Billie Jo

Kimberley Chambers

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Extract

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ONE

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Michelle Keane took a large gulp of wine and for what seemed like the hundredth time, glanced at the clock on the living-room wall. Two a.m. and the no-good fucker still wasn't home. She wouldn't have minded if he'd have rung her with one of his cock and bull excuses, but tonight he hadn't even had the audacity to do that. She knew he was at it, she'd known for a while. He was a clever bastard, though, and proving it wasn't going to be easy.

As she lay in bed unable to sleep, Billie Jo wondered where her dad was. He wasn't home yet and she worried about him when he was late. Starving hungry, she toyed with the idea of going downstairs to make a sandwich. Remembering her mum was pissed and on the warpath, she decided she'd rather starve.

Whenever her dad was late home, Billie avoided her mother like the plague. It was the same old story every time. Firstly, her mum would sit clock watching and drinking wine by the gallon. The Patsy Cline CD was the next part of the ritual. 'Crazy' was her mum's favourite song. Problem was, she had an awful voice and to say she murdered it was being polite. At the end of the song, her mum would burst into tears and blame Billie Jo for everything bad that had ever happened in her life.

'If it hadn't been for you, I'd still have my nice figure. Size ten I was when I met your dad. He's only out whoring now 'cause I've put on weight and he doesn't fancy me any more. It's all your fault, Billie. I wish you'd never been born. Me and your dad used to get on just fine until you came along. If I could have my life all over again, I'd never have a kid. I must have been bloody mad, I should have had an abortion.'

Billie took no notice of her mother's nasty comments. She'd had years of it, fifteen in fact. Mature for her age, she'd learned to deal with her psycho mum by the age of ten. Before that she used to cry a lot. She could never work out what she'd done wrong or why her mother was so angry with her all the time. When her dad was around she pretended to be nice, but as soon as he left the house, Billie would get the brunt of her mother's resentment.

Billie's relationship with her dad was completely the opposite. He was her life, her rock, and would do anything for her. She knew he was a dodgy bastard, she wasn't silly. That's why she worried when he was unexpectedly late. If he got nicked and put away, her life wouldn't be worth living. Pulling the covers over her head, Billie tried to get some sleep. It didn't come. Sighing, she prepared herself for the row that was bound to erupt on her father's return.

Terry Keane opened one eye, heard the sound of the birds singing and quickly opened the other. Cursing himself for dozing back off to sleep, he leapt out of bed and hurriedly got dressed.

'Bollocks,' he muttered, as he searched high and low for his keys.

Hearing the racket he was making, Jade stirred, switched on the bedside lamp and propped herself up on her pillow. 'You all right, Tel, what's the matter?'

'I can't find me . . . oh there they are.'

Jade smiled as she realised he'd been hunting for his keys. Screws carried smaller bunches. They were impossible to mislay, yet he was always losing them.

'What's the time?'

Bending over the bed, Terry gave her a short but passionate kiss. 'Put it this way, if the wildebeest is awake my life won't be worth living. It's nearly six.'

'Christ, is it?' Jade was genuinely shocked. 'I don't suppose you'll be able to escape again later, will you?'

Terry flashed his sexy smile and winked at her. 'You never know your luck, babe. No seriously, I've promised to take Billie Jo out for the day, just me and her, and I've got a bit of business to sort out tonight. I'll bell you later and let you know one way or another.'

'OK, have a nice day with Billie. Love you.'

'Love you too, babe.'

Smiling at his words, Jade put the quilt over her head and lay dreamily thinking about him. At twenty-five years old, Jade Jenkins had crammed a lot into her young life. Having been brought up by her parents Mary and Lenny, along with her younger brother Simon, she'd spent her childhood living in a cottage in a remote village on the outskirts of Somerset. By the age of ten, Jade was bored with her life, by the age of thirteen she was totally disillusioned. At fifteen, the tomboy in Jade disappeared overnight and she turned into a ravishing beauty. Long blonde hair, big green eyes, pert breasts and a size-eight figure, she was the talk of the local lads and the subject of many a wank. At seventeen she started to date the village heart-throb.

Tommy Jones had many a female admirer, was good-looking and knew it. Six foot tall, muscular, with sun-kissed skin and long blond hair, he resembled an Australian

surfer. His downfall was, he had the personality of a wet fish.

The son of a farmer, Tommy seemed more at ease dealing with animals than humans. Jade had never seen him as happy as when he was performing his midwife duties, delivering one creature or another. In fact he seemed happier with his hands around their private parts than he ever did with hers. Unbelievably, he proposed to her on her eighteenth birthday. Her parents were delighted, Jade was anything but.

'Let me sleep on it. I'll give you my answer tomorrow.'

Jade was unable to sleep at all that night, as she pondered her future. The following day she took all her savings out of her building society, went to the nearest travel agents and booked a one-way ticket to Spain.

After a lonely first week, Jade met Kirsty Clark, a bubbly 21-year-old from Romford in Essex. Stuck in a foreign country on their lonesome, they soon became kindred spirits and within a week had got jobs working together in a bar. Inseparable, they went on to enjoy the summer of their lives.

When October arrived, Jade couldn't think of anything worse than heading back to Somerset and facing the wrath of Tommy and her parents, so she ended up going with Kirsty back to Romford, where they shared a house with two of Kirsty's cousins.

Four weeks after arriving back, with their small amount of savings rapidly disappearing, Kirsty decided to take up a job offer working in a small recruitment office in the centre of Ilford. Within a week she had found Jade a job. There was a secretarial position available at a car lot in Seven Kings. Jade had done a year after leaving school at a secretarial college back in Somerset, so had a rough idea of what the job would entail. After sailing

through the interview, she started there on the following Monday and found it an absolute doddle.

Terry Keane was the proprietor of the car lot and had soon taken Jade under his wing. Married with a child, Terry felt sorry for her being miles away from home. Within a month they had struck up a great friendship. Terry treated her like the little sister he'd never had. She was unflappable, extremely efficient and trustworthy and Terry liked that.

Their relationship changed as the years ticked by and Terry's marriage to Michelle disintegrated. First, Jade had been a shoulder to cry on, a good listener, but as time passed they had become soulmates. Now, seven years on, they were deeply in love and planning their future together.

Jade had fought hard to stop herself falling in love with Terry. She would never have dreamt that one day she would be involved with a married man. She was a decent girl with good morals and it was against all her beliefs. Working with him every day she couldn't help her feelings. She'd even contemplated giving up her job at one point, but he'd talked her out of it. She knew he wasn't lying when he said his marriage was a sham.

She had met his wife Michelle quite a few times over the years, usually when she'd come storming into the car lot for one thing or another. A couple of times she'd come in demanding money. Once she was drunk and fell over and the other few times she'd turned up shouting and screaming. Terry had nicknamed her the wildebeest and Jade used to tell him off for being so nasty. But after a few altercations with Michelle, she understood why and thought it was a perfect name for her.

Their actual affair had started three years ago. A drunken kiss on a bitterly cold Christmas Eve had led them to

where they were now. In all truthfulness, the pair of them had been in love with one another well over a year before it started. Frightened of their feelings, neither of them had the guts to admit or do anything about it. Terry had been honest with Jade from the word go.

'As soon as Billie Jo turns sixteen, me and you can be together properly,' he told her. 'Until then we'll have to keep it quiet. I know what Chelle's like. She'll use the kid as blackmail and I don't want my little girl being dragged through the courts. Also if I fuck off now, she'd collar a load of dough off me. If I plan things properly, she'll get nigh on sod all.'

Jade had agreed with Terry and had waited patiently for him. Billie Jo would be sixteen next year, so hopefully the wait would soon be over. She loved him so much that if he'd asked her nicely, she'd have waited for him for ever.

Terry started up his black Range Rover, put on his Kenny Rogers CD and headed towards Hornchurch where he'd lived for the past three years. Before that he and Michelle had lived in a three-bedroom semi in Rainham. Over the last five years Terry's business had boomed and he was now the proud owner of a four-bedroom mock-Tudor house in Emerson Park. He had an ex-bank robber living one side of him and a footballer on the other, so he knew he must be doing well. The only downside he could think of was the fact he hated the fat bitch who lived in it with him.

Terry opened the glove box and took out the mobile phone that he had purposely left there earlier. They might have been one of man's greatest inventions but they could get you hung, drawn and quartered in a minute. Eighteen missed calls and ten answerphone messages. Smiling to

himself, he thought how much Orange must love him. With the bills he ran up and the calls he received, he reckoned he must keep the bastards in wages for a month. After dialling 123, he soon found out that all the messages, bar one, were from Michelle.

Number one said, 'All right, Tel, where are you, babe?' Number three, 'I've been trying to get hold of you. Where are you? You bastard.' Number six, 'I hate you, you lying cheating no-good fucking shit cunt.' He couldn't understand seven, eight, nine or ten, as Michelle must have been so pissed by this time that the messages were totally incoherent. The last message had been left at 2.55 a.m., which pleased Terry because that meant the fat bitch had probably passed out around that time. All he needed to do was sneak in quietly. Later, he would swear blind that he had got in at half three.

'"You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille, with four hungry children and a crop in the field."' Singing in perfect harmony along with Kenny Rogers, Terry decided to cover his tracks just to be on the safe side. He'd never stayed out all night before. Normally he was home by two or three at the latest. He didn't want to give the wildebeest any more reason than necessary to be suspicious.

Pulling the Range Rover into a lay-by along the Hornchurch Road, he called his best pal Davey Mullins. Terry knew all his pals' and business associates' phone numbers off by heart. His motto was, 'If you don't leave Jack Shit lying around, no nosy bastard can find it.' Same with the files and documents in his car lot. All he left in there was the simple stuff, anything important was stored in his brain. If the Old Bill ever shone the light on any of his illegal activities and decided to pay him a visit, he was confident that they would have had a wasted journey. As his mum used to say as she bathed him as a kid,

'You've got the memory of an elephant, son, and a penis the size of its trunk.'

Finally the phone was answered. 'Hello, who is it? What's the time?'

'It's me, you tosser, who do you think it is?'

By the sound of his voice, Dave had probably been up all night getting on it, so Terry spoke slowly but surely.

'Listen, I need a favour. I overslept round Jade's last night and I'm only just on me way home now. If her indoors is awake, I'm gonna tell her we've had trouble with some motors. I'll say we had a bit of grief with some geezers over in Swanley. If she don't believe me, I'll get her to ring you.'

'All right, no problem,' came the croaky reply. 'Laters, yeah.'

Terry knew his best pal would never let him down. They had been in many sticky situations and tight corners over the twenty years that they had known one another and had stuck together through thick and thin. The only thing which worried Terry was that just lately Davey Boy's cocaine habit had started spiralling out of control. Instead of having a few lines or a gram here and there like he used to, Dave had started shoving it up his hooter, morning, noon and night. Then of course the paranoia and rucks would follow, including one about a month ago with a gang of dudes on the Isle of Dogs. Terry had ended up with four stitches in the side of his head, trying to sort out Davey's mess.

Terry liked the odd line here and there, but only used it sporadically. If something started to take hold on you, in his eyes, it was time to stop. He knew it wouldn't be long before he had to sit Davey Boy down and have a serious chat with him. Terry sighed as he flicked the ignition back to life. Weaving his way out of the two cars that had parked

either side of him, he headed back towards Emerson Park and the wildebeest.

Putting the front-door key into the lock, he quietly turned it anticlockwise. So far so good, he thought to himself, as he sneaked in. After disposing of his shoes on the mat, he practised his ballet dancing impression as he tiptoed down the hallway in his black socks. It was beginning to get light now, so luckily he could see where he was going without falling arse over tit.

Seeing the living-room door ajar, he made that his first port of call. He knew that since Michelle's drink problem had escalated out of control, she rarely made it upstairs any more. He normally either found her flopped across the kitchen table, or lying comatose on their white leather sofa. He peeped through the crack of the door and like a fortune-teller predicting a tarot card reading, there she was, sprawled out like a beached whale recently washed ashore.

'The state of that and the price of fish,' he said quietly to himself. When they had first got it together, Michelle had been beautiful. Now, he found it hard to believe what had become of the girl he'd fallen in love with and married.

Michelle was out for the count. Lying flat on her back, the button and zip of her jeans were wide open, with mounds of fat bulging over the top. Terry inwardly chuckled. The thing that amused him most was the fact that apart from doing five gym classes a week, she was an honorary member of both Weight Watchers and Slimming World. It seemed the more she tried to diet and keep fit, the fatter she became. Hazarding a guess, he'd say she'd put on at least two stone in the last year alone. He'd often told her that she should go to the gym and her slimming classes and ask for her fucking money back. She must be the only woman in Britain

whose before and after photos looked like they'd been switched the wrong way round.

Suddenly stirring, Michelle woke up and spotted him. Within seconds, she'd leapt up like a banshee.

'You no-good fucking bastard. Who is she? Tell me who she is! I'll fucking kill her.'

'Calm down, it's not what you think. I've had business to deal with.'

Terry grabbed hold of her wrists to stop her lashing out at him and tried to pacify her. Chelle was having none of it. She could tell when he was lying, always had been able to.

'You lying cunt.' Running into the kitchen like a woman possessed, she grabbed the biggest knife she could find.

Billie Jo had been sound asleep until the commotion downstairs started. Her parents had always rowed but just lately their arguments were becoming worse and more frequent.

'Put the knife down, Chelle, don't be so stupid,' she heard her dad say.

'Don't call me stupid, Terry. If I find out you've been cheating on me, I'll cut your fucking bollocks off. I swear on my life, I'll do a Mrs Bobbitt on you.'

Billie ran down the stairs at the mention of the word knife and was horrified to see her mum pointing a big one at her dad. 'Mum, no please, don't hurt Daddy,' she screamed.

Momentarily, her daughter's presence was enough to throw Michelle off balance. Grabbing the knife, Terry shoved her against the wall. He rang Davey Mullins and handed Michelle the phone. 'Ask him where we was. Go on, you fucking nutter, ask him.'

Comforting his hysterical daughter in his strong arms, Terry gently led her up the stairs. 'Ssh, stop crying now,

Billie. It's all over now, babe. It was only a silly misunderstanding. Now come on, sweetheart, we're going out later, me and you. You don't wanna be all red-eyed now, do you?'

Once she had spoken to Davey Mullins, Chelle regained her senses. If Billie hadn't come downstairs, she wasn't sure what would've happened. The way she'd lost it, she'd probably have plunged the knife straight through Terry. She'd certainly felt capable of it. Unsteadily, she made her way back into the living room. The thought of him leaving her was too distressing to even contemplate. She still loved him deep down, always had and always would, and the thought of him being with another woman made her turn into someone she didn't recognise. The jealousy she had felt earlier was indescribable. She'd felt a sense of panic, as if her heart was being pulled out of her chest. She wasn't totally stupid. She knew he didn't love her any more. She also knew that if it wasn't for Billie Jo, he'd have fucked off long ago. That's why she drank so much, to blot out the truth.

It had been oh-so-different in the beginning. An only child, Chelle had been spoilt rotten and used to getting everything she wanted from a very early age. She was twenty years old when she'd met Terry in a local pub and she'd known instantly that he was the man for her. Handsome, wealthy and definitely a face, she'd made a play for him and got him. It hadn't been difficult back then. She'd possessed the looks, charm and acting ability to snare whoever she wished.

Within a year, Chelle's façade had started to slip. Desperate not to lose Terry, she'd purposely fallen pregnant. Billie Jo being born was her trump card. The child's birth enabled her to hang on to the man she loved and the lifestyle she craved. If he'd left her then or now,

she would be nothing, a no-mark. She couldn't and wouldn't let that happen. She'd kill him before she allowed him to walk out that front door.

Deciding a change of tactic was needed, she pondered over what to do next. She'd been playing Mrs Nice Wife recently and it had been getting her nowhere. A different game-plan had to be put into play.

Still too drunk to think straight, she guzzled the remainder of the wine, before sobbing in a crumpled heap on the sofa. If he was going to get rid of her, trade her in for some newer model, she was determined to go out with the biggest bang possible.

Terry made sure Billie was OK and then got into bed in one of the spare rooms. He could hear Michelle crying downstairs. She'd played the drama queen act for so long during their marriage that she was now an expert at it.

How the fuck has my life ended up like this? he thought silently, as he drifted back to his past. His childhood had been awful. The eldest of three boys, he'd been born into poverty. His father was a drunken brute, who had resented him from the day he was born. His mother was a typical downtrodden Irishwoman who did her best to avoid her husband's violent temper.

Terry's salvation had been starting work. At thirteen, he had got a part-time job at a car lot in Romford for a guy named Benny Bones. Being a streetwise kid, Terry was a fast learner and within months had mastered the trade off by heart. Benny was a cockney through and through. He knew every song, saying and villain that had ever come out of the East End of London. Terry loved his accent, stories and slang. He'd never felt Irish and having never really lived there, he classed himself as an Englishman. Irishmen reminded him too much of his drunken father.

Within a year of working for him, Terry had Benny's repertoire off to a tee, so much so that customers used to think they were father and son. In Terry's mind they were. Benny was the father he'd never really had.

It was around this time that Terry arrived home one night to see his mother lying on the floor, covered in blood, with her eyeball hanging out of its socket. Dragging his father out of the armchair, Terry proceeded to knock seven colours of shit out of him. All the years of pent-up frustration of being bullied by the bastard were finally released. Ex-boxer or no ex-boxer, a drunken ageing Paddy was no match for the up and coming Terry, whose parting sentence was to tell his father that if he ever touched his mother again, he would come back and finish him off. Terry walked out of the house that night and never went back.

Terry moved in with his boss Benny and over the next year or two used his knowledge to take the car trade by storm. Having saved enough money for a deposit, he then bought himself a little flat situated just off Seven Kings High Road. Enjoying his first taste of independence and throwing himself into his work, he had little or no time to bother with women. Witnessing his parents' fucked-up relationship had put him off for life, and apart from a few one-night stands, he couldn't be bothered.

He was thirty years old when he had the misfortune of meeting Chelle. His mother had warned him about girls like her, but he'd still been silly enough to let her dig her claws in and then trap him. The unplanned pregnancy had been a shock to him. Determined to do the right thing, he'd married her. Within months, he realised he'd dropped a clanger. A terrible wife equalled an awful mother, but determined his daughter would have a stable childhood, he battled on.

Now he was at the point of no return. Gone was the sweet, pretty brunette he'd first met. In its place was a money-orientated, nasty fat bitch with a mouth like a sewer.

'What a poxy night,' he muttered to himself, as he snuggled up under the quilt. He was wrecked now, worn out by it all, and couldn't wait to get some shut-eye.

Part of him felt guilty. If he hadn't come home so late, the row would never have happened. He wasn't bothered about Chelle, she could go and fuck herself. Billie was his only concern and he could tell his daughter had been shaken up by the scene that she'd witnessed earlier. Deciding to make it up to her by spoiling her rotten, he nodded off into a deep, welcome sleep.

Hearing her dad snoring in the next room, Billie wept quietly. The rows between her parents she'd learned to live with, she'd had to, but the events of earlier had nigh on scared her to death. The thought of what might have happened if she hadn't heard the commotion and come down the stairs was too traumatic for her to even think about. Her home life was bad enough, surely it couldn't get any worse. Consoling herself with the thought that it was probably just a one-off, she willed herself to sleep. She had a busy day ahead and didn't want it spoilt by being overtired.

As Billie nodded off to sleep, she was totally unaware of the run of bad luck that was catapulting towards her.

This morning's episode had been the start of it, a taster.

Unfortunately for Billie, the worst was yet to come.