchel was the filleting knife and the first opportunity that arose to use it, the Enemy intended to take it. Seeing his father in that hospital, unable to talk or eat, had been a sight that would live with him for ever. No kid should ever have to go through what he had. That was why he'd been so messed up. Not any more, though. He was ready to get even.

'Sorry I'm late, Ed. The morning from hell,' Vinny Butler apologized, shaking his pal's hand. Eddie Mitchell was the youngest son of the legendary Harry Mitchell, and it was well known in the underworld that it was now Eddie who pulled most of the strings within the Mitchell firm.

Ordering the waiter to bring Vinny a drink, Eddie grinned. 'How's tricks? Seems like ages since we've had a proper catch-up.'

'All good my end, thanks. How's Jess and the kids?'

'Driving me mad and costing me a fortune, as per usual,' Eddie joked. 'How's Michael doing?'

'Plodding on. His club's been busy, so that keeps his mind off all the other shit. Still cut up over Adam, but he'll learn to live with it. I had to with Molly. Made of strong stuff, us Butlers.'

'Did Nancy's body ever show up?'

'Nah. Long washed out to sea, her. Never mind. At least she died the way she wanted to die, so that's a comfort,' Vinny replied, his voice laden with sarcasm. 'So, what's this business deal you've got for me? Fancy opening a club together, do ya?'

Eddie Mitchell chuckled. He liked Vinny Butler, but Vinny had a few skeletons in the closet. Ex drug baron, prostitute basher and suspected psychopath, to name just three. Perhaps one day Eddie would consider going into business with Vinny. But not until his pal had proved himself completely. Eddie was no man's fool and even though he trusted Vinny, loose cannons were a liability. Eddie only had to look at his own brother to realize that. 'Nah, I'm not ready to become a club owner yet, pal. However, I do have a container-load of booze up for grabs.'

Knowing that whatever Eddie had on offer must be kosher, Vinny rubbed his hands together in anticipation. 'Enlighten me.'

Having had no joy spotting Michael Butler, the Enemy could barely believe his luck when he saw Vivian Harris strolling along the street, arms weighed down with shopping bags. He quickened his pace and furtively glanced around. There were only two other people about, an elderly couple holding arms.

Sliding his right hand inside the satchel, he felt for his knife. He was a fast runner, had a change of clothes with him, and an alibi lined up.

He thought back to the last time he'd used a filleting knife. He'd felt no remorse on that occasion, none whatsoever. The incident had happened inside a packed carvery. He'd been a young lad at the time, happily tucking into a roast lamb dinner when he spotted a boy from school. Martin Mabbutt came from a big, loving family, and resentment and hatred had flooded the Enemy's thoughts as he'd lunged towards him. He'd ended up stabbing Martin twice and his interfering father once. Both had lived, but he'd revelled in the havoc he'd caused and how close he'd come to killing them.

Breaking into a jog, he felt pure adrenaline pump through his veins as he inched closer to his prey. He glanced around again. The coast was clear. This was it. The moment he'd been waiting for. He pulled out the knife and was about to plunge it in Vivian's back when he heard a voice shout 'Rex!'

The Enemy discreetly slid the knife back inside the satchel, before locking eyes with a bloke who asked, 'You seen a black-and-white dog?'

'Nah, mate. Sorry,' he replied, before crossing over the road. The geezer had got a very good look at him, and he wasn't stupid. Revenge would have to wait until another day.

Chuffed with the container-load of spirits he'd just shaken hands with Eddie Mitchell on, Vinny Butler was celebrating the deal with a spirit or two himself. 'I haven't seen you since the Deborah Preston drama, have I? Did you hear what happened, Ed?'

'No.'

'Deborah, the delightful mother of my ex-bird, Joanna. Well, she only went and made a home-made bomb with the intention of blowing up my club.'

'You what!' spluttered Eddie, spitting his Scotch back in the glass.

Vinny laughed. 'Honest to God. A nail bomb it was, the Old Bill told me. Her son tipped 'em off, apparently. Turned out she blamed me for Joanna and Johnny's deaths and had gone off her rocker. They've carted her off to the funny farm now, thank Christ. That's all I'm short of, some psycho bird lobbing bombs my way.'

Eddie Mitchell shook his head. 'I've never met the woman, but she sounds a proper nutjob. Speaking of the Prestons, how's your Ava doing?'

'Good, mate. Settled in well. Buying her that mutt helped. Took her mind off her mother's death, and she barely mentions Jo now.'

Eddie Mitchell studied his pal as he chirpily continued to chat about Ava. This wasn't the first time it had crossed his mind that Vinny'd had something to do with Joanna's death, but surely not? Even Vinny Butler would not stoop that low to get custody of a kid – would he?

'I'd never have hurt Jo. You know that, don't you, Ed?' Vinny lied. 'Me and her might not have always seen eye to eye, but she had a good heart and was a decent mother.'

It was now Eddie's turn to lie. 'I know you better than that, mate. It never even crossed my mind. How's your mum keeping? If Ava's living with her now, you really should consider getting your mum a gaff out my way. Whitechapel's had its day, like the rest of the East End. Unrecognizable from when we were kids. The schools are far better in Essex.'

Vinny explained he'd been badgering his mother to move, without success, then told Eddie about Brenda's latest escapade. 'I'm embarrassed to call her my sister, Ed. I goes to the hospital to try and help her and she threatens to grass me up to the Old Bill about things that happened years ago. Mum's insisted I leave her to get on with it. I wanted to give the geezer a right pasting, obviously – cheeky bastard. I mean, you don't hurt a woman, do ya? Even a nightmare like Brenda.'

'I feel your pain, Vin. My Ronny's more of a hindrance to me than a help. I cringe every time he starts opening his trap after a bevvy. Mouth starts running away with him and he's a fucking liability. However, if I had a sister and a bloke clumped her, I'd have to give him a dig. That geezer took a massive liberty. Bren's your flesh and blood.'

Vinny had no feelings for his sister whatsoever, but nodded in agreement. If Eddie Mitchell thought giving Dave a pasting was the right thing to do, then he would. He might not love Brenda, but he adored a bit of violence.

Having seen her sister arrive home, Queenie gave it half an hour, then strutted up her path and rang the bell.

'Oh, it's you. What do you want?' Vivian asked, pursing her lips.

'Us to get back to normal. Can I come in? Only if Nosy Hilda sees me standing on the doorstep, the whole of Whitechapel will know our bloody business.'

Secretly pleased that Queenie had made the first move, Vivian marched into the kitchen and put the kettle on. 'Spoke to me like shit you did, Queen. So hurtful, some of the things you said.'

‘I feel exactly the same about the stuff you said to me. Why don’t we just forget all about the row? We’re both as bad as one another when we lose our rag. If Mum were still alive, she’d bang our bleedin’ heads together.’

When Vivian and Queenie argued as kids, they’d always make up by linking their little fingers together and singing a rhyme. It was Viv who held hers out first.

Queenie chuckled as their fingers entwined. ‘I’ve missed you, you miserable old cow.’

‘Not as much as I’ve missed you, you cantankerous old bat.’

Talk about things coming in threes, Michael Butler pondered to himself. First, he’d had to sack two of his bar staff for thieving. Then his ice machine had broken. Now the toilet in the men’s was blocked. It was the end to a perfect day – not.

Depending on the day and people involved, Michael would occasionally hire his club out privately. Today was one of those days when he wished he hadn’t. Irish Danny had been a big old lump who’d probably killed himself due to his love of food. The club was packed with rowdy Irish relatives and there had already been two punch-ups.

Sighing as he heard yet another alcohol-fuelled rendition of ‘Danny Boy’ being belted out over the mike by some pisspot, Michael poured himself a Scotch, sank back in his leather chair and swung his legs on top of his office desk. He shut his eyes and was disturbed seconds later by a pounding on the door. ‘What?’ he yelled.

‘You’ve got a visitor, boss.’

‘Who?’

‘A beautiful lady.’

Michael leapt up and kicked the leg of his desk with frustration. Katy had been stalking him via phone all day and he’d told her not to come here tonight. ‘Send her in,’ Michael spat. No way was he going to succumb to her charm. The only fuck she would get tonight would be him telling her to ‘fuck off’.

He was pouring himself another drink when the door opened. He turned, ready to treat Katy to a barrage of abuse, then dropped his glass in shock.

‘Bella!’ he exclaimed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As dawn broke the following day, Michael and Bella were still trying to sort out their differences. Michael wasn't happy with Bella's explanation as to why she'd disappeared for months. It had hurt him beyond belief when she'd told him she was staying away because she 'needed space'. Obviously, he was elated to see her, but he wasn't about to allow her to waltz back into his life as though she'd never been gone in the first place.

'Something don't add up to me, Bell. I can understand you shooting back to Italy to visit your sick nan, but not for all that time. You obviously got cold feet. I ain't no mug, so don't lie to me. We don't have a future unless you tell me the truth. Did you get cold feet? Or did you meet another geezer? There's definitely something you ain't telling me.'

Bella was sick of repeating herself. She'd guessed Michael would be peeved, but thought he would've been more pleased to see her. They'd not even kissed yet and he was as cold as ice. 'I am not lying to you, Michael. My nana was at death's door for a long while. Even the doctors were amazed she finally pulled through,' Bella lied. What else could she do – admit that she'd fucked his brother senseless?

'OK, so I believe your nan was ill. That still doesn't explain you telling me you needed space. I thought we were a couple and I wanted to be there for you. That's what people that love one another do, Bella. No matter how awful the situation, we're meant to support each other. You were my rock when Adam died. I try to return the favour and you push me away like I'm some nuisance, a worthless piece of shit. I was still grieving an' all, you know. I didn't get over my son's death overnight. Still bloody haven't, and probably never will.'

Bella was a tough cookie, barely ever cried, but she finally broke down. She had been selfish, had not given Adam's death a thought when she'd first blanked Michael's calls, then ordered him to give her some space. How she hated herself for that now. But she'd been so consumed by guilt, she couldn't think about anything other than what she'd done.

'Well, say something then. Crocodile tears don't wash with me.'

'The truth is I was worried about the pace our relationship was developing. I love you with all my heart, Michael, always have done and always will. But to take on your two boys is a massive ask. Not so much from my point of view, but I have Antonio to think of – he is my world. Your sons are much older, and I'm not sure it would work out if we all lived together. No way will I risk my son's happiness by rushing into anything, especially marriage.'

'More lies, Bella? You were probably at it with some other geezer,' Michael spat accusingly. He had no idea why he was being so horrible to her. Was it guilt because he hadn't been able to keep his cock in his trousers?

When Bella began to sob and plead her innocence, he finally softened. Sitting next to her, he put his arms around her. 'I'm so sorry, babe, I know you'd never cheat on me really.'

'And I'm so sorry too.'

Michael held the woman he loved close to his chest. 'Everything will be all right, Bell. Please don't shut me out again though, that's all I ask. My life was like an empty shell without you, and believe me, I'm no sappy bastard that usually comes out with such crap. But it was. I only feel whole when we're together.'

Laughing and crying at the same time, Bella held Michael's handsome face in her hands. 'I swear to God, I will never shut you out again.'

'Things will work out, you know. Perhaps I came on too strong, mentioning marriage and stuff? I know it's not gonna be easy, us making a go of it with the three boys. So let's make a pact to take things more slowly. There's no rush for us to move in together. And even if we decide we want to,

there's certainly no rush for us to get hitched. We'll make a fresh start. Go on some proper dates, and when the time feels right we'll introduce the boys properly. Sound OK to you?

'I've missed you so much,' Bella murmured, in her sexy half-English half-Italian drawl.

Michael breathed deeply, lust taking over every part of him. 'I want you badly. I promise if you ravish me, I'll return the favour.'

Bella unzipped the man of her dream's trousers and took his penis in her mouth.

Michael Butler stared at Bella's beautiful face as she pleased him. She truly was his soul-mate and he knew it.

Katy Spencer and her friend Lucy Tompkins were in high spirits as they joined the pharmacy queue in Boots.

'I'm so excited for you. When will you tell him – if you are?' Lucy giggled.

'As soon as I get him alone. I've never been a week late before, so I reckon I must be,' Katy convinced herself.

'I wonder if he'll ask you to move straight in with him?'

'Michael can be very romantic, so it wouldn't surprise me. You should see the faces and hear the noises he makes when we have sex. He's totally into me, Luce, I can tell. The only reason we're not already living together is because he thinks it's too soon for Lee and Daniel after Nancy. He loves me, I know it.'

'He is such a catch, Katy. You are one lucky girl. Which reminds me: while we're in Romford you must pop into Downtown and get that record. Every time I hear it, it makes me think of you and Michael.'

'What record?'

'The new one in the chart I told you about. It's so you and Mr Butler.'

When Lucy began singing the words to Atlantic Starr's 'Secret Lovers' Katy felt a warm glow inside. She put her hand on her stomach and as she neared the front of the queue, prayed silently to God that she was carrying Michael Butler's baby.

Ava Preston launched herself at her father's legs and nestled her head against them. 'Fred did naughties to Auntie Viv, Daddy.'

Vinny Butler knelt down to stroke Fred, who was also vying for his attention, then picked his daughter up and swung her in the air. Apart from Teddy (the mutt's toy) the only thing Fred ever wanted to shag was Viv's leg and Vinny found that highly amusing.

'You all right, boy? I was worried when I couldn't get hold of you last night. What's the point of having a mobile phone if you don't bleedin' answer it?' Queenie asked, hands on hips.

'Sorry, Mum. I had a business meeting with Eddie Mitchell and we got on the Scotch. You know how it is,' Vinny winked.

Queenie batted her eyelids, then grinned. Both she and Viv lusted after Eddie Mitchell even more than they did that Dirty Den in *EastEnders*.

'I was thinking, it's about time we changed Ava's surname, legally. Best to get it done before she starts school. Whaddya reckon?'

'But I like my name being Ava,' the confused child mumbled, pouting.

Carrying Ava into the lounge, Vinny placed her on the sofa, and sat next to her. His mum had enrolled her in nursery school, but that hadn't turned out too well. Not only had Ava been devastated over leaving Fred at home, she'd also punched two of the other children in her first week and had left by mutual agreement. 'You'll still be called Ava, but instead of Ava Preston, you'll be Ava Butler,' Vinny explained gently.

'Why is my name Ava Preston?'

Queenie crouched down. 'Because when Mummy registered your birth, she forgot to put your father's name on the birth certificate. Fred's registered at the vet as Fred Butler, so you want to have the same surname as him, don't you?'

‘Yes, but will Mummy be upset if the angels tell her?’

Queenie stroked the child’s hair. ‘No, love. Mummy’s dead. She won’t be able to speak to the angels where she is.’

Katy Spencer put the arm of the record player on repeat, lay down on her bed and daydreamed of her future. Lee and Daniel already adored her, she knew that much, and if her test came back positive, her and Michael would most definitely live happily ever after. Picturing what their baby would look like, Katy sang along with ‘Secret Lovers’. Lucy had been right. This song was written for her and Michael.

Taking the test out of her handbag, Katy smiled as she read the instructions. The pharmacist had told her to do the test first thing in the morning before she’d had anything to eat or drink. Patience had never been Katy’s virtue, so she ripped open the box.

The Enemy met his pal in the Eastbrook pub. Dale Grainger and himself had been best mates whilst locked up. In addition to being his drug supplier, he was also going to give him an alibi if and when needed. Dale had no idea what the alibi was for and that’s the way the Enemy liked it. The Butlers were very well known, even in Dagenham, and the less anybody knew the better.

Two drinks and twenty minutes later, the teenager had attracted the attention of two extremely drunken, much older women. ‘You’re handsome, you, ain’t ya?’ the ginger woman slurred, nudging her equally awful mate.

Dale nudged his pal. ‘Ignore them, otherwise we won’t get rid. A nightmare they are, proper alkies. Been barred from the Keys, Bull and the Railway. The ginger one goes out with Brett Carpenter, the biggest knob-end in Dagenham. The other one’s shacked up with Dave Green, another prick. You should see ’em perform down the Roundhouse of a weekend when the bands are on. It’s hard to believe she’s Vinny Butler’s sister.’

‘Who is?’

‘The one with the frowsy blonde hair. That’s Brenda Butler. Minging, ain’t it?’

Nodding in agreement, the Enemy stared at Brenda and pictured her covered in blood.

‘Michael! Stop it! I really do have to get home to Antonio. I promised my friends I would pick him up before noon, and it’s nearly that now,’ Bella explained.

Obligingly moving his finger away from Bella’s clitoris, Michael propped an elbow on the pillow beside her and rested his head on his hand. ‘When am I gonna see you again? And the little man? Missed him big time an’ all.’

‘I’m very busy the next couple of days. I have a lot of work to catch up on and meetings to attend. How about Saturday? I’d like to introduce you properly to my friends who run my favourite Italian restaurant. That’s where Antonio stayed last night. Will you be able to take time away from the club?’

Michael grinned. ‘You bet I can.’

‘Fabulous. But you still haven’t answered my earlier question,’ Bella reminded him.

‘What?’

‘I asked you did you date anybody else while I was away?’

‘Of course I didn’t, you daft mare. Not unless you count my old mucker, Black Kevin. I took him out a couple of times to cheer him up. Split up with his old woman, poor sod. And I can assure you we’re not gay.’

‘I believe you, many wouldn’t,’ Bella chuckled.

Feeling edgy all of a sudden, Michael leapt out of bed. ‘I’ll put the kettle on, babe. You hungry?’

‘No. A coffee will do just fine, thanks.’

Instead of the kitchen, Michael made a beeline for the sitting room. He’d switched his mobile off last night, then turned his landline and answer phone on to silent. Seeing the black machine flashing away like a good ’un, Michael sighed deeply. He would bet his club on who the calls were from and he had to get rid of her now, fast.

Vinny Butler was in a filthy mood. He'd been trying to get hold of Michael since early this morning, and had a vision of why his brother still wasn't answering his phone.

'I thought you were going to take Ava out for the whole day, boy?' Queenie questioned.

'Nah. Not today, Mum. I took her to the café and we've taken the mutt out for a run. Ava's happy here, playing in the garden.'

'It doesn't give me much of a break though, does it, Vinny? I'm going down the Roman all day on Saturday with Viv, so best you up your fatherly duties by then.'

'Glad you and Auntie Viv are OK. Who made the first move?'

'Don't change the bloody subject. I know you love Ava, but you can't put on me so much. I haven't had a chance to tidy upstairs properly and change the bedding since Tara and Tommy left. I'm no spring chicken now. I might look like one still, but me bones ache some days and I get tired in the afternoons.'

'When did Tara and Tommy leave?'

'The day Bren came out of hospital. I told you yesterday. Whatever's wrong with you lately? It's like talking to a silly boy, and you've got a face like a smacked arse.'

Rather than admitting to his mother that he'd spent most of the day visualizing his brother fucking Bella and wishing it was him, Vinny stood up, waving his hands. 'I'm going now. Can't be doing with you when you're in one of these moods. And you shouldn't be coming out with insults such as "silly boy". Champ wasn't exactly bright, was he? How would Auntie Viv feel, hearing you saying that?'

'Me and Viv both call him next door "silly-boy-got-none". Unlike you, Viv hasn't had a personality bypass,' she sniffed. 'Sod off then, and don't bother coming back until you're more cheerful. Or on Saturday, when you will be looking after your daughter for once.'

Without saying goodbye to Ava, who was in the garden with Fred, Vinny slammed the front door behind him.

Driving off like a maniac, he immediately regretted his actions and punched the steering wheel. Out of all the birds in the world, why did Michael have to fall in love with that cunt?

As soon as Bella left, Michael Butler listened to the messages on his answer machine. There were nine in total – six from Katy and three from Vinny.

Pacing up and down the room, Michael wondered what to do for the best. Katy was young, worked for him, so was it fair to sack her over the phone? It had to be wiser to do so in person. He should blame her dismissal on the boys' recent bad behaviour and pay her off with a wad of money. Surely that would keep her sweet? And quiet, regarding him and her.

Before he could pick up the phone and ask Katy to meet him, the buzzer disturbed Michael's pre-planned speech. Nobody else was at the club, so he answered it himself. It would be proper handy if it was Katy. Save him a journey.

'It's Vinny,' came the gruff voice over the speaker. 'Where the fuck you been and why aren't you answering your phone?'

Michael ran down the stairs and flung the door open. 'Sorry, bruv. I had a visitor last night – Bella. She's back from Italy and we're gonna give it another go.'

'How very romantic! And did it not occur to you that me and Mum might be worried if you wasn't answering your phone?'

A bit taken aback by Vinny's obvious anger, Michael shrugged. 'I'm a grown man, Vin, give me a break. I had to switch both phones off in case Katy rang. Good job I did: she's left tons of messages.'

'I'm not interested in your fucked-up love life, Michael. If you're silly enough to take a bird back who has already dumped you, that's your lookout. What I wanna talk about is Dagenham Dave. He needs to be taught a bit of a lesson. Brenda might be a pain in the arse, but she's still our sister.'

'But she threatened you with the Old Bill, Vin,' Michael reminded his brother.

‘So what. It’s a direct piss-take at us, him clumping Bren. We won’t kill him, but he needs a stern warning. People will think we’re mugs otherwise.’

‘What people?’ said Michael, wondering why Vinny was getting in a lather. ‘Bren and Dave had a punch-up. Big fucking deal. They’re back together now and everybody knows what a nightmare Brenda is.’

‘I was out with Eddie Mitchell yesterday. Even he agreed that Dave needs a good hiding. I’ve done a bit of research and heard through the grapevine that he serves up in the Cross Keys at the weekends. Barred from there is our Bren, she’s down the Roundhouse. So, we’ll stalk the Keys at the weekend, take Carl with us to entice the cunt outside. There’s a graveyard opposite. The perfect place for Dave to be taught who not to mess with in the future.’

‘I can’t make Saturday. I’m seeing Bella.’

‘Business before pleasure, Michael. And family before whores. Always remember that, bruv.’

As Vinny turned his back and walked out the premises, Michael wanted to give him a slap; disrespecting him was one thing, but having a dig at Bella was another. Instead he punched the wall. Vinny was obviously in one of his Jekyll and Hyde moods and until he snapped out of it, he was best left alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Michael Butler put the boys' breakfast on the table.

'Ain't you having none, Dad?' Lee asked.

'Nah. And I need yous two to pop out for hour or so about half eleven. Someone's coming round and I need to talk business, in private.'

'Who's that then?' Daniel enquired.

'Nobody you know,' Michael lied. Today was the first chance he'd had to talk in private with Katy and he was absolutely dreading telling her that there'd be no more her and him, and he didn't need her taking care of the boys any longer. A thousand pounds he planned to give her as a pay-off, and he only hoped that would soften the blow.

'But I thought we were grounded?' Daniel questioned suspiciously.

'You were until today. Can't keep you locked indoors for ever, can I? Just learn to behave yourselves in future. And keep away from Donald and Mary's café. If I hear you've been within a hundred feet of that joint, I swear I'll send you both away to a bloody boarding school. Understand me?'

'If we're not grounded any more, does that mean Katy will be coming back to look after us?' Lee asked.

'No. Katy won't be coming round any more.'

Daniel pushed his plate away and leapt up. 'Why? What's she done wrong? We like Katy looking after us, don't we, Lee?'

'Yeah. We like Katy a lot,' Lee added.

'Tough shit. Anyway, you've only got yourselves to blame. I wouldn't have got rid of Katy if yous two had behaved. That was the whole point of her being here.'

Eyes blazing, Daniel punched the table then locked eyes with his father. 'Don't fucking lie! You've been shagging her, I bet.'

Grabbing hold of his brazen son by the throat, Michael pushed him up against the wall. 'Katy's nearer your age than mine. What do you take me for, eh? You ever spout such crap or speak to me like that again, you'll know all about it, for sure.'

Upset because he was probably never going to see the bird he'd had wet dreams over again, Daniel Butler burst into tears.

'Get off! I mean it! Leave me alone, you filthy little ratpig,' Vivian squealed, as Fred clung on to her leg and rubbed his little dingle-dangle against her brand-new nylons.

Queenie tried not to laugh, but couldn't help herself as she picked up Fred and put him in the back garden.

'Disgusting bastard creature. Look, it's laddered me bleedin' tights. New on today, these were,' Vivian complained.

'Go and change 'em, but hurry up. We're running late,' Queenie said. For years it had been a ritual that Saturdays were spent visiting their loved ones' graves, before getting glammed up to spend the rest of the day at the Roman. Roman Road market was the place to be seen on a Saturday these days and most of the women who came from far and wide to shop there got done up to the nines.

Spotting a bit of dust on the television, Queenie took the duster out the drawer. Both she and Vivian were the envy of their neighbours with their pristine homes and posh furniture. China and family photos were Queenie's pride and joy and her lounge was brimming with both.

Vinny had turned up early this morning to pick Ava up. He'd apologized for being short-tempered the other evening, explaining that he had something on his mind and he'd tell her what once he'd sorted it. 'Don't worry, Mum. It's nothing to worry about. Quite the opposite, in fact,' he'd assured her with a wink.

‘Ready, Queen?’ Vivian bellowed.

Queenie stared at herself in the mirror, flicked her dyed-blonde hair and sprayed on some more lacquer. Looking perfect down the Roman was a must, especially on a Saturday. ‘Yep. Let’s knock ‘em dead, Viv.’

Katy Spencer was anxious, excited, scared yet buzzing, all at the same time. She hadn’t seen Michael all week. Daniel and Lee were being punished for misbehaving, which was why Michael had given her a fully paid week off work. He’d also insisted she wasn’t to visit him at the club, saying he’d had some business to attend to up north. Katy hadn’t quite believed his story, so she’d driven past his house and club a few times and there’d been no sign of his car. She’d even got her mate to ring the club three times and the staff had said he wasn’t there.

Pulling up outside Michael’s house, Katy had the biggest butterflies ever as she turned off the ignition.

Peeping through the curtains and wishing this moment was already over, Michael Butler opened the front door before Katy had even got to it. He’d been a proper Lothario back in the day, had more birds than hot dinners, but even then he’d been as kind as he could when dumping them. The stalkers he’d acquired along the way were few and far between. However, he had this awful feeling that Katy might turn out to be his biggest one yet. If Bella found out about his stupid fling, she’d probably chop his cock off. And the thought of losing her over something so meaningless did not bear thinking about.

‘I’ve missed you so much,’ Katy beamed, slinging her arms around Michael’s neck as soon as the front door was shut.

When she tried to stick her tongue in his mouth, Michael swerved his head to the side, then gently prised her wrists away from his neck. ‘We need to talk, babe,’ he said, kissing her politely on the cheek.

Following Michael into the kitchen, Katy felt a feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. She sensed from his coolness that he was going to dump her.

Having already prepared a story, Michael pulled a chair out for Katy, sat opposite her then squeezed both her hands in his. ‘You know how much I think of you, don’t you?’ Michael began.

Tears in her eyes, Katy nodded. ‘You’re going to finish with me, aren’t you?’

Wanting to tell the girl there was fuck-all to finish, Michael instead smiled politely. Treading on eggshells was a necessity at times, especially when it involved his beloved Bella, the love of his life. ‘We’ve got a bit of a problem, Katy. The boys clocked there was something going on between us and were pretty upset about it. You know what teenagers are like. I actually think they have a bit of a schoolboy crush on you themselves. Anyway, as much as it pains me, I’m gonna have to let you go. You’ve been absolutely brilliant all round and I can’t thank you enough, but I do feel it’s best you don’t turn up at the club any more either. A clean break would be best for both of us.’

‘What do you mean, let me go?’

‘I mean you can’t work for me any more and neither can we see one another. It’s too soon after Nancy’s death for me to be dating again. I have to put the boys first, that’s my duty as a father. You’re young, Katy, and I’m far too old for you anyway. You’re a beautiful girl who deserves far more in life than being stuck with some old git who has two unruly teenagers in tow. You can do so much better.’

Sobbing, Katy jumped up, darted around the other side of the table and flung her arms around Michael. She might be young, but she knew in her heart that she would love this man for the rest of her life. ‘I think the world of Daniel and Lee. They’re great kids. And I don’t care about the age gap. I love you so much, Michael. Please don’t finish with me. We can see one another in secret, if you want?’

Not knowing what else to do, Michael stood up and hugged the girl. He stroked her hair. ‘I’m so sorry, Katy, but it’s not just the boys. I’m not ready to move on from Nancy yet either,’ he lied.

‘But wouldn’t you like to settle down again one day and have more children?’ Katy wept.

‘Not yet, babe. Not for a long while. It was only the back end of last year Adam died. It’s far too raw for me to even think about having more kids. Perhaps one day? And who knows, one day when you’re older our paths might cross again. You never know what the future might hold.’ Michael wasn’t trying to give Katy false hope. He only wanted to soften the blow.

Katy stopped crying and smiled. ‘Can we still keep in touch via the phone?’

Michael shook his head. This was proving every bit as difficult as he’d expected, but it was his own fault for poking someone so young. ‘Look Katy, I really like you and that is why I don’t want you to contact me. If I didn’t think a lot of you, I wouldn’t care if you came to the club or rang me. I need some time on my own to sort my head out. It’s been all over the place since Adam died and Nancy committed suicide. You do understand, don’t you?’

Secretly thrilled that Michael was that obsessed with her he couldn’t bear the thought of hearing her voice or seeing her, Katy nodded. ‘I won’t come to the club or phone you, I promise. I’ll wait for you to contact me. Can I ask you a question?’

‘Of course.’

‘Do you love me, Michael?’

Hating giving her false hope, but knowing there was sod-all else he could do to get rid of her, Michael winked. ‘You know I do. Now you’d better get going because the boys will be back soon.’

‘How did they find out about us? What did they say?’ Katy questioned.

‘They’re not stupid, probably clocked the way we were with one another. Daniel was more upset about it than Lee. Anyway, as I said, they’ll be back soon, so best you make tracks. Look after yourself, sweetheart, and I wish you all the luck in the world for the future. This is for you,’ Michael said, handing Katy an envelope.

‘What is it?’

‘A grand. Call it a month’s wages. I thought you could treat yourself to a holiday. It’ll do you good to get away, babe. Clear your head, and you might even meet the man of your dreams.’

Throwing her arms around Michael’s neck, Katy savoured his touch and the smell of his aftershave. She knew what scent he wore and would buy a bottle tomorrow out of the money he’d given her. ‘I love you, Michael. I will wait for you, I promise.’

The Enemy was munching on a sandwich outside Percy Ingle’s when he spotted his prey. He’d heard the two old witches shopped at the Roman every Saturday, which was why he was donning his nerd disguise once again.

Watching the two women laughing and joking with a stallholder, he fought the urge to stab both there and then. He wasn’t stupid though. He would only be able to get away with stabbing one of the women, and if he did so, it would have to be in the middle of the market where it was jam-packed. Queenie was the one he wanted to suffer the most, so perhaps he could knife Vivian in the back, then duck behind one of the stalls before anybody realized what had happened.

When Queenie and Vivian began to walk away from the stall, the Enemy pulled the woolly hat over his head and adjusted the glasses on his nose. He’d spotted a few old faces he recognized earlier, but no way would anybody recognize him. Firstly, they wouldn’t have seen him since he was a child. And secondly, he was far too clever.

‘Daddy, I don’t like it here. It smells,’ Ava sulked. Her father had brought her to some stupid farmyard in Essex to see the animals and Ava was extremely bored.

Vinny picked his daughter up. ‘Look at those little piggies. They’re playing,’ he pointed out.

Ava turned her head in the opposite direction. ‘No. Don’t like ’em.’

‘Shall we go to that boozier I told you about, Dad? They have a good play area for kids. Me and Sammi often take Ollie there. He loves it,’ Little Vinny suggested.

Vinny nodded. Ava was a difficult child to please at times. Happy as a sandboy at home playing with Fred, but enjoyed very little outdoor activity. His mother had even tried her with Sunday school and that had ended in disaster. When the teacher had asked who Jesus was, Ava had replied ‘A cunt.’

Half an hour later, Vinny was sitting next to his son in the boozier, relieved that Ava seemed to be enjoying herself in the play area. ‘Look after Ollie,’ he shouted.

‘Yes, Daddy,’ Ava beamed, holding her nephew’s hand.

As proud as Vinny was at the way his son had turned out, he did currently have one issue with him. ‘We need to have a chat.’

‘About what?’

‘The wedding suits. You might be happy to prance around looking like a pansy all day, but no way am I wearing that creation. I’ll be the laughing stock of the East End.’

Little Vinny was slightly taken aback. ‘The suits are smart and modern. What’s wrong with ’em?’

‘What’s right with ’em would be an easier question to answer. For a start, they’re bastard-well white! You ever seen me walking round looking like Whitechapel’s answer to Larry Grayson?’

‘Who’s Larry Grayson? And the suits aren’t white, they’re cream.’

‘It don’t matter. I’m not wearing it.’

‘For once this isn’t about you, Dad. It’s mine and Sammi- Lou’s big day and we want it to be special. The bridesmaids are all wearing crimson and the males cream suits. You told me to choose what I wanted, so I did. Please don’t ruin this for me. The photos will look ridiculous if you’re the only one of us wearing a different suit.’

‘It’s got a fucking turtle neck an’ all,’ Vinny winced.

‘If you hate the suit that much, you can change it before the reception. Please wear it, Dad, for the actual wedding. Michael said he liked his.’

‘Michael’s secretly gay,’ Vinny replied sarcastically.

Oliver Butler toddling over stopped the discussion getting any more heated. Vinny scooped the child up and sat him on his lap. Unlike the rest of the Butler males, Oliver was blond, but he’d inherited the trademark piercing green eyes. Vinny adored him, but still couldn’t get his head around being called Granddad. He felt far too young to be addressed as such, so had taught Oliver to call him Vinny.

‘Inny, Inny. Wha dat?’ Oliver giggled, pressing his chubby finger against his grandfather’s nose.

Little Vinny smirked. ‘That’s the nose of a man who won’t do one small thing to please his son on his wedding day. Never mind, boy. When you’re older and you get married, I’ll do anything to make you happy. That’s what being a dad is all about.’

‘Bye, bye, Michael. I’m so excited now. See you tomorrow,’ Antonio said, before handing the phone back to his mother and jumping up and down on the sofa with joy. He’d never had a daddy like his friends did, but whenever he was with Michael, he felt like he did. People always said they looked alike and Antonio loved that. It gave him a sense of belonging.

‘Go and play in your bedroom if you’re going to jump about, Antonio. Mummy is trying to talk to Michael.’

When her son skipped out of the room, Bella smiled. ‘He is absolutely over the moon we are all going out tomorrow, Michael. He cried earlier, bless him, when I said you couldn’t make today. He truly adores you as much as I do.’

‘And I adore him too, babe. So sorry about today. I feel guilty now, but there was sod-all I could do about it. It’s family shit that has to be sorted,’ Michael explained. Vinny had sent Carl down to the Cross Keys yesterday evening, but unfortunately Brenda’s loser of a bloke was nowhere to be seen. Michael could have defied Vinny by refusing to cancel his date with Bella in favour of waiting for a phone call, but to be honest, it wasn’t worth the grief. Vinny seemed to have a real hang-up over his relationship with Bella and to put her in front of family business would only cause World War Three.

‘How are your mum and aunt?’ Bella asked.

‘As mad as ever. I haven’t had a chance to tell ’em you’re back from Italy yet, but they’re bound to want to see you when I do. Ava’s living with my mum, so I thought perhaps Sunday week, I’ll pick you and Antonio up and take you over my mum’s for dinner? If I remember rightly, Ava and

Antonio were inseparable at Vinny's fortieth, and Antonio adored the mutt. Fred lives there too,' Michael chuckled.

Bella's stomach churned. Ava was Antonio's half-sister and that thought alone made her feel physically sick. 'Let's not rush things, Michael. Don't tell your mum and aunt I'm back yet. Let me get settled again and then we'll surprise them together. I can't wait to see them again though. I thought they were lovely and so funny.'

'OK, babe. Whatever you want. I've gotta go now. There's a geezer here to see me. I'll bell you later.'

Bella said goodbye, replaced the receiver, rested the back of her head against the sofa and stared at the ceiling. Living a life littered with lies and deceit was awful, but what choice did she have? She'd tried to live without Michael and couldn't. She had to keep telling herself that she was the only one that knew the true identity of Antonio's father and there was no reason for anybody else to believe it wasn't Clint. Only Vinny, perhaps? And no way was Bella ever going to allow her son to be in his company. She was afraid if she did, Vinny would take one look at her beloved boy and, because of Antonio's age, black hair and piercing green eyes, put two and two together.

A sunny day always brought droves of shoppers to Roman Road market and the Enemy was pleased that the crowd started to thicken as he walked past Cardigan Road. He'd kept a good twenty feet or so behind Queenie and Vivian since he'd spotted them at Percy Ingle's and had stopped to browse at stalls whenever they had stopped. Queenie was wearing a floral dress accompanied by a bright-red jacket. Vivian's dress was bright green, and the silly old cow had some kind of fur draped around her neck. The Enemy liked animals – he'd recently bought a kitten – and in his eyes the fact some poor creature had been skinned alive so that old witch could drape it proudly over her shoulders was a good enough reason to kill her.

Spotting a gorgeous blonde, the Enemy began to smile at her before realizing there was no point as he was in this ridiculous disguise. Had he not been, he reckoned he could have been in with a chance. He'd always had all the girls at school after him and he hadn't done too bad while locked up. He'd lost his virginity to a twenty-five-year-old brunette called Dawn who was meant to be teaching him art. He'd been a hero amongst the other inmates when their affair had come to light. Dawn hadn't though. She was fired on the spot.

When Queenie and Viv did a detour into the arcade, the Enemy decided to wait outside and order himself a jacket potato. He wasn't hungry, but the less conspicuous he made himself look, the better. He was determined to carry out his plan today. Fucking hard-faced old slappers. They deserved everything coming their way.

Shirley Preston feared nobody. When her grandson Jamie had been falsely accused and then subsequently banged up for murdering Molly Butler, Shirley had dealt with the barrage of abuse and bricks aimed through her windows by chucking abuse back, along with the bloody bricks.

The police had strongly advised Shirley to take up their offer of a safe house far away from Poplar, but Shirley was having none of it. Unlike her parents, she'd survived the war and Hitler's bombs, so could bloody survive anything. To run away would have been a sign of guilt and even though, at first, the evidence had been stacked against her grandson, Shirley had always known in her heart Jamie was innocent. A silly boy at the time for leading the police up the garden path, but no child killer.

Roman Road wasn't Shirley's usual stomping ground. She much preferred to shop at Chrisp Street market, but today was her friend Madge's sixtieth birthday, hence her visit to Bow. 'I like that top, Shirl. The glittery silver one,' Madge pointed out.

About to take a closer look, Shirley was struck in the side of the head by a fist. 'How dare you show your face around this neck of the woods! Scum like you and that grandson of yours should be hung from the rafters,' Queenie Butler screamed.

The Butler and Preston family had more bad blood and betrayal between them than your average soap on TV could produce in a whole year.

Shirley's lip curled up in fury. 'He's innocent, my Jamie, you senile old bat. You wanna look closer to home to find your granddaughter's killer. Jamie heard through the grapevine that Ben Bloggs killed himself on the day of Molly's funeral. I wonder why?' she bellowed.

Shoppers froze and looked on in amazement as all hell broke loose. 'Your son killed my Roy,' Queenie yelled, dragging Shirley to the floor by her hair.

'And your Vinny killed my Joanna and Johnny,' Shirley shouted. The driver of the red truck that had ploughed her granddaughter's car into a ditch had never been caught and Shirley knew in her heart that Vinny had organized Joanna's death. Her son Johnny had been a broken man and had ended his own life shortly afterwards.

As Madge waded in, Vivian did the same. 'Get off my sister, you fat slut,' Vivian screamed, aiming blows at the over-sized woman. 'Your whore of a daughter ended my sister's marriage,' she bellowed, punching Shirley as well. Back in the sixties, Albie Butler had had an affair with Judy Preston, Shirley's daughter. Jamie was the child the Butlers had never known existed until he killed Molly.

When stallholders joined the fracas, the Enemy cursed his luck. Should he hang around? Or would his urge to murder a Butler have to wait until another day? In this crowd no one would see who struck the final blow ...

CHAPTER NINE

‘Put another ten kilo on for me, Jay,’ Vinny ordered. He’d originally caught the training bug while serving time and now couldn’t imagine life without his regular gym sessions.

‘I spoke to Michael yesterday. You didn’t tell me Bella was back on the scene, Vin.’

Grimacing as he lifted the overloaded bar above his head, Vinny hissed, ‘She’s a slapper and a messer. Don’t you think I have better things to talk about than her?’

A bit taken aback by the look of hatred on Vinny’s face, Jay Boy sensibly dropped the subject.

‘I need to make a phone call. I won’t be a tick,’ Vinny said.

Vinny took his phone out of the locker and rang Michael. ‘We’re gonna sort out that little problem today. It’s definitely a goer. I’ll pick you up from your club at four.’

‘No way can I make today, Vin. I had to blow Bella out yesterday ’cause you said it was definitely a goer then. I’m not cancelling my plans again.’

‘You wuss! Can you hear your fucking self? Get a grip, Michael. Your bit of fluff sodded off for months on end with no real explanation, and now you wanna put her in front of family business. What are you? A man or a fucking mouse?’

When Michael slammed the phone down on him, Vinny smirked. His brother would blow Bella out in favour of giving Brenda’s bloke a good hiding, and that was the plan.

Nosy Hilda and Mouthy Maureen loved a bit of gossip, and today’s was far juicier than most. Neither woman particularly liked Queenie or Vivian, but they loved discussing their business.

‘Start from the beginning and talk more slowly. You ramble when you’re excited,’ Maureen ordered her friend.

‘I told you something was going on between Albie and Vivian when I saw them in the pub together, holding hands and gazing into one another’s eyes. Well, Queenie’s obviously cottoned on because it all kicked off down the Roman yesterday. Old Mother Taylor told me Jewish Harold on the clothes stall told her that Queenie yelled “You’ve stolen my husband!” Apparently, they were rolling about the pavement like a pair of fishwives, fighting.’

‘Blimey! That’s a turn up for the books. Let’s go for a walk around Mr Patel’s. Queenie usually gets her paper about nine-ish. Be good to hear what happened from the horse’s mouth. The stuck-up old cow might even want to be friends with us now if her own sister’s stabbed her in the back.’

‘Can you imagine Viv and Albie humping? Makes me feel ill. I’ll get me coat. Let’s go.’

‘Michael!’ Antonio D’Angelo squealed with delight as he threw his arms around the man he hoped would one day marry his mum and become his daddy.

‘It’s so good to see you, Antonio. I’ve missed you and your mum so much. Open your presents, boy,’ Michael urged.

‘You really shouldn’t have bought him gifts, Michael. He has everything a child could wish for as it is,’ Bella chuckled.

Gesticulating for Bella to follow him into the kitchen, Michael took her in his arms and kissed her passionately. Even in a red velour tracksuit, she looked simply stunning. ‘I’m so sorry I can’t make the restaurant, babe. It’s a long story but my sister’s had some grief with her bloke. I’m gonna have to shoot off about three, if that’s OK with you?’

Bella forced a smile. She knew exactly the way Vinny’s evil mind ticked and what he was trying to do. ‘That’s fine, Michael. Family comes before pleasure.’

‘Here she is! Say what you said you was gonna say,’ Mouthy Maureen hissed.

As Queenie approached the newsagent’s, the first thing Nosy Hilda noticed was her black eye. ‘Oh dear! Are you OK, Queen? I heard what happened. You must be distraught. I mean, who’d have thought it? Your Albie and Vivvy. I was gonna tell you when I saw them holding hands in the pub, but you know me, I don’t like to gossip about other people’s business.’

Queenie looked at Hilda in astonishment. It wouldn't be the first time the ugly scarf-wearing old hag had got the wrong end of the stick. 'What the hell you going on about? I had a tear-up with Shirley Preston, not my Viv. Albie and Vivvy holding hands in the pub! When? And what fucking pub?'

'Sorry, Queen. We've obviously got the story arse-upwards.' Mouthy Maureen tugged her friend's arm. 'Come on, Hilda. Let's go.'

Vivian had offered to keep an eye on Ava and the horrid little mutt while her sister went out to get the newspapers and some eggs. 'Put the ratpig in the garden, Ava,' she ordered as the dog tried to hump her left leg.

'His name's Fred, not Ratpig! And he's got his dingle-dangle out again, Auntie Viv,' Ava giggled.

'Just do as I say, Ava, please. Now!'

'Ava, take Fred upstairs. I need to have a word with your Auntie Viv,' Queenie yelled, slamming the front door. She'd chased Hilda and Maureen down the road demanding answers when they'd tried to swerve their accusations.

'Whatever's wrong?' Vivian asked.

'You cosyng up to Albie in the Grave Maurice, holding fucking hands, Viv, is what's wrong. A laughing stock, I am, thanks to you and that womanizing old wanker. How long you been seeing him behind my back?' Queenie yelled, her eyes blazing with fury.

Vivian leapt off the sofa. 'Don't talk so bleedin' daft. You've lost the plot, you have.'

'That nosy old trout Hilda told me exactly what she saw, and she'd be too scared to lie. I don't care about my feelings, what I care about is my sons'. Mouthy Maureen knows an' all. Can you imagine who else must know if them two old crows have been talking about it? My Vinny and Michael have worked bloody hard to secure their reputation and I am disgusted with you, Viv. Albie, of all people! I knew you'd warmed to the old goat, but truth be known, it was all your fault that our marriage failed. Did you always have designs on him for yourself? Well! Did ya?'

'I'm not listening to any more of this old bollocks. I had a quick drink in the Maurice with Albie when me and you fell out recently. He was trying to cheer me up – end of! And of course I wasn't holding his bastard hand. Nosy Hilda must want her eyes fucking tested. As for you blaming me for ending your marriage, look closer to home, sweetheart. That murdering monster of a son of yours lost you your husband. Not me. Just like he lost me my Lenny. Like it or lump it, your precious apron-string clinger is a complete and utter wrong 'un.'

'All right, bruv? The prick's deffo in the Keys today. Carl's already there,' Vinny explained.

Having spent a bit of quality time with Bella and Antonio, Michael decided not to moan. 'Sweet. At least we can get this done and dusted today. Don't go overboard on him though, Vin. I know what your temper's like, and Bren will know it's us if the tosser disappears off the face of the earth.'

'I won't. Just wanna give him a firm warning. You heard from Mum? She's in a right old state. Reckons Auntie Viv's been having it off with our wonderful father. I told her she must be wrong, but you know what Mum's like once she gets a bee in her bonnet. It better not be true, otherwise that old bastard will truly pay for his sins this time.'

'Of course it ain't true. And if you dare lay one finger on Dad, you'll have me to answer to, Vin. When you last duffed him up, I was only a nipper. Be warned. I'm not now.'

Vinny chuckled. Albie had spent weeks in hospital when Vinny had learned of his affair with Judy Preston, and it served him right. 'How's your stalker? You heard any more?'

Michael was absolutely relieved to have gotten rid of Katy. 'Not a peep, thank Christ. I think the grand did the trick.'

'You'll be lucky! She'll reappear as soon as she finds out you're seeing Bella. Nothing worse than a scorned young psycho,' Vinny taunted.

Michael glared at his elder brother. 'What is it that pisses you off so much about me being happy with a bird? Didn't you also try and split Roy and Colleen up in the past, if I remember rightly? Just because you can't find love, Vin, you shouldn't be bitter towards others.'

Wanting to yell that he too knew every part of Bella's body inch by inch, Vinny instead put his foot on the accelerator and said nothing.

Albie Butler had a Sunday routine. After finishing work at the club, he'd always pop into the Blind Beggar and have a catch-up with a few old pals before heading home to Barking.

'Does it still get busy with those strippers, Albie? I'm surprised your heart can take ogling all that young flesh at your age,' Big Stan joked.

About to reply, Albie was drenched by his own pint of Guinness. 'What the hell! Why d'ya do that?'

'Because you disgust me, you dirty old toad. And so does that so-called sister of mine. I know what the pair of you have been up to,' Queenie yelled, clouting Albie around the head with her umbrella.

Holding Fred's lead, Ava was standing behind her nan, giggling.

'You're deranged! Always bleedin' well have been. Me and Vivvy! Don't make me laugh. Ruined my suit now, you daft old bat.'

Queenie sneered, hands on hips. She loathed the thought of Nosy Hilda and Mouthy Maureen spreading gossip about how she'd been betrayed, which was why she'd decided to come to the pub and spread the word herself in true Queenie style. She'd give the bastards something to talk about, all right.

By the time he got to Dagenham, Vinny Butler was in a foul mood. He and Michael had been having a dig at one another throughout the journey and were now bickering over the wedding suits.

'We're gonna look a right pair of tossers, end of. You should've backed me rather than telling my son you were happy to wear the bastard thing. Why tell him you liked it when you'd already told me you hated the poxy suit?' Vinny demanded to know.

'Does it matter? Jesus, Vin, we've only got to wear it for one day. Get a grip, will ya?'

'Gonna be a laughing stock, all thanks to you. You might be happy prancing around looking like a gay hairdresser, but I fucking well ain't.'

'Enough about the suits now, Vin. Can we discuss what we've planned for Dave? Only I know what you're like when you're in this type of mood, and the last thing I'm short of is you going overboard and snapping his neck.'

'I'm hardly gonna touch him. Well, not where bruises show anyway. Carl will get him out the boozier. He does most of his dealing in the car park, by all accounts. We'll drag him into the graveyard and give him a good warning about his future conduct. That's about it really.'

The men continued their journey in silence and five minutes later were parked up next to Carl. Carl got out of his motor and stepped into Vinny's Mercedes. 'He's still in there, but looks a bit pissed. I suggest I get him out now before he collapses,' said Carl.

'How do we know he's going to come outside and hand over drugs to a complete stranger?' Michael asked.

'He will. I got introduced to the prick the other night and bought him a beer.'

Michael glared accusingly at Vinny. 'But you said he weren't in the pub any of the other nights.'

Realizing he'd slipped up, Carl Tanner immediately covered his tracks. He had no idea why Vinny had sent him to the pub on three different days, yet still not acted on Carl being present. Vinny was his boss and Carl simply did as he was asked. 'Dave had too many hangers-on with him before, Michael. It wouldn't have been the right time. I told Vinny it was sensible to leave him be.'

Not overly convinced by Carl's explanation, Michael demanded, 'What we waiting for then?'

Dave Green was standing at the corner of the bar having a rant about the West Ham result when Carl approached him. Brenda had always been the one to advise him who he should and shouldn't trust, but she was barred from the Keys now so he had to make his own choices and happily followed Carl outside.

Vinny leapt out of the car and dragged Dave into the graveyard by his neck. ‘Like knocking women about, do ya? Answer me, cunt,’ he yelled, kneeling Dave ferociously in the groin.

Michael gave Dave a sharp dig in the ribs. ‘Nobody hurts our sister and puts her in hospital. Understand what we’re saying?’

Eyes like organ stops, Dave fell to the ground and covered his head with his hands. ‘I’m sorry. Really sorry. I love Bren and it will never happen again,’ he stammered.

Crouching next to the terrified waste of space, Vinny took a flick knife out of his pocket. ‘Get your cock out.’

‘No. Please God noooo! I really am sorry, Vinny. Truly I am,’ Dave wept.

‘Do as I say or I’ll slit your throat,’ Vinny demanded. He loved terrorizing the less fortunate, got off on it completely.

Hands shaking so much he could barely unzip his flies, Dave Green somehow managed to do as he was asked.

Vinny held the blade against the loser’s manhood. ‘I swear to you, you ever lay a hand on my sister or upset her kids again, I will dismember this little tinkler. And you’re not going to mention to Brenda that you’ve been paid a visit. Comprendre?’

‘Yes. Y-you have my word I will never upset Bren or the kids again,’ Dave gabbled. He’d never sobered up so quickly.

‘Let’s go,’ Michael urged.

Unable to help himself, Vinny stood up and stamped on Dave’s penis with all his might. He then did the same to the man’s stomach.

Not for the first time, Michael had to witness his brother losing his rag completely and with the help of Carl managed to drag him away before they had another murder on their hands. Vinny was such a loose cannon on occasions, he really was.

Vivian Harris stared forlornly at the television. *Brookside*, *EastEnders*, *The Two Ronnies*, *This Is Your Life* and *Only Fools and Horses* were just some of the programmes she and Queenie always watched together, and viewing them alone was no fun at all.

Pouring herself another sherry, Vivian sighed with discontent. Her and Queenie had been inseparable since they were kids. Their father had been a drunken bully who’d beaten their lovely mum up regularly, therefore she and Queenie had always sought solace in each other. They’d had some fall-outs over the years, like all sisters do. None more so than when it turned out Vinny had killed her beloved Lenny in that car crash. But they’d always managed to put things right between themselves, until now.

When the phone rang, Vivian guessed who the caller would be. She and Queenie had never needed friends. They’d always been content with each other.

‘How are you, love? Cheered up a bit today?’

‘I’m not too bad, thanks, Albie. I rung Little Vinny about an hour ago. Told him no way can I face the wedding. She’ll only go off on one again. Not worth the grief or spoiling that poor boy’s big day.’

‘Apparently, she’s told Michael if either you or I attend, she ain’t going. Ain’t it ridiculous, Vivvy? A load of fuss over nothing. The woman’s gone off her bleedin’ head. Bonkers!’

When Albie stayed on the phone chatting for the next half an hour, he cheered Vivian up no end. Unbeknown to anyone, she’d always had a soft spot for him, and he was the only friend she had right now.

CHAPTER TEN

As spring turned into summer, the Butlers remained in turmoil. Queenie still hadn't spoken to Albie or Vivian and continued to insist that she wouldn't attend her grandson's wedding if either turncoat attended.

Today, Little Vinny had decided to visit his nan with Oliver in an effort to make her see sense. He was sick of all the childishness. It was spoiling what should be a happy time for him.

'Ain't he grown! Gonna be a tall 'un like you, your father and Michael. Give your nan another cuddle, Ollie. She's far more important than that scruffy mutt,' Queenie chuckled.

When Oliver tried to pull Fred's tail, Little Vinny gently scolded his son, then ordered him to go and play nicely in the garden. 'I bought you these, Nan,' Little Vinny said, handing Queenie a box of Milk Tray and a bottle of Baileys.

'Aww, bless you. But I've told you before to stop spending your bleedin' money on me,' Queenie said, secretly pleased with her gifts. Her grandson had been a selfish little sod in his youth, had never even bought her a card when he'd lived with her. He'd changed so much since meeting Sammi-Lou and having a child himself though. Turned into a real charming, generous, young man.

'Nan, we need to talk about my wedding. All this silliness going on is upsetting me and Sammi-Lou. I will be devastated if you don't attend. It will truly spoil my whole day.'

'I'm not sitting in church with them two traitors, boy. Either you uninvite them or I won't come. I would hate it to all kick off and your big day be ruined. What would Sammi's parents think? Be shameful.'

'You've got it all wrong about Granddad and Auntie Viv, Nan. They only popped in the boozier for a quick drink because Viv was upset about rowing with you and Granddad wanted to cheer her up. That's all that happened, honest.'

'How do you know? You weren't bleedin' there, were ya? Nosy Hilda swears blind they were holding hands and I for one believe her.'

'Use your loaf. As if they would be sitting in the Grave Maurice, of all places, if they were having some kind of secret affair. You're not thinking straight, Nan. As for Nosy Hilda, she's an interfering old bat, and obviously as blind as one. I cannot understand how you believe her explanation over your own sister's. Vivvy has been there for you through thick and thin. It's ridiculous – Granddad and Auntie Viv? Don't make me laugh.'

Queenie fiercely wiped away the tears. She knew she'd overreacted at the time, especially when she'd marched into the Blind Beggar, aired her dirty washing in public, and chucked a drink all over Albie. Whatever had she been thinking? However, it was a bit late to backtrack now. She knew in her heart that Vivvy would never fancy Albie, so why had she behaved so irrationally? Queenie had no fond feelings towards Albie whatsoever, bar him providing her with three wonderful sons. Shame about the daughter, but with Albie's sperm she'd been fortunate to be blessed with what she had. The only thing she could put it down to was Vivian's blossoming friendship with the man they'd both once despised. That grated on Queenie immensely.

Little Vinny sat next to his grandmother and put an arm around her shoulders. 'I'll speak to Granddad and Auntie Viv. I'm sure they'll forgive you, Nan.'

Her grandson's use of the word 'forgive' made Queenie see red again. '*Forgive* me! For what? They were the two cosyng up in the pub whilst I was sat at home minding me own bleedin' business. I don't wanna upset you, lad, but this is how it is. If they go to the wedding, I bastard-well don't. The choice is yours.'

Another Butler having a meltdown was Vinny. Bella had sensibly stayed away from his neck of the woods, but every couple of weeks would invite his mum over for dinner at her gaff in Chelsea. Vinny would then have to endure his mother going on for hours on end about what a beautiful, classy

girl she was. How wonderful her brat of a son was, and gloating over how fucking wealthy she must be because her apartment was straight out of the TV programme *Dallas*.

When Vinny failed to find a phone number he was looking for, and yanked the drawer out of his desk, emptying the contents all over the office, Jay Boy asked, 'Is something wrong, boss?'

'Yes. Fucking everything! Listen, I need to make a call. It's private, so leave me to it.'

On his hands and knees, Vinny searched through all the crap he'd hoarded. He'd gone to his mother's yesterday, looking forward to one of her legendary roasts, then hadn't wanted to eat sod-all when she'd driven him mad over her visit the previous day to that bitch's gaff. Even Daniel and Lee had met Bella now and spoke highly of the slapper.

Finding the number of her modelling agency, Vinny poured himself a Scotch and downed it in one before dialling it. A camp-sounding bloke answered.

'Can you put me through to Bella, please? I've got an urgent message for her.'

'And may I ask who's calling?'

'Her boyfriend's brother, Vinny Butler.'

A moment later Bella came on the line, trying her hardest to sound composed. 'What can I do for you, Vinny?'

'To put it bluntly, I don't want you coming to my son's wedding. I don't care what you say to Michael, fake an illness if you have to, but I don't want you there.'

'To be honest there's nothing I would like better than to avoid your son's wedding, Vinny. But between me and you, Michael has started to get suspicious about my refusal to visit your mother's house. I intend to spend the rest of my life with your brother, and I cannot carry on avoiding such things. Not unless you want me to tell him the truth?'

'Of course I don't want you to tell him the fucking truth. He's my brother, it would break his heart.'

Unbeknown to Michael, Bella had no intention of attending the wedding. The thought of being in such close proximity to Vinny made her want to vomit, so she'd already hatched a plan to get herself out of it. 'Well, in that case, we need to come to a mature arrangement. I will avoid your son's wedding providing you agree to do the same for me on the odd occasion I visit your mother. There will obviously be other family events in the future, and we can liaise on which one of us will go. Do we have a deal?'

Vinny was seething. He wasn't used to being blackmailed, neither was he used to being spoken to like a child. Part of him wanted to call Bella's bluff, tell her he'd decided to tell Michael after all. That would wipe the patronizing tone straight out of her cocky gob. But much as he'd relish getting one over on her, it wasn't worth losing his brother for ever. His mother would probably disown him as well. Not over his fling with Bella, just the fact he'd kept schtum about it. She'd see that as treacherous and unforgiveable.

'I'm sorry to rush you, Vinny. But I'm very busy. I have a meeting with a client soon. Are you OK with what I suggested?'

'Ain't got a lot of choice, have I?' Vinny hissed. 'Just stay out my face, or else.'

Bella breathed a sigh of relief as Vinny cut her off. His idle threat at the end meant nothing. If he was going to tell Michael, he'd have done so long before now.

Vinny was absolutely furious. 'Cunt! Whore! Slag!' he screamed, throwing the phone at the wall. How dare the bitch say she'd let him know when she was visiting his mother, so he could stay away? That was the piss-takes of all piss-takes.

Katy Spencer took her linen jacket off to reveal the skin-tight white Lycra dress. 'Well? Can you see it?' she asked, turning to the side.

'Definitely. It's a big bump now,' Lucy Tompkins lied, knowing that's exactly what her friend wanted to hear. Katy was so tall and slim, even though she was now over four months pregnant, apart from a bit of a pot belly, there was no real sign.

‘Come on. Let’s start walking. I know we’re early, but I don’t want to miss them,’ Katy said, linking arms with Lucy.

Having managed to keep her pregnancy secret from her parents, Katy now felt the time was right for Michael to learn the truth. She’d been very disappointed that he hadn’t contacted her yet, but was sure once he knew about the baby they’d become an item once again. ‘Are you sure Daniel and Lee will notice, Luce? Say they don’t? I want you to hint or do something if they start to walk away without mentioning it.’

‘Like what? You said you didn’t want to blurt anything out,’ Lucy reminded her friend.

‘I can’t do this on my own any more. My baby needs his daddy and so do I. Michael needs to know, and then we can tell my parents together, like a proper couple. If the boys don’t cotton on, then point to my bloody bump and make a joke about me putting on weight and why. Obviously, don’t mention their father. Michael will want to tell them himself. But Daniel and Lee are bound to tell him my news as soon as they get home. I bet he rings me tonight. Or first thing tomorrow at the latest. I can’t wait to see him again,’ Katy said dreamily.

‘I don’t want to burst your bubble, but you did say Michael didn’t want any more kids yet. Say it’s too soon after Adam and he isn’t happy about it, Katy? He probably will be, but I don’t want you to be upset if he isn’t. I don’t mind being there when you tell your parents if need be.’

‘Michael will want to be there with me, Luce. He loves me, I know he does. Now he knows I’m pregnant, he won’t even worry about the age gap. He only let me go because he thought I could do better than him. He told me that to my face.’

‘Are you sure Daniel and Lee definitely walk this way?’

‘Yes. I often walked with them. I think they fancied me and wanted to show me off to their school mates,’ Katy chuckled. ‘If we hang about on that corner over the road there, that’s where they turn. They always go straight home to play on their pool table and gaming machines. They both thought I was so cool because I was good at Pac-Man. I know it’s bound to be a shock for them at first, but once they get their head around me being with their dad, I reckon they’ll love having me as their new mum.’

About to remind her friend that the reason Michael had finished with her was because Daniel and Lee had found out about her affair with their father and were unhappy about it, Lucy opened her mouth, then shut it again. Katy was in an extremely positive mood today, and all Lucy could do was be there for her if things didn’t quite go to plan. ‘The kids have started to come out now.’

Katy craned her neck and being tall had a great view. ‘I can see them, I think. Hang on. Yep! That’s definitely Daniel. Quick, let’s go round the corner, then walk towards it again,’ she said excitedly.

Daniel and Lee had just sparked up a cigarette when Lee spotted Katy. ‘Shit, put the fags out. It’s Katy. She might tell Dad,’ he hissed.

Confident that Katy was far too cool to grass them up, Daniel strutted across the road like James Dean, fag in mouth. ‘Long time no see. How you doing, darlin’?’

‘Fine, thank you. I miss yous two though.’

‘We miss you an’ all, don’t we, Dan?’ Lee grinned.

‘We’re sorry we lost you your job. We’d never have bricked Donald and Mary’s café if we knew Dad would sack you,’ Daniel apologized.

Feeling the first stirrings of unrest, Katy enquired what exactly Daniel meant.

‘Dad said it was our fault you couldn’t work for him no more. He said if we’d have behaved ourselves you wouldn’t have lost your job,’ Lee explained.

Trying to hide her anguish because it was totally obvious the boys did not know about her affair with their father, and Michael had blatantly lied to her, Katy asked, ‘How is your dad?’

‘Yeah, OK. Loved up again with Bella, so we don’t see him as much now. She’s OK though, ain’t she, Dan?’ Lee said.

‘Not as nice as you though,’ Daniel added, putting an arm around Katy’s back.

Lucy felt so sorry for her friend as she burst into uncontrollable tears. ‘Come on, mate. Let’s go,’ she urged.

‘Bastard! What a lying fucking bastard,’ Katy sobbed.

‘Have we said something wrong? Sorry, Katy,’ Lee spluttered.

Horrified when a group of schoolchildren gathered around, Lucy was the one to dig her friend out of a hole. ‘No, boys. You’ve said nothing wrong. But your dad told Katy she lost her job for another reason, that’s why she’s upset. Oh, and she’s also pregnant which makes her emotional as well.’

‘You got a boyfriend now, Katy?’ Lee gawped.

Instead of answering, an inconsolable Katy fled the scene.

Vinny Butler was in a random boozier where nobody knew him, knocking back Scotch after Scotch. Jay Boy, Carl, Pete and Paul were all at the club and no way did he want them to know he was on one. Neither would he ever mug himself off in front of his wealthy clients.

Cocaine had been a problem to Vinny back in the day, which was why he’d given it the elbow. Today, however, he’d felt a strong urge to get off his face and had purchased a couple of grams. Ahmed had introduced him to the crap in the first place, and Vinny was reminiscing how he’d not only paid the Turk back for that, but also every other treacherous thing he’d ever done. Ahmed had died the most horrendous death. Credit where it was due, the Turk had acted like a man even though he knew his fate. But that had all changed when Vinny had sliced his cock off. Ahmed’s screams were priceless, and every now and again Vinny would dream about that memorable night and wake up with a big smile on his face.

Clocking a bird staring his way, Vinny stared back. She was nowhere near as pretty facially as Bella, but there was something about her that was similar. Long dark hair, olive skin, tall, slim.

When the bird smiled, Vinny gestured for her to join him. ‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Nadia. Yours?’

Vinny had no idea why he replied in such a way, but he grinned and said, ‘Michael. My name is Michael, sweetheart.’

Daniel Butler was furious and ranting at Lee: ‘Of course it must be Dad’s baby, you div. Didn’t you see the look on Katy’s face when you told her he was with Bella? That’s when she called Dad a “fucking bastard”. Why would she say that if it weren’t Dad’s baby?’

‘Nah. Dad wouldn’t do that. He loved Mum and now he loves Bella. Katy is far too young for Dad to fancy.’

‘You are so thick at times, Lee. Dad didn’t love Mum, and she weren’t your mum anyway. I think we should both call her Nancy from now on ’cause I never loved her neither.’

Lee was about to stick up for himself when he spotted their father’s car pulling up outside. ‘You gonna ask him, Dan?’

‘Watch and learn. Leave this to me.’

Michael poked his head around the door of the lounge. ‘All right, boys? You eaten yet?’

‘No. Why? Gonna cook us a nice meal?’ Daniel replied, his voice full of sarcasm. Apart from the odd fry-up at breakfast time, his father never bothered cooking for him and Lee. He bunged them regular money to get takeaways instead.

Michael slouched in the armchair. ‘I ain’t got time to cook, need to get back to the club by eight. I thought we might have fish and chips. Wanna shoot out and get it?’

‘Nah. Don’t fancy it. Me and Lee bumped into Katy today and we told her how much we missed her cooking, didn’t we, Lee?’ Daniel replied, studying his father’s face.

Michael immediately felt edgy, but tried not to show or sound it. ‘How’s Katy doing? She got another job yet?’

‘Nah. She can’t work no more. She’s up the duff. About four or five months gone, we reckon, eh, Lee? Weird, ’cause she never had a boyfriend when she worked ’ere. Do you reckon she’s a slag, Dad?’

The colour immediately drained from Michael's face. 'How would I know? Listen, I need to ring your nan. She's still refusing to come to Little Vinny's wedding,' he said, jumping out of his chair. 'I won't be a tick.'

'But what about the fish and chips?' Daniel taunted, as his father bolted out the lounge.

Michael Butler's breathing felt laboured as the fresh air of the back garden hit him. He'd only ever shagged Katy once without a condom. Surely he couldn't be that unlucky? Or could he? Over his dead body was Katy giving birth to his baby.

Vinny Butler never invited birds back to his flat. Brothels or hotels were his usual choice for a bit of sordid entertainment. However after storming out of the club earlier, thanks to the effect that whore Bella seemed to have on him, he'd forgotten to take a lump of dosh out the safe.

Real men didn't carry credit cards, they walked around with a wad of paper money, and when Nadia had told him her gaff was a no-go, Vinny had suggested they go to his. Jay Boy had now officially moved out, was living with his bird Jilly. And no way could he go back to the club to pick up some wonga as he was totally off his face.

'So, what do you do for a living?' Nadia asked.

Vinny didn't indulge in small talk, especially with strangers. 'I'm a monk,' he replied, ramming his member back inside Nadia's mouth. He was reasonably well endowed, and had learned over the years that a mouthful of cock was the best way to shut a bird up.

Positioning himself so Nadia could not move, Vinny became extremely excited as her face reddened and she began spluttering and choking. This was what he got off on: power.

Katy Spencer was in a terrible state. She'd truly believed Michael had loved her, and still did to some extent. 'Once he knows about the baby, Luce, I know he will tell that Bella to jog on. How can he not when I'm carrying his child?' Katy wept.

Lucy Tompkins was no expert on men, especially men like Michael Butler, but she thought it was about time she was honest with her best friend. 'You have to face the fact that he might have been using you, Katy. I know he probably wasn't, but he did tell you he'd been in love with Bella before she'd gone to Italy.'

Mascara running and resembling a panda, Katy sat bolt upright on her pal's bed. 'Well in that case, let's go to his club and confront him.'

'No, Katy. Let's see if Michael contacts you first. Ring your mum and dad again to see if you've had any phone calls. Michael might not have spoken to Daniel or Lee yet. Play it cool.'

'But what if he doesn't contact me tomorrow?'

Lucy cuddled her friend. 'Then we'll both go to his club together and give him what for.'

Daniel Butler was furious. So much so, he'd already raided the fridge and necked two cans of his father's lager. 'He's a fucking pervert, Lee. Katy ain't that much older than us. I told you Dad fancied her, didn't I?'

'We don't know for definite that it's Dad's baby. Perhaps we should just ask him? Katy never stayed here, did she?'

Daniel looked at his half-brother in despair. He was so clued up for his age, so why wasn't Lee? 'As if Dad would shag her here while we were about! I'm telling you now, we've got a half-brother or -sister on the way. Didn't you clock how guilty he looked earlier? Then he ran out the room. I bet Dad was boning her at the club. Gonna be well funny when Bella finds out, eh?'

Lee was alarmed. 'You're not gonna tell Bella, are you?'

Daniel Butler smirked. 'Yeah, probably. At the wedding.'

Vinny Butler only ever enjoyed shagging birds up the rear. Not only was the hole tighter, it saved him from having to look at their stupid faces.

Feeling himself nearing that crucial moment, Vinny put his hands around Nadia's neck. 'You're a whore, Bella. Deserve all that's coming your way, you do,' he spat, tightening his grasp.

Nadia's arms and legs flapping reminded Vinny of a bird desperately trying to fly with an injured wing, and that only heightened the intensity of his orgasm.

'Jesus wept! I needed that. You can get dressed now,' Vinny ordered, rolling onto his back.

When Nadia did not reply, Vinny shook her. 'Wake up. Don't mess about.'

Panic setting in when there was still no reply, Vinny rolled Nadia onto her front. She felt like a dead weight, looked lifeless. He manically pumped at her chest. 'Wake up, girl. Don't do this to me. Fucking open your eyes, will ya?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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