

The Business

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Prologue

‘Just get her off my doorstep, will you?’

The young woman’s whole demeanour was one of controlled anger. Controlled, hard anger. The fact she was acting like this whole scenario was a bad joke spoke volumes in itself. Her deep-blue eyes were mocking her protagonist; laughing at her, and telling her she was well able for anything she might have to offer. It was the silent come-on, where actions spoke much louder than words.

The young policeman was nervous; he had never had to attend anything remotely like this before. He had heard about these kind of events, heard how women fighting could be far more intimidating and violent than two men, or even a gang of men come to that. But he had not believed they could be so vicious. So disturbing. Frightening.

The fact that the two protagonists the police were trying to keep apart looked like twins didn’t help, especially as apparently they were mother and daughter. But what really threw the policeman was the violence of the language. Not from the lady of the house, but from her so-called mother. From the elder of the two, a good-looker who was well fuckable in his books and who he knew, without any kind of official certificate, was not the full twenty pence. In fact, she was an obvious nut-bag. As her next words proved.

‘You fucking lairy little whore, get out here and fight me like a fucking woman. Do you honestly think I am going to swallow that from you, you mad bastard?’

The younger woman grinned, her absolute disgust for her mother written all over her face. Unfortunately this made her look more like her mother than ever. It gave her the same dark expression, the same sinister aura that told anyone who was foolish enough to mess with them that they were both more than capable of taking care of themselves.

The policewoman standing by, waiting to intervene should a fight actually ensue, was impressed with the girl’s controlled demeanour. It was obvious that the mother was a headcase, and it was even more obvious that her daughter knew exactly which buttons to press to get a reaction from her. The policewoman also sensed that the daughter was enjoying her mother’s discomfort. This was proved when the girl said with practised disdain, ‘Listen to yourself, Mum, and then you wonder why I won’t have anything to do with you. Why I moved as far away from you as possible. Why I am ashamed to admit you are me flesh and blood. All me life I cared for you, stuck up for you, and you weren’t worth it. As everyone always said, you ain’t worth a fucking wank.’

The tall woman went in for the attack once more, and PC White again held her back, only this time the job was far more difficult as the woman had the strength of ten men.

As he dragged her physically from the doorstep, a Range Rover pulled up sharply. The noise of it screeching to a halt was louder than the two women’s strident voices.

A large, heavy-set man with dark-blue eyes and a determined expression jumped out. He made his way over to them quickly, his powerful body emphasised by the tightness of his sweatshirt. The police realised immediately who he was, and their horror was rapidly replaced with terror. They were in the presence of a local legend, someone they had all heard

of, had seen in photographs but who, until now, they had never seen in the flesh. Kenneth Dooley was even more intimidating than they had realised; he was very imposing. And he was not known for having a kindly nature.

Grabbing the older woman roughly from the young policeman he said gruffly, 'Come on, Mum, let's be having you.'

She turned on him then, spitting vitriol. 'I might have known you would be on *her* side as usual, you're like a pair of fucking rednecks . . . duelling banjos you two. Always were.'

He ignored her, dragging her physically away from her daughter's front door. He was rough with her, and it was obvious that this was a regular occurrence.

'Just let it go, eh, she's come back and you will have to get over it,' he shouted to the woman left standing on the doorstep. He was dragging the irate woman towards his Range Rover, but she was determined that she wasn't going anywhere without a fight. He bundled her unceremoniously into the vehicle.

As he pulled away he was aware that the people in the surrounding houses were all watching the proceedings with interest. He had known this would happen eventually, he had just not expected it to happen so quickly.

Jordanna Dooley went back inside her small council house and closed the door on the police and the local on-lookers. She had been used to this kind of interest in her family since she was a child. Her mother had developed a habit of making everything in her life public. She was the equivalent to movie royalty where they had lived. Her whole life had been played out to an audience for someone else's benefit. She was the Britney Spears of her generation, and she could have taught that poor whore a few things.

Once inside the house Jordanna found she was shaking,

trembling with fear, a fear that was born from memories, not from her mother's actual presence. She had not seen her mother in quite a while and it always amazed her just how lovely she looked at first glance. How young she still seemed, even though the woman had lived at least two lifetimes and had made sure that her children lived them too.

Jordanna had never really known what it was to be a child; all her life she had been nothing more than an appendage, nothing more than her mother's object, her mother's chattel. Her hatred of her mother, like her private thoughts about her, were almost biblical in their outrageousness – she would quite happily send fifty plagues to her if she could. Not locusts or fucking frogs either, she would send that bitch every fatal disease known to man.

So broken had Jordanna been by her mother's disloyalty that she had eventually walked away from not only her, but her whole life. It was the only way she could get some kind of peace. When her mother had hunted her down, Jordanna had retreated into the Bible, into religion, in an effort to make her life mean something, to validate her existence. She had tried to keep her mother away with prayers. God knew, the courts would not help her.

Jordanna instinctively placed her hands across her stomach, feeling the small bump there that she hoped and prayed this time would grow into a full-term baby. Not another sticky mess that she would have to clean up and mourn so painfully like all the others.

That was her mother's fault as well, her inability to keep a child within the confines of a womb that had been sexually invaded much too early, and which now rejected anything that seemed to find comfort inside it. A womb that expelled her offspring before it could even be called a baby, a child, before it had anything even resembling a personality, a life.

It was as if with each of these rejections, Jordanna was being told by nature that anything she produced would not

be fit for the company of other human beings, for the real world. That what she was hoping to create was somehow not good enough, was second-best.

And now, seeing what her mother was like once more, she was on the verge of agreeing with that belief. It was getting harder and harder to justify her existence and she knew that was because of her mother's influence. She knew that her early life was still shaping her adult life, even now, no matter how hard she tried to stop it.

But all that still didn't change the fact she wanted a child of her own so badly, so desperately, that she would kill for that chance. She lived for that opportunity, and told herself that it was something she could achieve one day. Without that she would be finished, and she knew it. Her only real strength was her belief that one day she would carry a child to full term. Would finally hold a baby in her arms and love it unconditionally. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and took a few deep breaths to steady herself.

When she felt calm enough she walked into the small, spotless kitchen and sat down at her new IKEA dining table. She felt the fluttering inside her subside and lit herself a cigarette. The first puff made her feel sick and dizzy, the second draw brought her the comfort she needed.

She was not supposed to smoke, but she needed to now, needed a cigarette desperately. Her mother affected a lot of people like that, she seemed to destroy everyone she came into contact with, and that wasn't an exaggeration, it was a simple fact.

She heard the ringtone of her mobile then, Amy Winehouse singing 'Rehab', and the irony of it suddenly struck her.

She was laughing as she answered the call, but the laughter disappeared when she heard the voice of her grandmother asking belligerently, 'Is it true, has she tracked you down again?'

*

Kenny Dooley sighed heavily; his mother was now doing her quiet and hurt act. She had a lot of personas but this was the most irritating because it always worked with him. As much as she annoyed him, and she did annoy him, in fact she made him angrier than anyone else in the world, unlike his sister he could still feel a measure of sympathy towards her. It was this that brought on the anger in the first place because she didn't deserve his sympathy, she didn't deserve anyone's. Certainly not her daughter's, who she had bullied and used all her life.

He flipped open the small fridge between the car seats and said gruffly, 'Get yourself a beer, Mum, and stop fucking looking so sorry for yourself. You knew she wasn't going to hang out the fucking flags and kill a fatted calf so why are you acting as if this is a shock to you? If you had waited I would have had a word, tried to get you round there without all this drama.'

He pulled up at the traffic lights and then, looking her in the eye, he said sadly, 'But then drama is what you need, ain't it, Mother? You thrive on it.'

Imelda looked at her only son and said quietly, 'I can't help the way I am. What you see is what you get.'

She was already halfway through the can of lager, and the stench of her breath was filling the car's interior and making her son feel physically ill. She was, as always, stating what she saw as a fact, she thought that expressions like that made her honest, straight. She used them to justify her angry outbursts and her jealous asides. She was one of the most unhappy people he had ever come across, and that hurt him because, when the fancy took her, she could be a diamond. But, unlike most of the people she dealt with, *he* knew that she was hurting inside, had always been hurting inside. He knew that she didn't like herself and did not believe that anyone else could ever like her either. She changed friends often, dropping people on a whim at any slight, real or imagined.

She tried her hardest to be what she knew she should be, but inevitably she would lapse back into the person she believed she was really.

‘Trouble with Jorge is, she always thought she was better than everyone else, even as a child she looked down her nose at me . . .’

Kenny sighed heavily, he wasn’t going to dignify that shite with an answer. He was too shrewd to get into that conversation.

As he drove along the Whitechapel Road he spied someone he had been looking out for since the previous Christmas. Stopping the Range Rover he leapt out and began to punch the hapless victim of his rage. He battered him mercilessly, far more than was warranted because, deep inside, he really wanted to batter his mother, and this man, this ponce, was available. He was there.

Donny Barker had owed him money for a long time and, to make matters worse, he had disappeared off the face of the earth because of that debt. Now that Kenny could have coped with, understood even, but it was the fucker’s reemergence on his old stomping ground that had caused his ire. It was a piss-take – someone on the missing list was to be coped with, their blatant return without the payment of their debt was like a personal insult. And an insult of that magnitude had to be redressed at the earliest opportunity. All in all, the man couldn’t have surfaced at a worse time. Kenneth Dooley was a very hard man and, as such, he had a reputation to uphold.

Jordanna Dooley was whacked out. She was over the initial excitement that her mother had caused, and she was tired, seriously tired. As she lay on her bed, she wondered how people coped with the everyday. Most people she knew lived their lives without any kind of real hassle, real aggravation. Whereas her life had been fraught with all kinds of shit since day one.

This baby was her last chance at being normal, being like everyone else, and that was all she had ever really wanted. Normality, that was her only desire, her only dream. Just to be normal, no more and no less. But that was not something she felt was destined to be hers, and that was what terrified her. She was still so young, and yet she felt so fucking old.

Kenny fished a couple of wraps out of his jacket pocket and slipped them into his mother's hand. 'Here you are, go and have a ding-dong, girl.'

Imelda smiled at him then, suddenly aware that they had stopped outside her block of flats.

He opened the glovebox and threw her a wad of money. Then, poking a large finger into her face he said quietly, 'And keep away from her, right? I'll see what I can do in that department, but be warned, Mum, I don't hold out much hope.'

She shrugged then, her face much happier now as it relaxed into a real smile. Money and drugs had always had that effect on her. A couple of grams of coke, an armful of brown and a onner in her purse was her idea of heaven.

As she walked into her block her son watched her sadly; she was like a child, a vain, demanding, selfish child. That's why he felt so sorry for his mum, why he couldn't blank her out, why he accepted her outrageous behaviour and her outbursts. She had always kept one thing quiet, even when she was hurting so bad he could almost feel the pain inside her. She had still kept her trap shut, and he knew better than anyone how hard that must have been for her. Especially when she saw her daughter and was once more rejected without any kind of explanation whatever. But, in fairness, Imelda had always treated her only daughter badly. Jordanna had never known one truly happy day in her life.

Kenny had the key, and he knew he would do anything to keep the door to the truth bolted whatever happened.

Because the truth oftentimes was a hard bastard, the truth more often than not brought nothing but grief and hurt. It didn't bring closure, or decency, or any of the other shit that people who had never been in a position where the truth was a destructive force spouted. The truth was a springboard for many other upsets, bringing them out into the open at last, and then burying the half-truths, the far less painful truths, so deep they were impossible to dig up again.

He knew, and better than anyone, that sometimes, just *sometimes*, the truth could decimate a person and their whole life. It could cause a reaction so devastating it would make Hiroshima look like a playground prank.

Like his mother, he had never trusted the truth, and in their world that wasn't uncommon. He was known for his straight talking, his honesty. He knew that he would never lie about work – it was not feasible. But lying about some things was, in reality, fucking inevitable.

He remembered a priest once telling his class of five year olds that 'The truth will set you free' and the memory made him smile to himself. The truth could be a bigger jailer than most people realised. It was something that a lot of people just couldn't afford. Especially his sister Jordanna, the truth was the last thing she needed to hear. But he also knew that, now she was back in her mother's orbit, it was inevitable, that at some point the truth was likely to come out. Then what?

He didn't know and neither did anyone else. The lies went back to their childhood, and he knew that one day it would all surface, and when that day came, it would blow them all out of the proverbial water.

He also had a feeling that the day he had dreaded his whole life was near and, in a strange way, he just wanted it over with, wanted it out in the open. Because, God Himself knew, he was sick of keeping it all secret. Sick of living this lie. And living everyone's lie for them.

Book One

All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

– Leo Tolstoy, 1828–1910
Anna Karenina

If you hate a person, you hate something in him that is part of yourself.
What isn't part of ourselves doesn't disturb us.

– Hermann Hesse, 1877–1962
Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth

A child is not a vase to be filled,
but a fire to be lit.

– François Rabelais, 1494–1553

Chapter One

1978

Mary Dooley was cleaning, she cleaned like other people slept; without any thought whatsoever. Her eyes constantly scanned surfaces for dust or smudges. Her mirrors were buffed to a high gloss, and her floors were polished to an almost dangerous sheen. She saw it as her given right, her God-given right, as she was well aware that cleanliness was the nearest she would get to Himself in this life.

When not cleaning, Mary was cooking. Huge, wholesome meals that her family ate without any real regard; after all, they had eaten this way all their lives. She cooked the old way; mashed potatoes dripping with butter and well-cooked joints of meat left to settle into their juices before being hacked apart and placed reverently on to her willow-pattern plates. She made shortcrust pastries and heavy rock cakes bulging with sultanas screaming for thick butter to be spread on them and devoured with a cup of sweet tea. She could do anything with suet and a bit of shin. She could make a cheap cut of meat fit for the Pope himself to devour, as her husband often pointed out when in his cups.

She pooh-poohed his compliments loudly and with her usual ripe language. She disparaged this new talk of salads and

the avoidance of animal fats, and all the other crap they talked of that threatened her whole existence. She fed her family and she fed them in the only way she knew how.

Heart attacks indeed. As her own mother always said, sure, everybody had to die of something. Mary couldn't take onboard that you didn't need to die before your time, that she was slowly killing her family with love and good cooking. She saw it as some kind of conspiracy against her and all the other women like herself who had lived through the war and the want and were not going to go back to basic rations for anyone.

Tea was another of her passions. Mary left the big metallic pot on the hob bubbling away all day long until it was stewed black, and that was how she drank it. Black and sickly sweet. She said it gave her energy, and she was correct. It also gave her foetid breath and a furry tongue. This was at odds with her otherwise pristine appearance; like her home she was immaculate. From the tightly rolled French pleat that held in place long, thick, blond hair, coloured now every six weeks while her family were asleep, to well-fitting clothes that wrapped themselves neatly around her perfect size-ten body. For a woman well into her fifties she was still a looker. High cheekbones and deep-set dark-blue eyes saw to that. She had tiny, pretty feet that she was secretly proud of, and which she showed off every summer in cheap but tasteful sandals. They were her only real vanity.

Her hands were rough, well taken care of but still showing the damage from years of bleach and washing soda. Her skin was assaulted nightly with a good scrubbing of Pears' soap and a thick layer of Pond's cold cream. This seemed to work because she looked much younger than her years and she had the demeanour and carriage of a much younger woman.

Her only vice was smoking; a cigarette was permanently dangling from her cupid-bow lips, and she squinted up her eyes to counteract the constant stream of smoke whenever

she had her hands full. Her husband joked it was the secret of her good cooking, the adding of cigarette ash that everyone knew sometimes fell into her batters and her gravies. She laughed as loudly as her family at this, seeing nothing wrong with the occasional lapse of concentration. After all, it wasn't as if it could poison them was it?

Mary folded up her washing, enjoying the feel of its softness and the smell of its cleanliness. She was possessed of a twin tub that she would never part with, for all the new-fangled gadgets they had these days. As she said to Mrs Phillips, her neighbour, what was wrong with these young girls with their constant striving for an easy life, without the chores what the feck was there for a woman to do?

She glanced at the kitchen clock and stopped her folding. It was eight-thirty on a Monday morning, most of the family were away to their works and she was due at the church for nine o'clock Mass. She heard the toilet flush upstairs and sighed heavily. Her only daughter, her late surprise, as she referred to her, as she was over forty when she arrived, was finally up and about.

Pouring the child a cup of tea she took it up with her as she had to get her coat and hat anyway from the wardrobe. She treated this child differently to the boys and, deep down, she knew that, but she would never admit to it of course. She loved them all the same, at least outwardly, though her Imelda was the baby, and that, as she knew very well, was the trouble.

Her daughter got away with murder and, even though Mary knew it was wrong, she couldn't resist her. She was her last one, her baby, and she allowed her more licence than all the others put together.

Mary prayed daily that her trust in her youngest child wouldn't turn out to be misplaced but, in all honesty, she didn't hold out much hope. She had made one too many mistakes with that one, and it looked like they were coming home to roost.