

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Victim

Kimberley Chambers

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Life is looking bleak for Frankie Mitchell - not only has she lost custody of her two children to their sadistic, gypsy-bred father, Jed O'Hara, she is also pregnant and banged up in Holloway awaiting trial for attempted murder.

In Frankie's absence, her father, underworld boss Eddie Mitchell, is determined to get his own back. He wants revenge not only for his daughter's imprisonment, but also for the death of his beloved wife, Jessica. Determined to get his grandchildren back home where they belong, Eddie plans the O'Haras' demise slowly and precisely. But then he finds out a secret and learns the real reason why his daughter is in the slammer and all hell breaks loose.

Essex had never seen anything like the bloodbath that followed, but were either family actually capable of winning this long-running feud, or would they all become the victims of their own past mistakes?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberley Chambers lives in Romford and has been, at various times, a disc jockey and a street trader. She is now a full-time writer and is the author of *Billie Jo*, *Born Evil*, *The Betrayer*, *The Feud* and *The Traitor*.

Also by Kimberley Chambers

Billie Jo
Born Evil
The Betrayer
The Feud
The Traitor

THE VICTIM

Kimberley Chambers



preface
publishing

In memory of a wonderful man and publican

Lou Smith

(The Corner Pin, Tottenham High Road)

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I have purposely left my editor Rosie de Courcy until last, as this special lady deserves her very own special mention. Thanks for everything, sweetheart. I will never forget you and will always love you loads xxx

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

Orison Swett Marden

PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

1993

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

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

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

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

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

in the foot. Ed thought he'd seen the last of them but, unfortunately for him, he hadn't.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ed said goodbye to Gina, then hugged his aunt as she opened the front door. She'd been baking, as usual, and the smell of her house was always a comfort to him. Joanie had

brought him up as a kid after his mum had died of TB, and she was very special to Eddie.

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

Eddie took the stairs two at a time and entered what he called their office. The room hadn't been decorated since the seventies and Ed liked it that way, as it reminded him of the good old days when his old man was still alive. A large mahogany table sat in the centre of the room, with eight mahogany chairs around it. An old-fashioned bar stood in the right-hand corner and, apart from a massive picture of Harry Mitchell, which Eddie had blown up as a tribute and had placed on the main wall, the room had little else in it.

'What time do you call this?' Gary asked jokingly.

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

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

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

'Let's eat first and talk after,' Ed replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eddie's eyes clouded over. He immediately stood up, picked up his glass and threw it at the wall, purposely missing Gary's head by only inches. 'Do you think I really want my brothers dead? No, they might be a pair of bell ends, but they're still family. Remember, they're in Belmarsh at the moment, and I know every face in there who'll keep an eye on 'em for me. Use your loaves, lads, O'Hara is a fucking pikey and all he probably knows is two bob mugs in there. He ain't gonna have many pals in a cat-

A nick like Belmarsh, is he? If, by hook or by crook, O'Hara does somehow get to Paulie and Ronny, then that's life, but I'm confident he ain't got the brawn. But if he has and he wanted to do that, he could do it without my permission anyway. It's our safety I'm more concerned about now. I want Gina back home with me and yous boys alive. Raymondo has got a nipper on the way - he don't need the grief - and let's not forget about Joey. Who's to say that O'Hara wouldn't try to top him? He's an easy target, ain't he? The way I see it, lads, is by pretending to hand Ronny and Paulie to O'Hara on a plate, we won't have to look over our shoulders.'

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

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

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

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

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

Pausing momentarily, Eddie stood up and stared at his dead father's photograph. He then placed his hand against

his heart and turned to Gary and Ricky. 'I swear on your grandfather's grave, that one day I will get revenge for what the O'Haras have done to this family.'

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

CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

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

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

them that kept her awake all night with their hallucinations.

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

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

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

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

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

Eddie kissed his son on the forehead and then shook Dominic’s hand. Dom was Joey’s boyfriend and when Ed had originally found out about his son’s sexuality, he’d gone apeshit. Being a notorious East End gangster, Ed just couldn’t deal with the fact that his sperm had produced a

homosexual son, and it had taken a lot of pride for him to step down off his anti-gay soapbox.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joey had steel in his eyes as he faced his father. When he was a child, he'd been a proper crybaby and even now he'd sob at the drop of a hat, especially if it was a sad story or film where someone was nasty to an animal. But at the end of the day, he wasn't a boy any more, he was a man. He might be gay, enjoy a normal life and detest violence, but he was still his father's son.

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

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

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

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

Eddie scratched his head. It was a habit of his when he was struggling for the right words. 'Look, I know what you're saying, and yes, your uncles are both arseholes, especially Ronny, but they're still our flesh and blood, son. Even though I'm gonna tell O'Hara it's OK to fucking top 'em, I don't think he has the power to do it. Once they come out of Belmarsh he might, but they're looking at life and

until then, I think they're both safe. Whatever my or your opinion of 'em, I grew up with 'em, and you know how much I loved your grandad Harry. I can't, in reality, order a hit on me own, Joey, it ain't done in my circles.'

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

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

'Hi, my name's Frankie.'

As the girl stood up, Frankie was shocked by how short she was. She was no more than five feet tall, if that. With a mass of bushy afro hair and enormous breasts, she almost looked as though she was about to topple over. The girl smiled, and as she did, her face lit up. She had one of the

most beautiful smiles that Frankie had ever seen, and perfect white teeth. As she began to speak, her voice had a slight Jamaican lilt to it.

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

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

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

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

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

Eddie ended the call and sat back down at the kitchen table. He could sense the threat in Pat Murphy’s voice: O’Hara had said something to him, that part was obvious.

Furious with the decision he was now faced with, Ed slammed his glass down so hard that it shattered into pieces. The O'Haras were the bane of his life and he would never be truly happy until they were all dead.

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

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

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

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

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

'Oh my God, that's awful,' Frankie said, shocked.

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

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

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

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

Babs shook her head. ‘Dennis died over ten years ago and I vowed never to get involved with any other man, but I was desperate for a brother or sister for Matilda, so I had a fling until I got what I wanted. Jordan’s dad was a guy called Brandon. I barely knew him, and I never told him Jordan were his son. He seemed an OK sort of dude, but he lived with a girl. I doubt he would have been happy about it, as I’d told him I was on the pill. Me and the kids were

then given a council house in Streatham and that was the happiest I've ever been in my life. There was a park nearby and because I never had much money, I used to buy a cheap loaf of bread and take the kids there to feed the ducks. Then one day I got talking to this guy. I'd seen him there before and he seemed so nice. He was great with the kids, especially Jordan.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eddie Mitchell stared at the clock on the kitchen wall. He had promised himself he would make a decision by midnight and he had ten minutes left to do so. He poured himself another Scotch and stared at the now empty bottle. Jessica used to hate him drinking the stuff, said it changed him as a person and made him violent. Well, tonight he'd done at least three quarters of a litre, but he wasn't drunk and had only been drinking to help him make a decision.

Picking up his glass, Eddie walked into the lounge. A big photograph of his dad was on the opposite wall to Jessica's. It had been taken on his dad's sixtieth birthday at the restaurant where they'd all celebrated and Harry looked as large as life, with a big grin on his face and a fat cigar in his hand. Ed stared at the photo and smiled sadly. He still missed his dad dreadfully and he would never rest until he found out who had murdered him so brutally. One day Ed would find out, that thought kept him going, and when he did, he would torture those responsible before he actually killed them. He began to speak, his voice full of emotion.

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