

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Betrayal

Kimberley Chambers

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## About the Book

Maureen Hutton's life has never been easy. Married to an alcoholic and stuck on a council estate in East London, she scrimps and saves to bring up her three children alone.

Murder, the underworld, drug addiction - over four decades, Maureen sticks by her brood through thick and thin. But then the unforgivable happens. Maureen is told a terrible secret which threatens to rip her family apart. She can't say anything. She is too frightened of causing a bloodbath.

The only thing Maureen can do is get rid of the betrayer, before it is too late.

## About the Author

Kimberley Chambers lives in Romford and has been, at various times, a disc jockey and a street trader. She is the author of *Billie Jo*, *Born Evil*, and *The Feud* and is currently working on her fifth book.

Also by Kimberley Chambers

Billie Jo  
Born Evil  
The Feud

KIMBERLEY  
**CHAMBERS**  
THE  
**BETRAYER**



preface  
*publishing*

In memory of  
Mathew Hoxby  
1973-2008



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Last but not least, I would like to thank you, the reader. Without your support I would be working back on the markets or driving a cab . . .!

God bless each and every one of you.

Goodnight you moonlight ladies,  
Rock-a-bye sweet baby James.  
Deep greens and blues are the colours I choose.  
Won't you let me go down in my dreams  
And rock-a-bye Sweet Baby James.

James Taylor  
1970

# PROLOGUE

*July 2006*

'I'm very sorry, Mrs Hutton, but we are talking weeks here, rather than months.'

Walking away from the hospital, I feel calmness within. My cancer has returned and being told I'm riddled with it was exactly what I'd expected. Unless you've had the dreaded disease, you wouldn't know where I was coming from. Tiredness, lack of appetite, an inability to do the simple things that you once found so easy. The signs are plentiful. To put it bluntly, you just know when you're dying.

As I sit on the bus, I gaze out of the window. Deep in thought, I watch the world go by. As strange as it may seem, I notice silly things. Mothers doing school runs in their luxury four-wheel drives, children as young as ten chatting away happily on mobile phones. Smiley, happy people, who wouldn't know hardship if it smacked them in the face.

Not wanting to become bitter, I turn away from the window and think about my own life. I take my pad and pen out of my bag and begin to make notes. Unlike most sufferers of cancer, I'm not that bothered about dying. Part of me would even go as far as saying that in some ways leaving this life will be a relief.

Happy people don't want to die. They are the lucky ones who are blessed with good times. I was happy once, but not now. For people like me, death spells an end to all of the suffering. I don't mean to sound like a manic depressive,

but I've had years full of stress and turmoil and I can't take any more. I've had enough with a capital E.

I had a terrible upbringing. I'm an only child, and my father left home when I was three years old. I don't remember him and have never set eyes on him since. My mother was a dear soul, but died when I was ten, a victim of the same bastard disease that has now got hold of me.

My aunt kindly offered me a home and then gave me a dog's life. Living with a violent alcoholic, I was regularly beaten senseless. She treated me as her slave and I had to beg for my dinner, like a dog on all fours. At sixteen, desperate to escape her, I married the first bloke I laid eyes on. Tommy Hutton was his name. He was twenty-one, and in my eyes cool, brash and handsome. I thought he was my saviour; how bloody wrong was I?

Approaching my stop, I gingerly get off the bus and start the short walk home. I unlock my front door and put the kettle on. I'm tired, but determined not to sleep. There are questions I need answering, things I need to plan, stuff I need to tell. So many secrets and so many lies. To rest in peace, I need to tell and know the truth. Picking up my pen and paper, I talk out loud as I try to remember the past.

I don't know how to start. Will I read this to anyone? Or even show them? I choose my first line with care.

My name is Maureen Hutton and this is my story . . .

# ONE

**1975**

'FUCKIN' HELL, TOMMO, he ain't moving.'

White as a sheet, Tommy Hutton bent down to try and wake his victim. 'Wake up Smiffy, please wake up,' he said, as he frantically prodded and shook him.

Tibbsy, Benno and Dave Taylor stood rooted to the spot. Along with Tommy they were members of a notorious local gang known as the Stepney Crew.

Tonight they had organised a big off with a rival firm from Bethnal Green. Top four versus top four. Both gangs were determined to be crowned Kings of the East End; both thought they were the business. Tommy Hutton, AKA Tommo, had formed the gang: therefore he was their undisputed leader. Terry Smith, AKA Smiffy, had started the other firm and he was their top boy.

Tonight, however, things had gone very wrong. Determined not to be outdone by Smiffy, who had recently threatened him with an air gun, Tommy had decided to steal his old man's fishing knife. He'd been keen to frighten Smiffy, cut him, scar him, show him who was boss. He certainly hadn't meant to stick the knife straight through him.

Taking charge of matters, Tibbsy picked up the weapon. 'We'd better get out of 'ere lads. The cunt's dead, I'm telling yer. You take the knife, Tommo, get rid of it.'

Tommy shook from head to toe. He couldn't move, his legs weren't doing as they were told. 'What am I gonna do? I didn't mean to kill him,' he sobbed.

Tibbsy grabbed his arm. 'We've gotta go, Tommo, before anybody sees us. Don't fuck about or we'll all be going down.'

Tommy tucked his flared trousers into his socks and urged the others to do the same, fashion was a no-go at times like these. Ashen faced and panic stricken, the four lads ran for their lives.

Less than a mile away, Maureen was totally unaware of her son's dilemma.

'See yer on Saturday then, if I don't see yer before, Sarn. It starts at seven, so don't be bloody late.'

Maureen Hutton smiled as she shut the front door. It was her thirty-second birthday on Saturday and she was having a party to celebrate.

House parties were a regular occurrence on the Ocean Estate in Stepney. All skint as arseholes, she and her neighbours got together every Saturday night for some cheap booze and a knees-up. Maureen had numerous good mates who lived near by. Some were single mums who had it hard like herself, but her best friends Sandra and Brenda, they both had husbands. Neither she nor her friends dwelled on their poverty. Like most cockneys, they made the best out of what little they had. Every now and then they'd take it in turns to watch one another's kids so they could have a night at the bingo. Apart from their Saturday night parties, bingo was their only other source of entertainment.

Maureen put the kettle on and made herself a brew. Her life had always been hard, but lately she'd been content. Her husband Tommy had left her years ago. A gambler and a piss-head, she was far better off without him. Sometimes he'd turn up like a bad penny, but he never hung about for long. A quick pop in to say hello to the kids or the occasional visit to his mother was about all he was good for. Alcohol was far more important to him than his family.

His mother, Ethel, was a legend in her own manor. At fifty-six she was a coarse, boisterous woman and as famous in the East End as Ronnie and Reggie. She swore like a navy, drank like a fish, regularly went out on the thieve, and could tell a story to match the best of them. Hard as nails, she was. In the war she would wash down the dead bodies and help patch up the casualties. When the war ended, she set herself up in business with her friend, Gladys, and together they would perform illegal abortions. A tin bucket, a syringe and a bar of washing soap was the method they used. They were no experts, but were always careful to keep the end of the syringe in the bucket. One slip of the hand and the air bubbles could be fatal. Ethel had come up with the idea herself. She'd used the same method on the kids to wash out their worms. Many a time she'd shove a syringe of lukewarm water up their harrises and smile as their screams echoed from Stepney to Soho.

Maureen glanced at the clock. Her son, Tommy, was well late tonight and she'd skin the little bastard when he got home. Thankfully, her other two were safely tucked up in bed. Tommy was her eldest child - she was seventeen when she had him and he'd been a little bastard from the moment he'd let out his first cry. He was fourteen now, a cocky, streetwise little bleeder who was forever getting himself into trouble. Tall, dark and cheeky, he was popular with the girls, but even they found him a handful. He rarely went to school, was always fighting and she knew full well that he went out thieving with his pals and his gran.

Susan, her twelve-year-old daughter, was another worry. Sullen and obnoxious, she had a plain face, a plump body and a spiteful streak in her. She was unpopular at school, with very few friends, and even the kids on the street steered well clear of her.

Thankfully, her youngest son, James, was no trouble at all. Sweet, kind and funny, he was everything that Maureen had ever wanted in a child. She hadn't known what to call

him when she was carrying him. She had plenty of girls' names, but no boys'. Her friend, Brenda, had chosen his name. A massive fan of the singer James Taylor, Bren had played his album till the grooves wore white. Maureen herself had fallen in love with the track 'Sweet Baby James' and, at Brenda's insistence, agreed that if her unborn was a boy, she'd name him James.

The title of the song suited her son perfectly and Maureen was over the moon when her mother-in-law thieved her a record player along with the album. For hours she'd play that record to James when he was a baby. She'd sing the words as she rocked him to sleep, her special boy with his own special song. Trouble was, as the years went by, he became known as Jimmy Boy. Tommy had started the trend by insisting that James made him sound like a poof. Maureen had been pissed off at first by his change of identity, but as time went by she'd accepted it. A name's just a name and he'd always be James to her.

All her neighbours had been shocked by her last pregnancy - she had been split up from her Tommy for years when she'd fallen. A drunken night of passion for old time's sake had been her excuse. Little did they know what had really happened!

Maureen's reminiscing was ended by the sound of the front door opening and the arrival of her eldest son. 'Tommy, I'm gonna marmalise you, get your arse in 'ere, yer little bastard,' she shouted at the top of her voice.

Ignoring her, Tommy Hutton ran up the stairs as fast as his legs would take him. His clothes were covered in blood and he had to get changed before his mother spotted him.

Just about to chase the cowson up the stairs and drag him back down by his hair, Maureen had a change of heart. He shared his bedroom with James and if she ran upstairs like a raging bull, she'd be bound to wake him up. Maureen lit the gas and put the kettle on to boil. She needed to calm down and a cup of Rosy was usually the answer. Tomorrow



she'd have the little bastard's guts for garters. Yawning, she made her brew and took it into the living room. Just lately she'd taken to sleeping downstairs on the old sofa. The house only had two bedrooms. The boys shared one and her and Susan the other. Ethel lived slap-bang opposite in a nice little one-bedroom flat.

Over the last few months, her daughter had become a nightmare to share a bed with. She'd nick the blanket then wriggle like an eel all night, and Maureen had a feeling that the little cow was doing it on purpose. Worn out by her lack of shut-eye, she had no alternative other than to move out of her own bedroom.

Tommy lay in bed wide awake. Now he'd pulled himself together, he felt a right prick for crying in front of his pals. He was meant to be the leader of the gang, not some fucking mug. After they'd legged it, him and the lads had headed to the park to sort out an alibi, and a plan, and as luck would have it, they'd bumped into Lenny Simpson. Seeing the blood on Tommy's clothes, and the state of the four of them, Lenny guessed that some major shit had hit the fan and had fired awkward questions at them. Stuck for answers, they'd had no choice other than to spill their guts to him. He was sound, Lenny, and if he couldn't help them, no one could.

'I'll be your alibi. I'll say you were round at mine all night. We had a few beers and were playing David Bowie records. I've got all his stuff, every album, so if anyone asks, we were boozing while listening to Bowie, right? If you stick to the same story as me, you'll be all right, boys.'

Tommy hugged Lenny and repeatedly thanked him. Lenny had his own reasons to want to help out. Smiffy, the piece of shit in question, had terrorised his younger brother for the past three years. Lenny had been planning on disposing of the scumbag himself, but didn't quite have the

bottle to go through with it. Tommo had done him and his family a massive favour.

The other thing they'd discussed were the other lads in Smiffy's gang. They'd all scarpered in separate directions when it had got a bit naughty. Tommy had chased Smiffy for at least five minutes before he'd caught him and, apart from his own crew, there'd been no one else about.

'There's no way the Bethnal Green boys'll grass,' Tibbsy said confidently.

'All they'll do, if anything, is come after us for revenge. They definitely won't involve the pigs,' Benno insisted.

Tommy looked at Dave Taylor. 'What do you think?'

Taylor shrugged. 'Dunno. Our top four boys have done their top four, case closed. You can never say never, but I'll doubt they'll grass.'

Tibbsy called an end to the meeting. 'Look we can't stay out 'ere all night, it's too suspicious. Let's all go our separate ways and when we get home, we must act normal.'

Tommy stood up. 'I can hardly act normal, can I? I'm covered in Smiffy's blood. What am I meant to say to me mum?'

Tibbsy put an arm around his pal. 'Just leg it up the stairs before your mother sees yer. You need to wash the knife so none of our fingerprints are on it. Bag up all your stuff, wait till your mother's asleep, creep out and dump it.'

As he lay awake in bed, Tommy thought over his pal's advice. He'd bagged the gear up, washed the knife, but was far too scared to leave the house. Say someone saw him? Say his mother caught him or the pigs were lurking near by?

Seeing his brother stir gave Tommy his solution. He'd lifted James out of the window a couple of months back to run a couple of errands for him. The boy had shit himself and he didn't really want to get him involved again, but

what choice did he have? He couldn't go himself, it was far too dodgy.

Tommy was an expert at climbing out of his bedroom window. There was an old coal bunker below and as long as you positioned yourself right, the drop was a piece of cake. What he'd have to do was climb down first with the gear, then climb back up and lift James down. Umzing and aahing with his conscience, he made his choice.

'Jimmy boy, wake up.'

James sat up and rubbed his little eyes. 'Whatta matter Tommy?'

Tommy put his finger to his lips. 'Get dressed, Jimmy, I need yer to do summin' for me.'

James obediently did as he was told. He loved his big brother very much. Tommy was his hero and he'd do anything he could to make him happy.

## TWO

JAMES WAS PETRIFIED as he stood in the back garden and lifted up the bag. Gladys, his gran's friend, lived in nearby Whitehorse Lane and his brother had given him strict instructions to creep around her back alley and hide it in the bushes at the rear of her garden. He hated going out alone in the dark - he was frightened of the bogeyman that his mum had always told him about. Even at the tender age of five, he knew not to ask Tommy too many questions. He wasn't silly, he knew the bag must have something very important inside, but he knew better than to be nosy. Taking a peek was totally out of the question. As he reached his destination, he began to cry. He wanted his mum and his nice warm bed. Realising that the bag was far too heavy to shove into the big bushes, he hid it at the bottom of them and quickly ran away.

Tommy must have smoked ten fags as he nervously waited for his little brother to return. Smiffy wouldn't be the only cunt dead if James was caught outside, his mother would make sure that Tommy was buried in the grave next to him.

Hearing a noise from behind, Tommy felt relief flood through his veins as he spotted James. 'You OK, Jimmyboy?' he whispered. 'Did you do exactly what I told yer to?'

James nodded. 'I did what yer said, Tommy.'

Tommy smiled as he helped the frozen child onto the coal bunker. Trying to get him back in the window was a damn sight harder than trying to get him out. After a bit of a struggle, he shut the bedroom window and hugged James

tightly. Kneeling down, he took a couple of five-pence coins out from under the mattress and handed them to him.

'You, Jimmy boy, are the best bruvver in the world. Take this money and buy yourself loads of sweeties. But remember, this is our little secret and you must never tell anyone about tonight, not ever.'

James nodded. He perfectly understood what his brother was saying. Living in Stepney, you learned the dos and don'ts from a very early age. James hid the two shiny coins in his sock drawer, crawled into bed and fell straight to sleep. His nightmare began almost immediately. The bogeyman had kidnapped him and had hidden him in the alleyway behind Gladys's house.

Still hyped up, Tommy lay awake for hours. He wondered if Smiffy had been found yet, or maybe he wasn't even dead and had woken up and gone home. The incident had happened around the back of the old garages, just off the Mile End Road. It was a pretty remote area of a night, and chances were, if he was brown bread, he wouldn't be found till morning.

Tommy sighed. He'd have to move the bag that James had hidden at some point, although it should be OK for now. It was well away from the scene of the crime, and there was no reason on earth why the pigs should search old Gladys's street. Even if Smiffy was dead, with no suspects, the case would die down within weeks and then he and the lads could retrieve the bag of evidence and burn the bastard to cinders. Satisfied he'd be in the clear, especially with Lenny's alibi, Tommy finally got some much-needed shut-eye.

Maureen was up at six the next morning. By eight o'clock she'd done all the washing and ironing and everything was put away neatly in the airing cupboard. Just about to start vaccing, she heard the door open.

'You got that fuckin' kettle on yet, birthday girl?'

Maureen smiled as Ethel let herself in and sat down. Her mother-in-law had her own key and came and went as she pleased. Rooting through her shopping bag, Ethel pulled out two tins of Spam, a tin of corned beef, a box of chocolates and a leg of lamb.

Maureen smiled. Ethel's little gifts came in more than handy. In fact, without her help, she sometimes wondered how she'd manage to feed the kids.

Ethel stood up. 'I'm off down the waste now to meet up with Glad. Do yer need anything off the market?'

'You can get us some pickles, Mum,' Maureen said. She always called Ethel 'Mum'. It was the done thing in the East End to refer to the in-laws as you would your own parents.

Tommy opened his eyes and leaped out of bed. Yesterday seemed like a bad dream and he wished that it was. He usually loved Saturdays - he and the rest of the gang normally hung about down Roman Road market. The Roman was a buzzy old place on a Saturday and there were always a few bob to be earned. On a good day, they would treat themselves to pie and mash from Kelly's. On a bad one, they'd share a bag of chips or two. Today he couldn't face going to the market; neither did he feel hungry. Nervously, he slung on his clothes and ran down the stairs.

'Oi, yer liberty-takin' little fucker,' Maureen shouted. Chasing him up the path, she grabbed his arm. 'Where were you last night? Yer didn't get home till half past one. How many times have I told yer, midnight at the latest.'

Tommy looked at her sheepishly. 'Sorry, Mum. I was round at Lenny Simpson's. We were listening to David Bowie records and having a few beers.'

Maureen looked at him in amazement. She could always tell when he was lying. 'Since when have you been into David fucking Bowie? Listen, I don't care if David turns up

round Lenny Simpson's to sing to yer in person, you get your arse back 'ere by midnight in future, do you hear me?'

Tommy nodded. 'I'm sorry, Mum.'

Maureen tutted as she watched him sprint down the road. He'd be the death of her, that boy. He drank like a fish and the way he was going he'd have no liver left by the time he was twenty-one. The selfish little bastard hadn't even wished her happy birthday.

James woke up, got dressed and fished in his drawer for his new-found wealth. It was his mum's birthday today and he wanted to creep out and buy her the best present ever.

Maureen was busy preparing for her party that evening. She had dozens of eggs, plenty of cheese and, with Ethel's leg of lamb, Spam and corned beef, she could really push the boat out for once.

James quietly let himself back in. 'Happy birthday, Mummy.'

Maureen had tears in her eyes as her youngest handed her a card, a small cake and a beautiful potted plant. 'Oh James, you little darling, you've made mummy cry now. Where did you get these from? Where did yer get the money, love?'

James had already prepared himself for this particular question. 'I saved all my pennies that Nanny gave me for ages and ages,' he said confidently.

Maureen picked him up and smothered him in kisses. 'You are a very special boy, James, and your mummy loves you very much.'

James wriggled out of her arms. 'I'm going to play on my space hopper now.'

Susan stood at the kitchen door with a sullen expression firmly intact. 'I'm starvin'. Can I 'ave some breakfast?'

James turned to his sister. 'It's Mummy's birthday today.'

Susan scowled at him. 'So what?'

James squeezed past his nasty sister and ran into the garden. He'd had just enough money left to buy himself a gobstopper and he wanted to suck it in peace and savour every moment.

Tommy sprinted to his pal's house in record time. Tibbsy shot straight out the door and the two of them ran round to Benno's. Dave Taylor was already there, but no one said a word about the previous evening until they had reached the serenity of the park. Searching through the bushes, Tibbsy pulled out a bottle of sherry. His nan, bless her soul, was senile and he'd chored it from her house and stashed it a couple of days ago.

'Don't think bad of me,' he said, as he unscrewed the lid. 'Me nan don't even drink, someone must 'ave bought it for her.'

All four lads took it in turns to swig from the bottle. None of them had slept well, and their nerves were shot to pieces.

Tibbsy stood up. 'Right, what we gonna do? Has anyone heard anything yet?'

The other three shook their heads. 'Me muvver had the telly on - there was nothing on the local news,' Benno said.

Tommo took another large gulp from the sherry bottle. 'What we should do is send someone down that way. Maybe Smiffy was just unconscious. He might not be dead.'

Dave Taylor shrugged his shoulders. 'We've never seen a dead person before, so none of us would know what one looked like.'

Tibbsy shook his head. 'I'm telling yer now, the cunt was dead. Someone must 'ave found him by now, and I bet yer it's swarming with police down there.'

'Who can we send down there to 'ave a nose?' Tommy asked. 'We don't wanna involve any of the other lads that weren't with us last night. It's a good job we kept the meet a secret, and never told any of 'em.'



Tibbsy agreed. Sometimes their gang consisted of about twelve but last night's pre-arranged encounter was top boys only.

'If we're not gonna tell anyone else, the only one we can ask to go down there is Lenny Simpson.'

Tibbsy slapped Benno on the back. 'Good thinking, Batman. We'll finish this booze, then we'll go and find him.'

Lenny Simpson was at home looking after his younger brother when the lads knocked. 'I'll go and check it out for yer, lads. I'm gonna have to take Matty with me though, there's no one else to look after him.'

Lenny Simpson was one of the put-upon people of this world. His mother sold her body to fund her drug habit, and his two sisters were selfish and a complete waste of space. Lenny's younger brother, Matthew, was fifteen and mentally retarded. It had been him that Smiffy had taunted and terrorised for years. Lenny looked after Matty almost twenty-four seven, and if it wasn't for him, the poor little sod would have been stuck in care years ago.

'Right, what's the plan then?' Tibbsy asked, as Lenny appeared with his little bro.

Lenny grabbed Matty's hand. He had a terrible habit of running into the road. 'I'll go down there with Matty. You and the lads go to the park and I'll meet yer back at the shelter.'

Tommo searched through his pockets and ordered his gang to do the same. Counting up the money, he handed it to Lenny. 'Get us some cider, Old Man Tatler won't serve us. Whatever's left over, you can spend on sweets for Matty.'

Lenny went into the shop, handed the lads their booze and said goodbye. He couldn't wait to find out what had happened to his brother's tormentor. With a bit of luck Smiffy was brown bread and would rot in hell.

Tommy and the boys sat anxiously in the shelter, drinking and chain-smoking. The hour they waited for Lenny to come back seemed more like an eternity, and as they spotted him and Matty in the distance, they sprinted towards them. Tibbsy was the fastest runner and reached them first.

'Well?' he asked expectantly.

Lenny Simpson loved a bit of excitement. If it hadn't been for having to take care of Matty, he would have been a gang member himself. Plonking himself on the grass, he relayed the full story.

'Smiffy was found at 'alf six this morning, apparently. Old Mother Kelly said he was as stiff as a board. It's swarming with Old Bill down there and they've even shut off part of the Mile End Road. I saw Graham Roberts, he said the Old Bill had been round his asking lots of questions. He reckons they're doing loads of house-to-house enquiries. There's tons of people hanging about, but the police 'ave put tape round. Everyone down there reckons that Smiffy had so many enemies, they'll never find the killer.'

'Wee wee, Lenny. Wee wee.'

Lenny glanced at his brother. He'd already got his cock out and was pissing on the grass.

'Don't piss 'ere Matty. Be a good boy and go over there by that tree.'

Cock in hand, Matty shuffled away.

Overcome by shock that he was actually a murderer, Tommy sank to his knees.

'Move over Tommo, you're kneeling in piss,' Tibbsy said, laughing.

Tommy ignored his pal and put his head in his hands. Fuck the piss, that was the least of his problems. He was a killer, he'd wiped out someone's life and he didn't have a clue what to do about it.

Lenny put an arm around him. 'You'll be OK, Tommo, just stick to the story. Mine, records, beer, Bowie. Me mum and sisters weren't about and I've clued Matty up on what to say.'

Tommy looked at Matty who was waddling towards him with his cock in his hand. That imbecile's gonna be a lot of fucking use, he thought inwardly.

Dave Taylor downed the last of the cider and chucked the empty bottle. 'I'm starving, who's up for some chips?'

Tommy shot him a look of hatred. 'I don't believe you, Taylor. I'm looking at life and all you can think about is your gut.'

Taylor shrugged. 'It was just a suggestion.'

Tommy stood up. These pricks were doing his head in and he needed to be alone. He forced himself to be polite. 'I'm off now, lads. It's me mum's birthday and she's having a party, she needs me to give her a hand with some stuff.'

The crew nodded.

'See yer, Tommo. If we hear anything we'll let yer know,' Tibbsy said.

Tommy dug his hands deep into his pockets and trudged away. He couldn't believe what had happened. He wasn't that bothered about Smiffy - he hated the cunt, always had. It was himself he was worried about. Say the police found some evidence? Or the Bethnal Green wankers grassed him up?

Tommy's instincts told him he was in shit street. Filled with worry, he took a slow walk home.

## THREE

'SUSAN, WHAT YER doing? Three times I've asked yer to help me with these sandwiches. Now move your fucking arse.'

Susan lolloped into the kitchen, picked up the knife and lunged at the bread as though she'd had an argument with it. She hated doing favours for anyone and on the odd occasion she was forced to, she made her feelings known.

Seeing the mess that her daughter was making, Maureen grabbed the knife and ordered her to go and get changed. 'And make sure you 'ave a wash, yer dirty little cow.'

Tommy sat on the back step and lit up a fag. It was only recently that his mum had allowed him to smoke indoors. She wasn't happy about it, but had told him he was old enough to make his own choices. 'If you're gonna do it behind me back, you may as well do it in front of me,' she said.

Tommy's ears pricked up as he heard his gran arrive. Her voice was like a foghorn and you couldn't miss it. 'There's been another bloody murder down the road, Maur,' she exclaimed. 'You know Mary Smith, dontcha? Her lad, Terry, was found this morning. Apparently, the poor little bastard had been laying there, brown bread for hours.'

Maureen was preparing the pickles and nearly dropped the Tupperware dish in shock. She knew Mary Smith very well. She was a regular at the bingo hall and they'd often sit together and have a chinwag.

'Gordon Bennett! I can't believe it, Mum. It's terrible, she's such a nice woman, is Mary. She idolised her Terry,

was forever talking about him. What must the poor woman be going through?’

Ethel shook her head. ‘Poor fucker. I dunno what this bleedin’ world’s coming to. There was none of this in my day – yer could leave your fuckin’ door open then, yer know. If yer left it open now, some bastard would rob yer and murder yer in your bed.’

Maureen agreed with her. ‘I feel so sorry for Mary. I’ll have to pop round to her house in the next couple of days and offer my condolences.’

Unable to listen to any more, Tommy felt physically sick as he jumped next door’s fence and clambered into their back alleyway. Crouching down by the bushes, he held his head in his hands. He never had a clue that his mum and Smiffy’s mum knew one another. Learning they were friends was like a smack in the face to him. What the fuck was he meant to do now? If he was rumbled, his mother would skin him alive. Wishing more than anything he could turn back the clock, he sat deep in thought. He had to force himself to go back home, get changed, and join in with the birthday party. If he didn’t, it would look odd and he didn’t want anything to look suspicious.

DC Perryman and PC Rogers had been sent to investigate a black bag that had been found by a dog walker. The bag had been spotted amongst some bushes in an alleyway that backed onto the Ocean Estate. DC Perryman had been desperate for promotion for a very long time and couldn’t hide his delight at the contents.

‘Look at this, Rogers. Bingo!’ he said, as he looked at the blood-stained windfall.

The party was in full swing by the time Tommy arrived back home.

‘Where yer been, yer crafty little bastard?’ Maureen wanted to know.

'I'm sorry, Mum. I popped round me mate's and . . .'

Cutting him dead, Maureen shoved him towards the stairs. 'You look like a tramp and I will not have you showing me up on my birthday. There's hot water in the immersion, get upstairs and get washed and changed.'

Maureen's anger at her eldest diminished as James flung himself at her. 'Uncle Kenny's here, Mum. He's over there with Nanny.'

Feeling flustered, Maureen dashed into the kitchen to pour herself a drink. She was having one of her funny turns again.

Kenny was her husband Tommy's younger brother, Ethel's other son. He and his wife, Wendy, had done well for themselves. A scrap-metal dealer, Kenny had recently brought a posh house in Essex, much to Ethel's annoyance. 'What's a matter with bleedin' Stepney? Not good enough for him any more? That's her doing, Lady fuckin' Penelope,' she moaned. Wendy came from Upminster and her parents were quite well-to-do. Ethel had disliked her from day one.

'Look what Uncle Kenny brought me,' James said, as he ran into the kitchen and thrust a toy police car at her.

Maureen looked at his happy face. The poor little sod didn't get many toys; they couldn't afford them, as a rule. 'Go and put it in your bedroom and you can play with it tomorrow. It'll get broken if yer leave it laying around tonight.'

James did as he was told. On reaching the bedroom, he was surprised to see Tommy there. 'Why are you lying down?'

Tommy sat up. 'I'm fine, just tired, that's all.'

'Do you like my present? Uncle Kenny brought it for me. He's brought you summink, and Susan.'

Tommy smiled. Ruffling his brother's hair, he stood up. 'I'll race yer downstairs, Jimmy boy.'