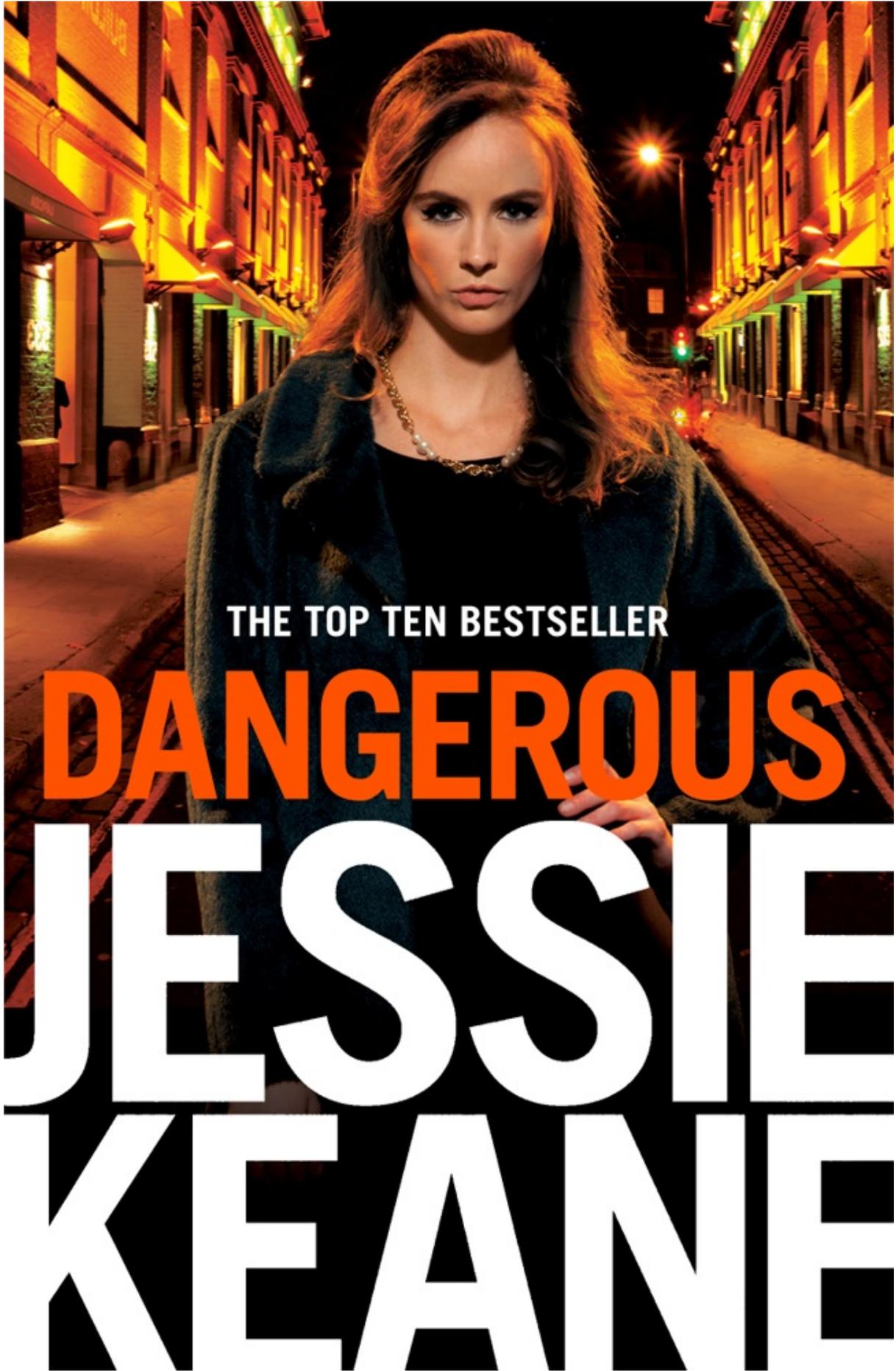


THE TOP TEN BESTSELLER

**DANGEROUS**

**JESSIE**

**KEANE**



JESSIE  
KEANE

DANGEROUS

PAN BOOKS

*To Cliff, as always*

## CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 37](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)  
[Chapter 39](#)  
[Chapter 40](#)  
[Chapter 41](#)  
[Chapter 42](#)  
[Chapter 43](#)  
[Chapter 44](#)  
[Chapter 45](#)  
[Chapter 46](#)  
[Chapter 47](#)  
[Chapter 48](#)  
[Chapter 49](#)  
[Chapter 50](#)  
[Chapter 51](#)  
[Chapter 52](#)  
[Chapter 53](#)  
[Chapter 54](#)  
[Chapter 55](#)  
[Chapter 56](#)  
[Chapter 57](#)  
[Chapter 58](#)  
[Chapter 59](#)  
[Chapter 60](#)  
[Chapter 61](#)  
[Chapter 62](#)  
[Chapter 63](#)  
[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)  
[Chapter 66](#)  
[Chapter 67](#)  
[Chapter 68](#)  
[Chapter 69](#)  
[Chapter 70](#)  
[Chapter 71](#)  
[Chapter 72](#)  
[Chapter 73](#)  
[Chapter 74](#)  
[Chapter 75](#)  
[Chapter 76](#)  
[Chapter 77](#)  
[Chapter 78](#)  
[Chapter 79](#)  
[Chapter 80](#)  
[Chapter 81](#)  
[Chapter 82](#)  
[Chapter 83](#)  
[Chapter 84](#)  
[Chapter 85](#)  
[Chapter 86](#)  
[Chapter 87](#)  
[Chapter 88](#)  
[Chapter 89](#)  
[Chapter 90](#)  
[Chapter 91](#)  
[Chapter 92](#)  
[Chapter 93](#)  
[Chapter 94](#)  
[Chapter 95](#)  
[Chapter 96](#)  
[Chapter 97](#)  
[Chapter 98](#)  
[Chapter 99](#)  
[Chapter 100](#)  
[Chapter 101](#)

[Chapter 102](#)  
[Chapter 103](#)  
[Chapter 104](#)  
[Chapter 105](#)  
[Chapter 106](#)  
[Chapter 107](#)  
[Chapter 108](#)  
[Chapter 109](#)  
[Chapter 110](#)  
[Chapter 111](#)  
[Chapter 112](#)  
[Chapter 113](#)  
[Chapter 114](#)  
[Chapter 115](#)  
[Chapter 116](#)  
[Chapter 117](#)  
[Chapter 118](#)  
[Chapter 119](#)  
[Chapter 120](#)  
[Chapter 121](#)  
[Chapter 122](#)  
[Chapter 123](#)  
[Chapter 124](#)  
[Chapter 125](#)  
[Chapter 126](#)  
[Chapter 127](#)  
[Epilogue](#)  
[Acknowledgements](#)

*For the love of money is the root of all evil.  
Some have wandered away from the faith and  
impaled themselves with a lot of pain  
because they made money their goal.*

1 Timothy 6:10  
Common English Bible

## PROLOGUE

*Soho, London, February 1962*

It happened on a Saturday night. She was at the Carmelo, working in the office over the club, when there was a commotion downstairs and Mitch the barman burst through the door, wild-eyed, dishevelled, and so scared it was all he could do to breathe.

‘It’s fucking Sears!’

The words came out as a strangled yelp, and then he was gone as quickly as he’d appeared, leaving the door swinging on its hinges behind him.

For a moment she was so stunned by Mitch’s sudden entrance that all she could do was sit there, immobile, the pen poised over the accounts, listening. When she’d passed through the club earlier, it had been packed with a typical Saturday-night crowd, out for a good time. With the door closed and her mind on the accounts, she’d barely registered the disturbance until Mitch came up to give her the glad tidings.

Now, above the sudden mad pounding of her own heart, she could hear glasses smashing, tables being overturned, women screaming and a man’s voice roaring threats.

*Oh shit.* It was happening, just as Marcus Redmayne had said it would when he came into another of her clubs two weeks earlier, trying to scare the arse off her.

She was scared now all right. Her legs felt weak underneath her as she forced herself out of the chair and hurried to close the door. For a moment she stood with her ear pressed to the wood, listening to the pandemonium downstairs.

*Oh fuck oh God oh help . . .*

Trembling, she turned the handle, stepped out onto the landing and peered over the banisters. There was a fight going on, people with baseball bats and bike chains striking out at anyone who got in their way, and women were running, shrieking in fear.

Clara’s heart was beating so hard she was afraid it would tear its way through her chest wall and thump to the carpet in a bloody heap.

*Fulton Sears.*

There he was, in the centre of the room, huge and bald and ugly as sin, swinging left and right with brass knuckledusters, his hands red with blood all the way up to the wrists, wallowing in this bloodbath like a hippo in the mud. Limp with fright, Clara edged backward, trying to be invisible – but before she could make it back to the office he looked up and saw her there.

She froze.

His face split in a wide grin. She saw him knock one of the waiters to the floor and then glance up again, up to where she stood on the landing, and . . .

*Shit! He was coming up!*

He was surging through the fight, barging people out of the way. Clara raced into the office and slammed the door closed. Instinctively she fumbled for a bolt or latch, but there was no lock on the inside of the door – why would there be?

Improvising, she jammed one of the chairs under the handle and stood there, watching it, panting with terror. Then she lunged for the desk, snatched up the phone and dialled 999, her eyes never leaving the door, the handle, all the time waiting for it to turn, waiting for that monster to try to get in at her.

As she was dialling, she could hear Toby's voice in her head: *Whatever happens in the clubs, we don't ever call the police. We never involve the Bill, not even the ones on the payroll. We sort things out ourselves.*

Clara paused for a long moment. Then she slammed the phone back down onto its cradle. Looked around for a weapon, anything, to defend herself.

There was nothing.

Sweating, trembling, all she could do was stand there, listening to the chaos downstairs and waiting for the handle to turn. How long would a chair hold him? About two seconds. Unable to look away, she carried on staring at it.

*Oh God, please help me*, she thought, her pulse deafening in her ears. She felt she was going to pass out or throw up, sickened by the images flashing through her mind of what he'd do when he got his hands on her.

The noise downstairs seemed to be fading. She could hear only men's voices now, shouting, no more screams. Groaning, did she hear groaning? She thought she did. And . . . oh sweet Jesus, she could hear someone coming up the stairs. She could hear *him*, moving stealthily, creeping up the stairs. Her eyes were riveted to the handle. To the door. To the chair. She couldn't move, she couldn't even breathe.

*The handle was turning.*

Slowly, excruciatingly slowly, it was starting to turn.

With a desperate cry Clara flung herself forward, put her full weight against the flimsy barrier of the chair. Her chest was tight with fear. She was right up against the door, she could almost *feel* him there, right there, on the other side of it.

The handle continued to turn. She could feel his weight go against it, felt it shuddering through the wood. The chair bucked beneath her. He was going to get in here. He was going to get her.

She waited, sweat trickling down her temples, sliding down her back. She could smell her own fear. If he got in here . . .

There was no *if* about it.

He was going to.

And then . . . oh God, what was going to happen to her?

A faint, deep-throated chuckle came from the other side of the door.

The hairs on the nape of her neck stood on end. He was laughing at her. He knew she was here, she was trapped, and he was mocking her. Any moment now he would burst in here and hurt her, kill her. She could almost see him on the other side of the door, barrel-chested, bloodstained, sadistic and out for revenge.

*God, please help me, she thought. I'll do better. I'll be good, I promise, just help me right now, will you?*

God wasn't listening.

Was it any surprise? Would anyone, God included, actually care if she came to grief? Not her family, that was for sure, and she had no friends.

The only thing she had left was a reputation – and it wasn't a good one.

She was Black Clara – twenty-four years old, twice married and twice widowed, a hard-hearted gold-digger, a cold-blooded chaser of men and their money. Clara Dolan, the hopeful young girl she had once been, hadn't survived the move from the slums of Houndsditch. But all she'd ever done was what she *had* to do. Wasn't that the truth?

Suddenly the door buckled as he launched a ferocious kick. Jarred by the impact, her teeth snapped together so that she bit her tongue and made it bleed.

Clara flinched and let out a hopeless yell.

Then another.

*Jesus, oh please, please . . .*

Another kick. Clara was thrown backward against the desk, floundering. Then the door and the chair flew inward, and Sears burst into the room.

# 1

## *Houndsditch, London, 1953*

Clara was fifteen when she found out that love is dangerous, that it will destroy you. It was a lesson she learned at her mother's side, when Kathleen Dolan went into labour for the fifth time.

Kathleen's first pregnancy had brought Clara into the world; then came a stillbirth, followed five years later by Bernadette, or Bernie as she was always known; and then, two years after that, came Henry. Now there would be another baby and it was the last thing they needed, any of them, because Dad had run off to avoid a prison sentence, leaving them with nothing.

So here they were, what was left of the Dolan family: Kathleen, Clara, Bernie and Henry, living in a hellhole, with barely enough money to feed themselves on post-war rations and a constant struggle to find the rent, which was so high – six pounds a week! – that Clara thought Frank Hatton the rent man ought to be wearing a fucking mask, since he was committing daylight robbery.

Clara still couldn't believe that Dad had left them. Night after night, she dreamed that he would come back to tell them it was all a joke, a mistake, they were going home. It was eight months since he'd abandoned them. Not long after, Kathleen his pregnant wife learned that he'd been fiddling the books on his business and she had confided as much, amid floods of tears, to her eldest daughter Clara.

It all came out then, as disgusting and unsightly as spilled entrails unravelling. Tom Dolan's engineering firm was deeply in debt, while all the money he'd scraped off the top had been squandered on living like a lord. The firm – which had been a successful growing concern employing two hundred and fifty people – was in ruins. And there was worse to come. Without telling Kathleen, Tom had taken out a raft of huge loans from the bank and put their home up as security.

'It's going to be fine, Mum,' said Clara, sitting on the bed, which was soaked with her mother's sweat, and dabbing gently at her feverish brow with a cool flannel. Kathleen moved fitfully, and the old newspapers they'd put under her to save soaking the mattress crackled.

*Oh, is it?*

Clara was trying hard not to let her fear show in her face. She kept glancing nervously at the hugely swollen belly straining beneath her mother's sweat-stained nightdress. She knew nothing of childbirth. All she knew was that her mother had been lying here in agony all night. Now, morning was nudging at the curtains, sending

strands of light through, and the daylight made her more anxious than ever. Was this right, for the labour to go on so long?

Against her better judgement, she'd sent Bernie out in the small hours to fetch the district nurse. They all hated being in the flat, but venturing outside it was even worse. The Dolans occupied the attic, but on the floors below them there were other families, some packed in ten to a room, and often they spilled out onto the communal stairs, blocking access to and from the top floor.

Hatton the rent man had told Kathleen that their landlord Lenny Lynch had 'put the schwartzers in to de-stat', and Kathleen had to explain to Clara what that meant – that since the 1952 McCarran–Walter provisions blocked the Caribbean's emigration outlet to America, West Indians had been pouring into Britain and landlords had seen this as a golden opportunity.

People like Lenny Lynch had lost no time in packing the immigrants into places previously occupied by white families, and had ruthlessly encouraged them to do their worst: to piss in doorways, leave rubbish up and down the pavements, play jazz at all hours, install white prostitutes to pimp off, behave in a threatening manner toward the whites so that they would move out . . . and then landlords could move the more profitable, more easily exploited blacks in.

So Clara spent a long, anxious time waiting for Bernie's return. When she eventually made it home in one piece Clara was relieved. But the news wasn't good. The district nurse was off across town attending some other poor bitch who couldn't afford the ten shillings a proper midwife would cost.

'But her husband said she'd come straight over as soon as she got back,' said Bernie, who was now hovering, fidgeting, her pixie face screwed up with worry, in the bedroom doorway. Little Henry was clinging on to Bernie like she was a life raft in a sea of doubt.

Hours crept by.

'Should I go over again and see if she's back yet?' asked Bernie finally, her face wet with tears of terror at the sight of her mother in such pain.

'Yeah,' said Clara. She thought of the doctor's place, several streets away, but they didn't open until nine, that was *hours* off, and anyway the doctor was never there, he hadn't been there yesterday because it was Sunday and no one worked on a Sunday, it was a Holy day. Still, they had to try. This couldn't be right, not this long. 'And I'll write you a note for the doctor – you can drop it through his letterbox too. And for God's sake, be careful. Don't talk to anyone.'

They could only hope. They could only *try*.

Bernie charged off down the stairs and at the noise of the door slamming behind her Kathleen's eyes fluttered open. She let out another deep, growling moan. Then, pitifully, she tried to give Clara a reassuring smile. Clara thought her heart would break, to see that smile. A bleak bitterness gripped her. *Fucking men*. There had been a time when she believed her father could do no wrong – not any more. There he was, swanning about who knew where, having ducked his creditors, and a jail term too, and here was poor Mum, who was worth ten of him, no *twenty*, suffering because of what he'd done to her.

'Mum, I think we're going to have to try and get you over to the hospital,' said

Clara.

‘Oh yeah? What we gonna do then? Fly? Or walk?’ Kathleen smiled and then winced as a fresh contraction hit her.

Clara winced too as Kathleen gripped her hand and let out another one of those gut-wrenching moans.

*She could die*, thought Clara with a thrill of real horror. *Oh, Dad, why did you do it? How could you leave us like this?*

They’d lost their lovely house, their precious home, when he’d done a runner. Clara felt ready to puke her guts up when she thought of their house; it had been so beautiful, with its manicured lawns. They’d had a gardener then, and a cleaning lady who came in once a week, and there was a fish pond with a fountain shooting up to the sky. There was an elegant top-of-the-range Jaguar on the drive that Dad liked to use as a runabout, and a Rolls-Royce in the garage for family outings.

Clara would never forget that life, their other life, their *real* life. There were trips out to the races, expensive holidays at the seaside. She could still see him in her mind’s eye, Tom Dolan, her father, that bastard, laughing and flicking his silver monogrammed Ronson lighter, the flame flaring as he lit another Havana cigar. His gold tie-pin and matching cufflinks would glint in the sunlight. His black hair – like Clara’s own – was thick and glossy, and his eyes – also like hers – were the striking violet-blue of an English blue-bell wood, always shining with confidence.

And Mum, she’d looked so different then! Mum in designer dresses, her copper-brown hair swept up, styled by the hairdresser at a costly salon up West. Five pounds a week each – a bloody fortune! – for Clara and Bernie, and Henry, the apple of his dad’s eye, indulged so much. *Too* much, maybe. No expense spared, not then. The sky was the limit. But suddenly it had ended, it had all come unwound, the threads of their once-gilded lives. Clara had been vaguely aware that creditors were queuing up, staff were being laid off, suppliers who hadn’t been paid in a long while were baying for blood and demanding money that was no longer there.

And then the biggest shock of all.

The money was no longer there because Dad had been systematically robbing the company. He’d creamed off sixty thousand pounds to live a lavish lifestyle way beyond his means, all so that he could impress his friends, play the big I-am, buy Rollers and spend days out at Ascot and mix with the nobs he so admired, so wanted to *be* like; pretending he wasn’t an ordinary working-class bloke who’d made good, pretending he was something he wasn’t.

But what use was it, thinking about that now? Kathleen had rented this flat. They were here. They *had* to cope.

‘I’ll get hold of a copper, see if he can’t whistle up an ambulance,’ said Clara. She knew this was like wishing for gold bars down a sewer. The coppers never came round this area if they could avoid it; and on the rare occasions they did, they came in twos and threes, never alone.

They didn’t have a phone here – a *phone*, what a bloody joke! – and no one else who lived in these rat-hole flats did either. The telephone box out in the road had been vandalized months back and no PO engineers had proved brave enough to venture into this warren of thieves to fix it.

‘We could get a taxi,’ gasped Kathleen, still trying to smile through the agony. This too was a joke. They couldn’t afford a taxi. A taxi was the stuff of dreams. They couldn’t afford fuck-all. Not any more.

*So this is what they mean by being up shit creek,* thought Clara.

They had no money and they were three weeks behind with the rent. One of the few things they’d hung on to from their old life was Mum’s battered Singer sewing machine, and for the first few months Kathleen had got by taking in dressmaking work, never bringing her clients here – of course not – but going out to do fittings and deliveries. The last few weeks, however, Kathleen had been too ill to even lift a needle.

They couldn’t turn to the neighbours for help, either.

‘You mustn’t talk to anyone,’ Kathleen had told her children when they’d moved in here.

Clara had been mystified by this to begin with. It took her a while to understand that all the big terraced houses along this street and the adjacent ones had been greedily parcelled up into flats and let out by uncaring landlords, mostly to migrants and their white ‘girlfriends’, who were prostitutes whose wages the men lived off. Late into the night there were fights, music played full-volume, people loitering in groups, smoking and grinning on the stinking stairs as they tried to pass, watching the family who occupied the top floor as though they were prey.

This, truly, was a nightmare. Clara had heard of such things, but she had never dreamed she’d see them close-up. This place – the furnished flat Kathleen had assured her eldest daughter would be the answer to their newly homeless state – was hell: red-hot in summer, freezing in winter, and there was never any peace. The basement of their building had been turned into an illegal cellar-club where people could gather to smoke marijuana and gamble day and night. The Dolans had to share a squalid, filthy toilet two floors down with everyone else in the block, and it was a battle just to get down there and back without being stopped or asked for cash or manhandled.

And the flat itself was no haven from the squalor. The walls were green with damp, old wallpaper peeling off and hanging in brown mouldering strips from every corner, cockroaches scuttling around in the rotting floorboards beside the skirting board. All the Dolans’ own beautiful furniture had been seized by bailiffs before the eviction order was served, so they had to make do with the stuff that came with this ‘furnished’ sweatbox. The stained mattresses reeked of piss and were crawling with bugs. The bedside cabinets were empty orange boxes with bits of fabric tacked onto them. The previous occupants must have had a dog or a cat, because soon after they moved in Henry developed fleabites all round his ankles.

Kathleen had rented this flat because she’d had no choice: it was the only one they could afford. Now, they couldn’t even afford this. It had got to the stage where they kept the front door firmly locked at night and daren’t answer it by day, knowing it would either be someone wanting to rob them of what little they had, or the never-never man wanting payment for items Kathleen had bought on tick. Or, worst of the lot, Frank Hatton.

Clara shuddered. *Hatton*. Last week Kathleen had been too sick to deal with the repulsive, bristle-chinned old thug when he showed up at their front door to collect the

rent money, so Clara had reluctantly answered the door and told him that they had a few problems but would pay him in full next week.

‘Promise?’ leered Hatton. He wore a battered brown leather coat and he had an Alsatian, mad-eyed and with thick black-and-tan fur, on a stout lead at his side. Round here, Clara reckoned he daren’t go out without the damned thing or else someone would rip his teeth out and sell them for dentures. The dog was snarling. It looked like it wanted to tear Clara’s throat out. She thought that if Hatton let it go for a second, it would do just that.

Clara hated the way Hatton’s eyes roamed over her; it felt disgusting, like having a slug crawling over your skin.

‘A pretty girl like you need never starve, you know,’ he’d said. ‘Well, I suppose you do know. You must.’

Clara felt her face stiffen with distaste. She knew she was a striking girl, with her black hair, white skin and violet-blue eyes. Men had propositioned her before. But he was old enough to be her *granddad*.

‘Tuesday,’ she said, and shut the door in his face.

‘Three o’clock, I’ll be here!’ he shouted.

Clara leaned against the door, feeling sick, her heart hammering, her mind chasing around in never-ending circles. They were trapped here and they would all die here, in poverty and in fear. They were in hell, and there was no way out.

*Soho, 1953*

Lenny Lynch looked at his flashy gold watch as he stood at the bar in the Blue Banana club. The place was packed, everyone having a good time, playing chemmy and poker. Eartha Kitt was pouring out sultry vocals on the turntable, singing ‘*C’est Si Bon*’; Lenny didn’t know what that meant, but he guessed it was something sexual, something hot.

It was almost time.

Pet an animal too much, feed it too well, and eventually, the thing’s going to turn and bite you on the arse. Simple common sense. Dogs, women, men – they were all the same in this respect, Lenny knew it for a fact. But . . . what could you do? He’d always had a soft spot for Marcus Redmayne.

Lenny studied his reflection in the mirrors behind the optics. *Poor old cunt*, he thought, half-laughing to himself – or trying to, anyway. All the Brylcreem in the world couldn’t hide his thinning hair, all the costly wet shaves and hottowel head massages at Trumper’s couldn’t disguise the fleshy pouches around his bloodshot blue eyes, or the way gravity and time were pulling the sides of his mouth down. His shirt was expensive, his suit bespoke, Savile Row, the best. *But, come on, let’s face the music and dance, shall we? I’m old*, he thought. And now he felt tired and sad, too, because it had reached the point where something had to be done about Marcus, something drastic.

And it would be done tonight. He’d already arranged it.

‘Put me another one in there, would you, sweetheart?’ He handed his empty glass to Delilah, a statuesque Nigerian beauty in her forties who for years had managed this Soho basement bar for him. She tended the bar naked but for a pair of thigh-high black leather boots, as was her usual rather startling practice.

Lenny looked around. The place was busy for a Monday, full of English, Americans and Italians – all sorts of scum in here since the war – most of them playing at the gaming tables, and he’d take a cut from every winning pot. The tarty-looking hostesses with their hard acquisitive eyes and ready smiles were giggling and flirting while serving the punters overpriced drinks and anything else they fancied.

‘You a bit down, m’boy,’ Delilah purred, eyeing him up. ‘Troubles?’

Lenny thought about confiding in her, then bit his tongue. Delilah was one of the people, his old trusted people, who had put the finger on Marcus, saying he’d been coming in here with that scrawny sidekick of his, checking out the books, acting like

she was scooping off some of the honey for herself, which of course she would never do. Delilah had been outraged by this implication, by the mere suggestion that she would ever take from Lenny Lynch. And Lenny was, too. There were lots of complaints coming in about Marcus now, half of Soho was in uproar.

‘You know what, Lenny boy? You want to sort that pup Marcus out afore he bite you,’ said Delilah, reading his thoughts.

Lenny looked at her, startled. But she was right. Delilah was a wise woman. Lenny watched her swagger away to the optics at the back of the bar. Once upon a time, that black arse jiggling around the place would have excited him. In the past, he’d romped happily with Delilah in the back room. Now? Forget it. He was limp as a windsock on a dull day.

Delilah refilled Lenny’s glass and turned back to the bar with a broad smile, but inside she was furious. Fucking Marcus Redmayne, sticking his nose in things that didn’t concern him, coming in here like a frigging accountant, checking the stock, examining the books, asking questions like she was a damned criminal. She’d run this bar for Lenny ten years now, right through the war and everything – of *course* she dipped in now and then, didn’t everyone? Lenny wouldn’t mind, even if he knew; she was sure of that. Not that he did know, and she was never going to tell him, but if Marcus would only back off and let well alone, everything would go on as normal and things would be just fine.

She had put the word out around Lenny’s other clubs, and sure enough Marcus had been in most of them, checking over things, asking questions. He was all over the place like a fucking rash, she was sick of that boy. Hiding her irritation, she sauntered back to the bar, working it hard, doing her utmost to make ol’ Lenny’s cock stand up – if it still could, which she very much doubted. All the same, she had to try, because that was the way she’d always kept Lenny off-balance in the past, using sex to keep him sweet. But it was obvious he wasn’t up for it tonight. He was too busy staring at his watch. In fact he’d been flicking glances at it all evening.

‘Something going down?’ she asked him.

Startled, Lenny looked up. He seemed almost surprised to see her there.

‘Eleven o’clock,’ he sighed. ‘Got some boys doin’ a job.’

Delilah’s attention sharpened. ‘Would that something involve Marcus?’

Lenny nodded.

*Well, thank fuck for that,* thought Delilah.

Lenny could tell that Delilah was happy Marcus was going to get it in the neck. No doubt about it, she was a gorgeous girl. But right now . . . not even Delilah’s prodigious bignippled tits, swaying teasingly in front of him like two over-filled balloons, were doing it for him. Smirking, she placed his drink on the bar. He downed it in one, just as he had the one before. He knew he’d pay for it later. Once he’d been a ten pints a night boy, but he was too long in the tooth for all that shit now. One whisky was his limit. Two gave him heartburn. Three had him up and down to the bog the whole night long.

He looked around. The Blue Banana was an important part of his little empire. No one owned all of Soho, but he prided himself that a good portion of it belonged to him.

In addition to the Blue Banana, he had the Blue Heaven, the Blue Bird, and the Calypso. And then there was the property he had dotted about London: flats in Notting Hill and Houndsditch, stuffed with all sorts, most of them running prossies. Since he'd edged out all the decent working-class families that used to live there, he was pulling in a fucking fortune.

As for Soho, it had been a battleground since the war, with the whites, the Maltese and a few Italians all wrestling for control. So far, Lenny had come out on top. He had the best troops, the best men. And Marcus was the best of the lot, his right hand, his wingman. Or at least he had been, until the rumours started up, until it all began to turn sour.

Lenny hadn't wanted to believe any of it. At first, he'd refused to. He was the one who'd taken the boy off the streets, groomed him, made him into a man. They'd grown close. He'd spent a fortune on Marcus, sorted him out with a house, a wardrobe of decent suits, all the whores he could fuck. They'd drunk together, fought together, and slowly, inch by inch, Lenny had sat back, relaxed a little, let Marcus take the reins.

*You fucking fool*, he told himself.

Truth was, he was getting tired. Truth was, he was getting bloody *old*. He was sixty-eight now, past retirement age, and sometimes it seemed easier to let Marcus take the strain off, let him handle the active stuff. Marcus was a young blood of twenty-two, sharp as a tack and handy in a fight, he could take it.

*Oh yeah, he can take it, he's taken you for a cunt, after all.*

Lenny sighed and drained his glass. He looked around at the punters, the girls, and felt weariness overwhelm him. He'd put things in motion, and he felt sad to the depths of his soul about it.

*Why'd you do it, Marcus? Wasn't I always good to you?*

But Lenny was no fool. He knew this was the natural order of things. It was inevitable that a leader of men, growing into his strength, would try to take over. It was the same in the animal kingdom. Like those stags he'd seen when he was up in Scotland that time, doing a bit of business: the old ones got pushed out to die alone, the younger, stronger ones became the new rulers. It was nature.

Once, he and Marcus had practically been mates. Buddies. But no more. The young whelp had turned on its master, trying to drive a wedge between Lenny and his old and trusted friends, accusing them of cheating him. Lenny had confronted one or two of them, asked was there any truth in it. Wounded by these groundless accusations, they'd asked him, was he blind? Couldn't he see what that fucker was up to? Couldn't he see that the cunt was trying to push him over the edge? It was all a ploy to isolate him so that he could shove him out of the way and take over.

Lenny Lynch knew they were telling the truth. But he was a fighter, always had been. He looked at his watch again. It was time. Eleven o'clock, and goodbye Marcus. It was all set up. Old he might be, but Lenny wasn't ready to retire from the game just yet, he wasn't ready to give in and get out. He was going to fight, and fight dirty, to keep his place at the top of the heap. And Marcus was about to learn that Lenny Lynch still had teeth. Bloody great sharp ones.