

**Kimberley
CHAMBERS**

Life of Crime



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2018

1

Copyright © Kimberley Chambers 2018

Kimberley Chambers asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-814473-9 (HB)

ISBN: 978-0-00-820846-2 (TPB)

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Typeset in Sabon LT Std by
Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C007454

This book is produced from independently certified FSC™ paper
to ensure responsible forest management.

For more information visit: www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

PROLOGUE

I was thirteen the first time I ever got arrested and can remember it as though it were yesterday. I was driving a stolen Ford Escort MK 2, my feet barely able to touch the pedals, yet I'd still been able to handle that car like a man.

Cigarettes, I'd been caught with. Illegal ones that'd been brought into the country from Belgium via France. Yet no matter how hard the Old Bill interrogated me, I never admitted to where I'd really got those fags from.

'One of life's losers, that's what you are. You'll never amount to nothing, you stupid little bastard,' my mother bellowed when the Old Bill brought me home.

'Only fools break the law. You're an idiot, boy,' my schoolteacher hissed in my ear the following Monday morning.

Well, I've got news for them. I ain't no loser, neither am I a fool. A bastard perhaps, thanks to my embarrassment of a mother having no idea who my father is. But I'm a winner, and ever since that day I've been determined to prove all the doubters wrong.

I was gifted with charm, good looks, the gift of the gab

Kimberley Chambers

and intelligence – all the tools a man needs to make it to the very top. And if I need to trample on a few people's lives and feelings to get there, then so be it.

Well, that's what I used to think, anyway. But I've since learned different.

Sometimes in life – especially when it's a life of crime you're involved in – things don't go to plan.

My name is Jason Rampling and this is my story . . .

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Spring 1994

Johnny Brooks glanced up from his newspaper and looked at his daughter inquisitively over his thin-rimmed reading glasses. 'And where do you think you're off to, young lady?'

'Only to the Sunday market with Trace. I'll be back before dinner.'

'Haven't you forgotten something?' Johnny asked shrtily.

Twenty-one-year-old Melissa sighed. She was running half an hour late as it was; she'd promised to be at Tracey's by eleven. 'What?'

Johnny gestured towards the child who'd caused so many arguments and so much personal heartbreak. 'Your mum isn't well enough to look after your son today. She's gone back to bed with a migraine.'

'Another one? Can't you keep an eye on Donte, Dad? Please. I promise I won't be long,' Melissa asked hopefully.

'No. I bloody well can't. He's your son and you knew your life would change when you decided to have him.'

Kimberley Chambers

Your mum's run down lately. I don't want you putting her under any more pressure. It isn't fair, swanning off whenever you feel like it.'

Melissa Brooks picked up her son and glared at her father. 'Come on, Donte, let's get away from the old bigot. If you were white, he'd be happy to take you to the Working Men's Club with him. But he hates taking you anywhere because you're mixed-race.'

'That's a lie and you know it, Mel. I like to enjoy a pint on a Sunday and relax. Not baby-bloody-sit a toddler. You made your bed, you lie in it.'

When the front door slammed, Johnny Brooks cursed. He was old school and loathed the fact that she'd got herself knocked up out of wedlock. But that wasn't the reason he was so tetchy of late. His beloved wife was dying – the doctors had found a cancerous tumour on her brain – and nobody else in the family knew, bar him.

'You're late,' Tracey Thompson snapped.

'I know. Sorry.'

'Bloody hell, Mel. I told you to dress up a bit. You could've made more of an effort. And why've you brought Donte with you? You said you'd be leaving him indoors.'

'My mum's not well again so I had to bring him. And it's pouring with rain, case you hadn't noticed, that's why I wore my Timberlands. You're not wearing those high heels, are you? Your feet'll get soaked.'

Tracey studied herself in the hallway mirror. Her long blonde hair wouldn't be blown out of place as she'd used half a can of extra-strong lacquer on it. Determined to impress, she was wearing her ripped faded jeans, short denim jacket, a belly top that showed off her recent

Life of Crime

piercing and red stiletto sandals. ‘How do I look?’ she asked, satisfied that she looked incredible.

‘Nice. But it’s nippy out so you’ll probably freeze to death. Never mind. You wanted to stand out, didn’t you?’

Tracey chuckled. She had her eye on a lad who worked at Dagenham Sunday Market, hence her getting so dolled up. ‘Come on then, bitch, let’s go.’

Johnny Brooks sipped his pint while discussing yesterday’s football results. Rainham Working Men’s Club was his regular Sunday lunchtime haunt. Stepney born and bred, Johnny lived in South Hornchurch now and owned a successful builders’ merchants. Everybody knew him in Rainham as that’s where his business was. Back in the day, he had been a decent amateur boxer. Although at five foot eight he wasn’t the tallest of men, he was sturdy like a bull, and had carved out quite a hard-man reputation for himself over the years. He was forty-eight now and had recently had his ginger hair cropped to cover up the fact his hair had started to recede.

‘Your old pal’s just walked in, Johnny. I thought he was still in the clink,’ said Scottish Paul.

Glancing around, Johnny’s expression turned to one of anger. Craig Thurston had been a business associate of his – until they’d fallen out over money. Carol had warned him to steer well clear of the man in future and Johnny hadn’t even known he was out of prison.

‘He’s coming over, Johnny,’ Brian the Cabbie added, well aware there was no love lost between his pal and Thurston.

At six foot three, Craig Thurston was a lump. He’d made good use of the gym while in prison and sauntered towards Johnny with a cocksure grin on his face. ‘Well, well, well, if it ain’t my old mucker, Brooksy. Got that

Kimberley Chambers

dosh you owe me, have ya? Only I'm collecting my debts now I'm a free man again.'

'Do one, Thurston. I owe you sod-all and you know it,' Johnny spat, even though that wasn't entirely true.

'Not the way I see it, pal. Fifty grand I lost, thanks to you, and I want it back.'

In no mood to part with any money or even discuss what had happened, Johnny stuck to his guns. 'Your own stupidity lost you your dosh, just like it lost you your livelihood. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to finish my pint in peace.'

Craig grinned, showing the one gold tooth he'd treated himself to before he got ripped off; he knew exactly which buttons to press. 'A little birdy told me your Melissa got herself knocked up. What's your little grandson called again? Shoeshine boy?'

Johnny flew out of his seat and shoved Thurston against the wall. 'You leave my family out of this.' It wasn't Johnny's fault that a mate of his had done a runner with Craig's dosh.

Hearing the barmaid threaten to call the police, Thurston's pal grabbed him by the arm. 'Come on, Craig. Let's sort this another time.'

Craig pointed a finger in Johnny's face. 'I want my dosh, Brooksy – or else. Made sure you got yours, didn't ya, you slippery piece of work.'

'Or else what? You come near my daughter or grandson, I'll fucking kill ya, d'ya hear me?'

'I wonder what your Carol would say if she knew you were shagging your secretary?' Craig tutted, his eyes twinkling with devilment. 'Shirley Stone's her name, isn't it? Blonde, big tits, I can see the attraction. Might have to have a crack at her meself.'

Life of Crime

Still able to throw a decent punch, Johnny flew at Craig like a raging bull.

When Craig fought back and Johnny ended up sprawled across the table, smashing their beer glasses, Brian the Cabbie and Scottish Paul intervened. 'Leave it now, Johnny. Can't you see he's trying to wind you up?' Brian urged.

'Craig – your bail conditions, mate. Old Bill are on their way,' Craig's pal warned.

Johnny had winded him, but Craig put on a brave face as he walked backwards towards the entrance. 'See you again soon, Brooksy. Give my love to Carol, won't you? I'll be paying her a visit before long, tell her.'

'Go near Carol and I'll kill ya,' Johnny threatened.

'Ignore him, mate. He's all talk. I'll go up the bar, get us another drink,' Scottish Paul said.

'Don't bother. I'm going home,' Johnny snapped.

'Don't go outside yet in case he's still there. Your face is already cut. You don't want Carol to know you've been scrapping, do you?' Brian the Cabbie warned.

'I'm not fucking scared of him,' Johnny bellowed, storming out the club.

There was no sign outside of Thurston or his pal and as Johnny stomped along the road, he was furious. Not so much at Thurston – he was just a lowlife, chancing his luck. It was himself Johnny was livid with. If he didn't have secrets in the bloody first place, there'd be no cat to let out the bag.

'This is all I bloody well need! That smell is making me feel sick. Whatever you been feeding him?' Tracey wrinkled her nose in disgust. 'You're gonna have to change him, Mel. No way are we going near the shoe stall with him

stinking of shit. Put that good-looking bloke off for life, that will.'

'Stop the car then and I'll find a toilet. He's only two, Trace, he can't help it,' Melissa snapped. She and Tracey had first met at school aged eleven and had been best pals ever since. They clashed though, fought like cat and dog at times, but never over anything too serious. Petty things. Tracey was a selfish cow and had no real understanding of children or their needs. A typical spoiled only child, she was.

Tracey pulled over on the corner of Church Elm Lane. 'That pub's open. Sort him in there,' she ordered, holding her nose with one hand while frantically spraying her Angel perfume with the other. Her lovely Ford Fiesta currently smelled like a public toilet.

'Don't cry, darling. Mummy's going to change you now,' Melissa whispered in Donte's ear. He was a good boy, her son. Rarely played up and seemed content and happy in his small world.

Ignoring the glaring barmaid who made a cutting remark about the toilets being for customers' use only, Melissa marched into a cubicle, locked the door and began the none too pleasant task of cleaning her son up. Sometimes she yearned for her old life back. Before she had fallen pregnant, herself and Tracey had been out raving every weekend. They'd even had a girlie holiday in Ibiza, which was amazing.

It had been at a rave that Melissa had met Donte's father. Joel Wright had an immediate effect on Mel that no other lad had before. He'd been eighteen, same age as she was back then, and he was self-assured and handsome. Swept off her feet, she'd slept with Joel the third time they met up and was pregnant within eight weeks of meeting him. Unfortunately, he'd turned out to be a

Life of Crime

bullshitting user. But even though she sometimes missed her old job, friends, nights out and that free-as-a-bird feeling, she had never regretted the decision to have Donte and bring him up as a single mum. He was part of her, her very own little soldier, and when his smile lit up the room Melissa felt like the luckiest girl alive.

‘Drink, Mummy, drink,’ Donte mumbled. He had only recently started talking more fluently.

‘In a minute, darling. There’s a nice clean boy,’ Melissa beamed, lifting her son in the air.

When Donte looked at her with his big brown eyes, held her tightly around the neck and whispered the words, ‘Love you, Mummy,’ Melissa’s eyes filled with tears. His scumbag of a father had never even seen him; her beautiful boy deserved better.

Shirley Stone was mopping the kitchen floor when the doorbell rang. She wasn’t expecting any visitors, she usually spent Sundays alone. ‘Johnny!’ she gasped. ‘Whatever you done to your face?’

‘Had a scrap and fell on some glass. Looks worse than it actually is. We need to talk, love.’

At thirty-eight, Shirley was ten years younger than Johnny. She’d worked for him for the past eight years as his secretary, and when she’d separated from her husband in 1988 their affair had started shortly afterwards.

‘You’ve got blood on your shirt too. Want me to wash it for you?’ Shirley offered. ‘You’ve got a couple of clean shirts in my wardrobe.’

‘No. Leave it,’ Johnny sat on the sofa, urging Shirley to do the same. She was a busty blonde, very pretty, and from the moment she’d started work for him there’d been an instant attraction.

Kimberley Chambers

‘We’re going to have to call it a day, for now at least,’ Johnny said, before explaining he’d got into a fight with Craig Thurston, who’d threatened to spill the beans to Carol. Their affair certainly wasn’t common knowledge. A couple of colleagues knew, one had even caught them in a compromising position recently, but Johnny had no idea how Thurston had found out. Somebody had betrayed him, that was for sure.

Shirley’s eyes welled up. Johnny had been adamant from the very beginning that he loved Carol and would never leave her and Shirley had accepted that. ‘OK. If that’s what you want.’

Johnny stared into Shirley’s pale green eyes and stroked her cheek. ‘It isn’t what I want, but I have little choice. There’s stuff you don’t know about Carol’s illness and she needs my full attention right now.’

‘Did you find out what was causing those migraines?’ Shirley enquired. Johnny often spoke about Carol, and Shirley had met her loads of times when she popped into the yard. She was a nice woman and Shirley liked her, but she couldn’t help the way she felt about Johnny.

‘Yeah, we did. But I can’t go into detail, Shirl. I promised Carol I wouldn’t say a word to anyone – even the kids don’t know yet. I’ll have to give up working for a while, so Ken’ll be running the yard. Between you and him, I know things’ll run smoothly in my absence.’

It didn’t take Einstein to work out whatever was wrong with Carol wasn’t good, so instead of being narky with Johnny, Shirley hugged him close to her chest. ‘You know where I am if you need me.’

Johnny kissed Shirley on the forehead, then stood up. ‘Thanks for being so understanding. I’ll see myself out.’

*

Life of Crime

‘So, what’s he look like, this bloke? How old is he?’ Melissa enquired. Ever since she’d visited the market last week, Tracey had been harping on about some hunk on the shoe stall.

‘Does my hair look all right? My lipstick isn’t smudged, is it?’ Tracey asked, trying her best to walk steadily on the uneven pavement. Her feet were freezing. Five-inch stilettos really were not practical to wear to a market on a chilly, wet day.

‘Yeah, you look great.’

‘I already told you what he looked like. Don’t you listen to anything I say?’ Tracey complained. ‘He looks a bit older than us, blond hair, curtain-cut, and he’s lovely and tall. Wait until you see his eyes – piercing blue, they are. He reminds me a bit of Bros – Luke more than Matt. He’s gorgeous. Make sure you say that Donte is yours, won’t you? I don’t want him to think I’ve got a kid. Oh, and try on as many shoes as you can. Pretend you can’t make your mind up.’

‘I’m not taking these boots on and off, Trace. Be easier for you to try the shoes on.’

‘No it won’t. While you’re trying the shoes on, I can talk to him, find out some info. Please, Mel. I’d do it for you.’

Knowing full well that Tracey would sulk if she didn’t agree, Melissa reluctantly mumbled, ‘OK.’

The distinct smell of fried onions hit Melissa as they neared the burger van. The cold wet weather obviously hadn’t put people off shopping, as the market seemed busier than usual.

‘We’re nearly there,’ Tracey announced excitedly. She had no idea what the lad’s name was, but he’d definitely seemed interested in her last week. He’d chatted to her

Kimberley Chambers

and her mum for ages, and as they'd walked away he'd treated Tracey to a lopsided grin and a wink.

'Is that him?' Melissa asked, pointing to a blond guy who had his back turned to them. He was tall and was wearing a tan leather box jacket and faded jeans.

'Don't bloody point. Just act normal,' Tracey hissed, her heart racing.

When the bloke turned around, Mel was rather taken aback. He didn't remind her of Bros – he was far better looking in her opinion. His blue eyes twinkled as he winked at Tracey and said, 'Back again.' He then turned his attention to Donte, who was happily playing with his toy car in his pushchair. 'All right. Is he yours?' the hunk asked Melissa. His eyes were the deepest blue she had ever seen and she could certainly understand why Tracey fancied him.

'Yes. He's two now. Say hello to the man, Donte,' Melissa urged.

'Hello, man,' Donte mumbled, too engrossed with his car to look up.

Jason chuckled, crouched and held out his right hand. 'Hello, Donte. I'm Jason. What ya got there, mate?'

Slightly peeved that Jason was paying far more attention to Donte than her, Tracey held her stomach in, pushed her boobs out and tapped him on the back. 'My mate needs a new pair of shoes, but she's not sure what style she wants. Something with a heel and glamorous, like mine,' she said, waving her left foot under his nose.

Jason stood up and smiled. 'Your wish is my command. You're welcome to try on anything you want. Just gonna serve those other customers and I'll be back. What size are you, darlin'?'

'Five.'

Life of Crime

‘Give me a minute, then I’ll sort out a selection that I think will suit a pretty girl like yourself.’

Melissa blushed. She wasn’t by any means ugly, but rarely got called pretty, especially when she was out with Tracey. Unlike her skinny blonde friend, she had shoulder-length brown hair, a size-twelve figure and lacked a decent wardrobe since Donte had been born. Tracey knocked spots off her.

‘Pick some shoes out then,’ Tracey smirked. She wasn’t one bit bothered about Jason calling Melissa pretty. It was obvious he was only being kind.

‘I haven’t got much money on me,’ Melissa hissed in her pal’s ear. ‘Can’t you try some on and buy a pair? He’ll get the hump with us otherwise, think we’re messers,’ she warned.

‘OK. But find out where he lives and drinks.’

‘Why me? You’re the one who fancies him – you ask him. He’s gonna think I’m after him otherwise,’ Melissa complained.

‘No, he won’t. Not being funny, Mel, but he’s a bit out of your league.’

Carol Brooks had tried to keep herself busy since finding out her fate. A year the doctor had given her, top whack, and instead of wallowing in self-pity, Carol was determined to cherish every moment.

‘I’m home, love. You upstairs?’ Johnny shouted out.

‘Yes. I’ll be down in a minute. I’m just sorting through some old photos,’ Carol replied, flicking through their wedding album. She was forty-six now, plump with short auburn hair. She’d looked so different on her wedding day; back then, twenty-seven years ago, she’d been blonde and slim. She’d never forget Johnny’s words as her father

Kimberley Chambers

walked her down the aisle: 'Jesus Christ, Carol. You've taken my breath away. What you doing marrying an ugly bugger like me? You look like Lulu, my girl.'

About to remind Johnny of his words, a piercing pain shot through the side of Carol's head and she screamed out in agony.

'Carol! What's a matter?' Johnny yelled, racing up the stairs.

When there was no answer, Johnny pushed open the bedroom door and had never felt so guilty in his life. His beloved wife was lying on the floor, convulsing. Next to her was their wedding album.

Tracey giggled like a silly schoolgirl every time Jason said anything remotely funny. 'You're hilarious,' she gushed, touching the arm of his tan leather jacket.

'Mummy – doggy, doggy,' Donte said loudly, pointing at the toy stall opposite. The stallholder was showing some customers a toy dog that walked and barked.

Jason crouched in front of the pushchair. 'OK to get him out?' he asked Melissa. She'd tried on shoe after shoe and Jason was no fool. He knew her mate was after him and had roped Melissa in to help her out.

'Yeah, sure,' Melissa replied. Watching Jason wander over to the toy stall with Donte in his arms, she turned to Tracey. 'Time you tried some shoes on – I'm not trying on any more, specially since I can't afford to buy a pair. Did you find out where he lives?'

'No. But he's only twenty and drinks at some pub called the Brewery Tap in Barking on Friday nights. He said they have live music in there. We should go down there next week. Can you ask your mum to babysit?'

Jason returned with Donte holding the toy dog before

Life of Crime

Melissa had a chance to reply. 'Put that back, Donte. It doesn't belong to you,' Melissa ordered.

'It does now. My treat.' Jason winked.

'Oh no. I can't let you pay for that. Here, I'll give you the money,' Melissa replied, fishing frantically through her handbag for her purse. She hoped she had enough cash on her to cover the cost.

'No, you won't. Listen, Trev on the toy stall owes me plenty of favours, trust me,' Jason insisted.

'Erm, can I try on these black boots in a size four, please?' Tracey asked, pointing to a high-heeled suede ankle boot. She couldn't understand Jason's obsession with Donte. It was odd, to say the least. 'Don't move, Mel. I need to hold on to you,' Tracey ordered, lifting up her left leg to undo the strap on her sandal.

Aware of Jason's blue eyes staring at her, Melissa blushed again.

'I've got a little 'un myself. A four-year-old daughter,' Jason blurted out.

To say Tracey was shocked by this piece of news was an understatement. She promptly lost her balance, toppling over sideways.

'You all right, mate?' Melissa asked, voice full of concern. Part of her wanted to laugh, but she knew how mortified Tracey must be, so held her emotions in check.

Feeling a complete idiot, Tracey quickly put her sandal back on and grabbed Mel's arm. 'Come on. Let's go.'

'Don't you wanna try the boots on now?' Jason smirked. Trev on the toy stall was pissing himself laughing and he was desperately trying not to do the same himself.

'No. I'll try them another time,' Tracey snapped, hobbling off. She'd felt her ankle twist as she'd fallen and it was already throbbing.

Kimberley Chambers

‘Thanks again for the toy,’ Melissa said, walking away.

‘Come on, Mel,’ Tracey urged, red-faced. The quicker she got away from this market, the better.

‘Mel, you forgot something,’ Jason shouted after them.

Leaving Donte’s pushchair with Tracey, Melissa ran back to the stall. Jason handed her a piece of paper. ‘That’s my phone number. If you fancy a drink sometime, give us a bell.’

Melissa opened her mouth, but couldn’t speak. No words would come out.

‘Mel, come on,’ Tracey shouted angrily.

Melissa took one last look at Jason, then ran to catch up with her pal.

‘What did he want?’ Tracey demanded.

‘Nothing.’

‘Don’t lie to me. I saw him hand you something. Did he give you his number for me?’

‘No, Trace. Look, I’m sorry, but he gave me his number for me.’

Tracey stared at her friend as though she had gone stark raving mad. This wasn’t going to plan at all. ‘What did he actually say when he gave it to you? You sure he never meant it for me?’

Melissa felt flushed. ‘He said if I fancied going for a drink, I was to call him.’

Tracey was in shock. ‘You’re not going, are you?’

Mel shook her head. ‘Course not. You like him.’

The short journey back to South Hornchurch was awkward, to say the least. Tracey was in no mood for small talk. She was fucking fuming.