



Love hurts  
but can it **kill** . . .

# Tainted Love

## Kimberley CHAMBERS

THE NO.1 *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

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HarperCollins*Publishers*

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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

# Table of Contents

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[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Part One](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Part Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Have You Read Them All?](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[By the Same Author](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

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## 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 for her beloved boys. Vinny had been about nine, Roy seven and Michael a mere toddler. So smart they'd all 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 I 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 a 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 you and 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.’

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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 ...’

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## 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 the 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 on 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 chain 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 mickey. 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 you 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 those 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 on 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 'er 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 Grave 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 the 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 urinal. ‘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, well 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.

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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 seen 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 boy. 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 the 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 he

words would come back to haunt her, big time.

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## 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 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 of 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. Has 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 we

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 and 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 the 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.’

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The owner asked his age, then showed him half a dozen. ‘That one’s your best bet, but it’s a bit 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 ...

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## 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 practise 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 the 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 a week, 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 her 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. Not 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 that 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 Liverpudlian 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 were 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 Spence, Daniel and Lee Butler were currently discussing what they would like to do to certain parts of his 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 that 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 severe



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