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My Uncle Charlie

Written by Julie Shaw

Published by HarperElement

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JULIE SHAW

**MY UNCLE
CHARLIE**

**THE TRUE STORY OF YORKSHIRE'S
NOTORIOUS CRIMINAL FAMILY**

H A R P E R
element

All names and identities have been changed in this memoir, to protect both the living and the children of those who have died. Some changes have been made to historical facts for the same reason.

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The Final Countdown

*Slouched, you slowly shuffle, unsure where
you'll safely sleep,
Hood hitched close, hiding your head as you
falter down High Street,
Weather beaten face and weary eyes, no longer
a welter weight,
A punch bag, a punk, a parasite now, you care
not to ponder your fate.*

*The bottle, the bag, the boxing brochure, bound
tightly beneath your belt,
The past, the present, the pain to come, no
prickle of pride to be felt,
A doorway, a dumpster to bed down in,
destined to die in the damp,
A chorus of chants cloud your chemical brain,
seconds out for the champ.*

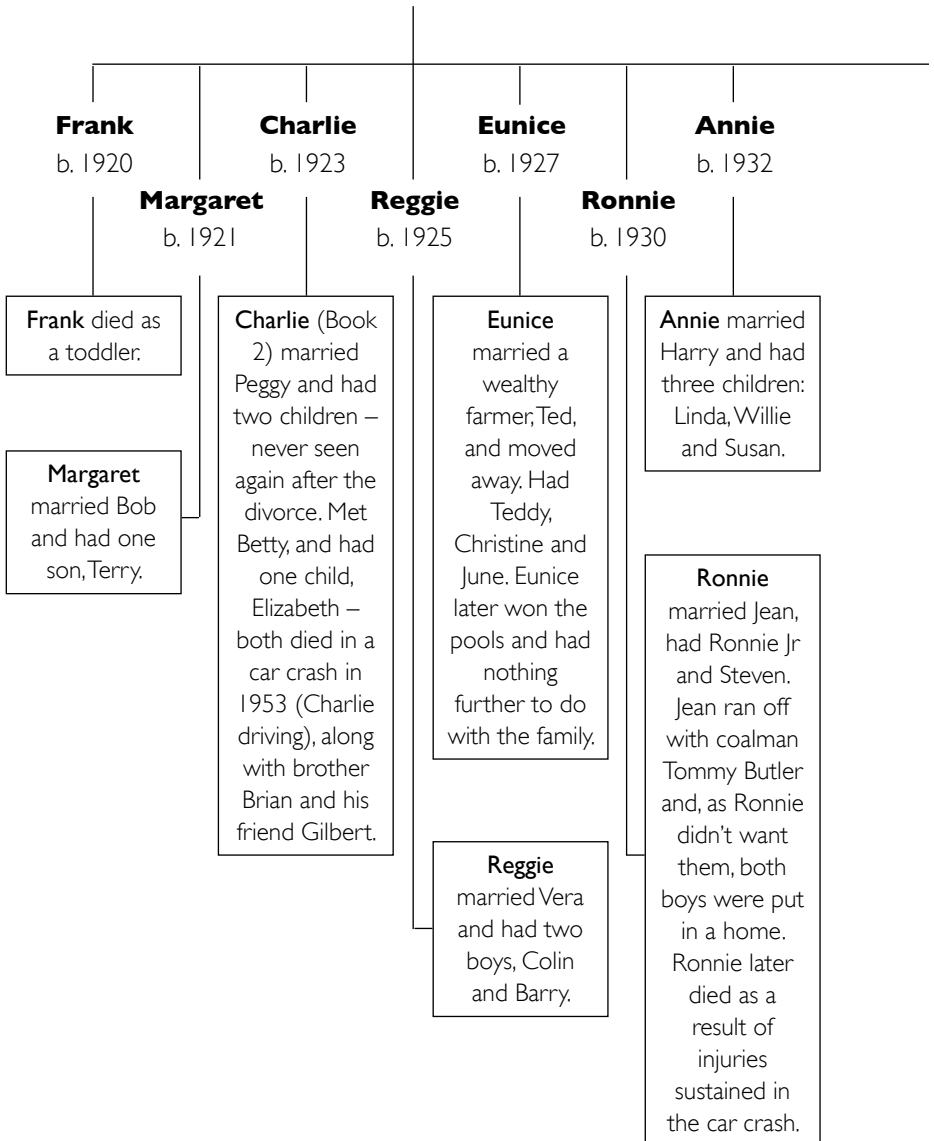
Note by the Author

My name is Julie Shaw, and my father, Keith, is the only surviving member of the 13 Hudson siblings, born to Annie and Reggie Hudson on the infamous Canterbury Estate in Bradford. We were and are a very close family, even though there were so many of us, and those of us who are left always will be.

I wanted to write these stories as a tribute to my parents and family. The stories are all based on the truth but, as I'm sure you'll understand, I've had to disguise some identities and facts to protect the innocent. Those of you who still live on the Canterbury Estate will appreciate the folklore that we all grew up with: the stories of our predecessors, good and bad, and the names that can still strike fear or respect into our hearts – the stories of the Canterbury Warriors.

ANNIE AND REGGIE HUDSON

Married 1919



Hudson Family Tree

June
b. 1933

Keith
b. 1937

Joe
b. 1943

Brian
b. 1935

Malcolm
b. 1940

David
b. 1946

June married Jock and had three children: Lyndsey, Vinnie (Book 1) and Josie.

Keith married Shirley (Book 3) and had three children: Julie (the author), Glenn and Paula.

Joe married Sandra and had Ricky, Michael, Beverley and Scott, who died as a toddler. Married Patsy and had Joe and Amanda. Married Sharon and had Kelly and Karl.

Brian died in a car crash in 1953 (brother Charlie at the wheel).

Malcolm married Valerie and had three kids: Stephen, Donna and Tracie. Was a fighter and loved to drink and cause trouble.

David married Pauline and had Brian and Paul. Then married Susan and had David, Lee and Paula.

Prologue

November 1999

Vinnie pulled the lapels of his Crombie together and shivered. A bloody church was no place to be on a November morning. Any church, but definitely not St Joseph's Catholic Church which, built in the 1800s, made plenty of its lofty religious aims, but absolutely no concessions to comfort. And it didn't help that they'd yet to shut the doors. Every time they creaked open to admit yet another latecomer, another blast of freezing air came in too.

He glanced around him, marvelling at the size of the turnout. He was 42, so by now he'd been to a fair few funerals, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the church so packed with mourners. Neither, he reflected once the service got under way, had he remembered just how long a fucking funeral mass could be. He leaned close to his mother, June, who was standing beside him, dressed in one of her trademark fur coats. 'How long is that fucking priest going to drone on for?' he whispered. 'I'm fucking freezing my bollocks off here!'

June kicked at Vinnie's boot with the toe of her black stiletto. She was 65 now, still slim, and though she was slightly less spiky than she had been in her younger days, she was still pretty feisty when she was in the mood to be. 'Vinnie! Have some respect!' she hissed, picking up her hymn book in

readiness for another hymn to start. ‘Bloody swearing in a church. Pack it in!’

Vinnie duly picked up his own hymn book and looked across at the coffin up in front. He’d had a good innings, had his Uncle Charlie – that was what everyone kept saying, anyway. No, 76 wasn’t *that* old, but it wasn’t that young either. And, truth be known, Vinnie thought, casting his eye again over the enormous congregation, he’d done fucking well to make it that far, considering. June’s oldest brother, and for many years the linchpin of the whole Hudson clan, he’d flirted with death often enough to be considered lucky to have reached his seventies. And there was little doubt, though he’d be gone, that he’d not be forgotten.

The organ started up again, and Vinnie made a big show of wincing as his mam started belting out the final hymn. She could sing, no doubt about it, but he couldn’t resist it. Winding her up was still a reliable source of entertainment, specially given *what* she was singing. *Make me a channel of your peace?* he thought. *As if! Are you listening to this, our Charlie?*

Vinnie glanced at the box again, unable to suppress a grin. He’d probably be turning in his coffin before he was even in the bloody grave!

He checked his watch surreptitiously as the hymn drew to a close, not wanting to risk another prodding from his mother. Not long now, hopefully, and then he could get outside and have a roll-up. And get a proper look at some of the faces he’d yet to properly clock. And there were a lot of them crammed in behind him, he knew that – all suited and booted to come here and pay their respects to his uncle, even though, ironically, many of their battle scars had probably been inflicted by the old rogue himself.

The rows in front, on the other hand, were full of close family, though you wouldn't know it – none were actually weeping. Aunties and uncles, various in-laws, and fuck knew how many cousins. Probably even a few second cousins, too – Charlie's influence had reached out far and wide. There was also the woman Vinnie knew was Charlie's latest 'companion'. She was called Dorothy Mary, and looked around the same age as his mother. Though, caked in make-up and with thick, dark arches drawn on where her eyebrows should have been, Vinnie thought she resembled some kind of old shop mannequin. He didn't know her well, but knew enough to know she was probably in a minority of one – the only one who was actually genuinely grieving for Charlie, because though his loss was sad there wasn't much grief going on, not in the traditional sense. Which was understandable, because his uncle had been something of a stranger when he died, having isolated himself from friends and family years ago.

No, this sadness today wasn't like being upset over the loss of a close relative – it was more a kind of emptiness for a time that had passed. Charlie's death represented a lost age, the end of something. Vinnie felt it and he was sure that all the others did too.

But he wasn't one for melancholy, any more than he was one for funerals. And, looking around him, he grinned to himself again. It probably wouldn't be a bad day out, this, all told. Yes, he'd had to sit through three hymns and a long boring sermon – not to mention having to listen to the divvy priest utter a load of crap about what a 'stand-up' guy Charlie was – but, looking at this lot, he realised the wake might actually be okay.

His mam had already told him it was going to be held at the Spicer Street Club, a brisk 15-minute walk away, and a place that had already played host to many family funerals, weddings

and christenings. He couldn't wait to get there. Who knew? It might not just be a good knees-up. There might be a punch-up or two as well.

Slightly cheered now – due respect to his uncle notwithstanding – Vinnie picked up the order of service he'd not looked at up to now. It was a simple affair, a single sheet of paper, folded in half. On the front was a picture of St Joseph's and Charlie's birth and death dates, and on the back they'd printed a black and white photograph of the old bugger. It wasn't recent – not much danger of Charlie having posed for pictures in recent years, after all – but as Vinnie looked at it, it was like he was looking straight into the past. There were family resemblances, and there were family resemblances, and this family resemblance was staggering. *Fuck's sake!* he thought, smiling to himself as the priest rabbited on. *He looks just like me grannie Hudson in a suit!*

Or, rather, did. Now Charlie was gone, it was like something important had died with him. It was the end of an era, the likes of which they'd probably never see again. The era of the Canterbury Warriors.

Part One

Chapter I

Bradford, April 1919

8 April 1919 was a defining day in history for the city of Bradford. It also marked the end of an era. The First World War had brought many social changes. With millions of young men called up to serve their country at its outset (with many more to come, to replace the injured and fallen) millions of women had stepped in to fill the employment gap.

It had been women who'd kept the city on its feet during the crisis – taking on jobs that were definitely not considered 'women's work'. It had been women who'd toiled in factories for the war effort, too, spending long hours on assembly lines, doing laborious, dangerous work. So-called 'Canary Girls', their reward for their toil in building countless shells and missiles was the tell-tale yellow skin of jaundice, due to constantly handling explosives.

But the war had now come to an end. This was to change everything, as the young demobbed troops needed their jobs back, and little by little the women who'd kept the home fires burning were being let go and sent home to care for their men. This naturally included the transport infrastructure, and 8 April saw a major social change. It was the last day a woman would punch the tickets on Bradford's corporation trams – they wouldn't be seen again as conductors for many years.

8 April was also a defining day for Annie McArdle. Eighteen years old, she had weathered (and often enjoyed) the war years, but today she was about to embark on a new journey. Today was the day that she'd walk up the aisle of St Joseph's Catholic Church and vow to love, honour and obey her handsome beau, Reginald Harold Hudson, and their personal battle was about to begin.

'Aww, Annie, love,' Doris McGuire yelled as she threw a handful of rice at her old school pal. 'You know what? You look like the cat that got the cream!'

'Silly bugger!' Annie replied, ducking to try and avoid the next shower of grains winging its way towards her. She hitched up her wedding gown to save it getting blackened in the dirt. She loved her dress – it had taken her mother weeks to sew up and she felt like a queen gliding around in it. She gave Reggie's arm a quick loving squeeze. 'Here, Doris,' she joked. 'It's this fellow here that should be the one grinning. Luckiest day of his life, this is.'

'Don't show me up, woman!' Reggie snapped as they made their way down the church. 'And hell fire! I wish they'd knock it off with that bloody stuff!'

Narky bugger, Annie thought. And on their wedding day as well. Not that she was overly bothered. She knew that where Reginald was concerned she could give as good as she got – always had, always would – so he was just going to have to get used to it. They were married now and Annie intended to be just as brazen a wife as her mother had always been; not taking any nonsense off him ever.

She glanced at Reggie now, and her hand went immediately to her stomach. It was flat now – she was a slim girl – but it wouldn't be for much longer. Which was okay – their hasty marriage wouldn't seem unusual, not with all the servicemen

coming home and rushing to wed the girls they'd been reunited with. But it had also shown her the kind of man Reggie was in that department; a man, to use her mother's parlance, who expected to be serviced on demand. She'd have to nip that idea in the bud quick smart.

It was amusing, though, watching Doris and the rest of her friends giving her cheeky winks – implying that she was in for a great surprise tonight. Annie snorted at the thought. She'd already had that; the surprise being that, contrary to what everyone had told her – about it being a chore and a bind that she'd just have to get used to – she'd actually enjoyed it, rather a lot.

No, she thought, the surprise would come in seven months, near as good as. But hopefully it would be a late arrival so it wasn't too blindingly obvious that she'd been such a wicked, wicked woman.

The wedding breakfast, which actually took place in the afternoon, was held at the McArdles' house. Like the Hudsons, they lived on the Broomfields estate, and in the same row of small terraced houses that they rented from the corporation.

Usually a bit of a hovel, it had put on its best face for the day – swept out and cleaned sufficiently to be smart enough to receive guests, of which there were now 30 or so, all piling in through the narrow doorway, and falling hungrily on the feast of bread and dripping Annie's mum had prepared, washed down with cupfuls of her dad's mead.

Billy McArdle's mead was a legendary tippie locally. Mostly because it was potent enough to be the cause of many a sore head, even after downing just a couple of cupfuls. Well, in today's case, as was the case when there was any sort of occasion, jarfuls – many would be drinking from washed

and scrubbed jam jars, there being far too few cups to go round.

But Billy's mead was also famous because he was a bit of an enthusiast, often experimenting with flavours, depending on what kind of fruit he could nick from various gardens. Sometimes it was raspberry flavoured, other times scented with blackberry, but at this time of year there was little to add, so the wedding drink was just made with the usual honey.

'A toast! A toast!' he cried now, as he swung his mead upwards, and Annie felt her heart swell with love. She never really understood why her mam was so mean to him. To her he was a very fine man. 'To our little Queen Annie and her prince charming, Reggie Hudson,' he continued, beaming at them. 'Long may they reign!'

Annie's mum, Queenie, picked up her husband's pipe from the stone fire top and puffed on it. 'And good luck, my girl,' she called across to her daughter. She roared with laughter then. 'Because you're gonna need it. Mark my words!'

'Oh, Mam, give up,' Annie chided. 'You know he's not a wrong 'un. Well, not half as bad as some of them, anyway. And at least we'll have a roof to call our own over our heads.'

This had been a great source of pride to Annie. But an even greater source of relief. Two of her friends, Doris and Florrie, had already been married for a couple of years now, and were still living with their in-laws, all crammed in together. Hardly the most romantic way to start married life. And though she got along with Reggie's family, she certainly didn't want to live with them. She was 18 now, and sick of being treated like someone's child. No, she wanted to be in charge now – rule her *own* roost.

Queenie tutted and pointed over to Reggie. He was standing by the window, laughing and roaring with the other men. 'Really?' she said. 'Look at him! Drunk as a lord already, he is,

pound to a penny. And it's not yet six o'clock.' She then smiled, giving Annie a nudge on her arm. 'Mind you, girl,' she whispered, 'if he carries on like that, at least you might miss out on a bit of how's yer father.' She winked knowingly. 'Now *that* you can do without!'

Annie felt her cheeks redden. How could her mam say things like that? She moved away from her. She certainly didn't want to talk about *that* sort of thing and definitely not with her mother. Not with someone who didn't have a good word to say about the man she'd supposedly once loved. No, she'd find more agreeable company with her friends. She caught her new husband's eye as she went over to join them, pleased to feel the same flutter of excitement she'd always done as their eyes met, remembering what he'd said earlier about how he loved the way she looked with her hair up, how she looked like a painting of a goddess. Slightly less agreeable was the lewd, suggestive wink he responded with, specially when he followed it up by grinning at Doris and Florrie, causing them to dissolve into a fit of giggles and blushes too.

They knew him too well, she thought, as she joined them. But then, that was probably to be expected. All four of them worked at the local Punch Bowl pub and had done for over a year now – Reggie as a waiter and with Annie, Doris and Flo serving the drinks.

'Right ladies' man, that one is,' Doris warned, as Annie took a sip from her drink. 'You'll probably have to keep him on a leash.'

The mead tasted warm in her throat. Pleasant. She took another gulp, almost downing it. 'Oh, don't you worry,' she said. 'The bugger'll be *wearing* a leash, more like.'

Flo clearly didn't want to linger on such a depressing line of thought. She stroked the arm of Annie's wedding dress and

sighed. ‘Aw, your gown is lovely, Annie,’ she cooed. ‘You look the bee’s knees, you really do. Like a princess. I wish I’d had a dress like that when I married my William. We had bugger all, us, compared to this. Still don’t!’ She sighed then, and looked across to where her own husband was. ‘And you know how folk say things like “It seems like it was only yesterday when you married him”?’

Annie nodded.

Flo stopped stroking the soft material and looked wistfully at her friend. ‘Well, it doesn’t. Not to me. It seems like a million years ago that *I* felt like a princess.’

‘Even more reason for me to make the most of it, then!’ Annie said quickly, not wanting to spoil the happy mood that was overtaking her now the mead had started taking effect. ‘Look,’ she said, doing a twirl so her friends could see how prettily the dress moved. ‘See the way it flips up at the bottom?’

She really wasn’t looking forward to having to take it off, not really. Well, she was, because Reggie would be helping her. But it still seemed a shame – seemed all wrong that once it was off, it was all over. That you only got to wear something so beautiful for a single day.

‘It’s just *gorgeous*,’ Flo said, planting a kiss on Annie’s cheek. ‘And I’m so happy for you. And I bet you can’t wait to get carried over that threshold later, too, Annie. Imagine that, eh? Annie McArdle with her own corporation house!’

‘Annie *Hudson* now, Florrie, remember? I’m not a McArdle any more. Thank God,’ she added with feeling, glancing across at her parents, and seeing them already engaged in one of their regular angry rows, probably about nothing in particular. It wasn’t going to be that way with her and her Reggie. She wouldn’t let it. She’d have him dancing to her tune before he even realised.

She looked at him again, not quite believing her luck. He was a catch, was her Reggie. There was no doubt about it. With his coal-black hair sleeked back so he looked like one of those film stars, his dad's posh suit fitted him perfectly. He wasn't a tall man, but he was built well, with muscles in all the right places, and looks that could melt a girl's heart.

Oh yes, Annie thought, she would have to keep an eye on this one. Right now, though, she would cut him some slack. It was supposed to be a party after all.

And it was a party that went on till midnight. One minute the house was full and it seemed the next it was suddenly empty, and Annie realised her dad was passed out on the floor while her mam was busy shoving the last remaining guest out. 'Go on, bugger off!' she was shouting, all the niceties obviously over with. 'You've all got homes to go to, haven't you?' she barked.

All but one, it seemed. The guest who'd bagged the one decent armchair and who was slumped in it, only just awake.

Her husband. 'Are you ready then, Reggie?' she asked him, shaking his shoulder. But he merely grunted and shook her arm away. 'Reggie!' she said again more sharply. 'It's time to go now!' He at least opened his eyes at this, but what Annie saw wasn't encouraging. He looked boss-eyed and could hardly keep them open.

Now sure quite how she was going to rouse him, let alone manhandle him to their house, she called Queenie over to help. 'Mam,' she called, 'come and see if you can get him up for me, will you?'

Queenie looked at him and smiled, then she shook her head at her daughter. 'You could throw a pan of water over him,' she suggested, 'but it wouldn't do you much use. No, you go on and get yourself home, girl. He's going nowhere, is he? Any more

than your ruddy father. No, leave him here to sleep it off – best thing for him, really. And for you, love,’ she said more gently. ‘It’s not often you’ll have a night off, so if I were you I think I’d make the most of it.’

‘I can’t do that!’ Annie exclaimed, mortified. ‘It’s my wedding night! Come on, Mam – help me at least get him on his feet.’

But her mother just looked at her sleeping son-in-law of not quite a day, tutted at Annie and shook her head again. ‘You *really* want to take that lump home with you? Really? Trust me, love, even if you do manage to stagger home with him, what then? When they get into that state, it only means one of two things – either a good hiding or a bit of the other. You’ll enjoy neither tonight, so go on – enjoy this last night of peace, girl, because it’ll be a long time before you can enjoy another.’

Dejected by this unexpected turn in developments, yet without the energy to argue, Annie suddenly felt overcome by weariness. So she simply hitched up the hem of her dress, grabbed her mother’s shawl from the door knob and made her way out of the house and towards her new home. *Have I been expecting too much?* she wondered as she traipsed through the empty streets. *Was her wedding day over now? Done? Was that it?* Because it wasn’t the end to the day she’d envisaged at all. She was a bride and she was supposed to be carried over the threshold. That was the rule. Instead, she was going to have to carry herself over it – not to mention the dress she’d been so looking forward to Reggie helping her out of – and go to bed, in the cold, all alone. He might be drunk but at least he’d have made a half-decent hot-water bottle. Not to mention the rest of it, as well.

All those dreams she’d had about what was going to happen tonight, where were they now? They were going to dance

around the house together – and as they danced, he was going to sing to her. Mouth her favourite song – ‘I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles’ – into her ear. He was going to sing that and then he was going to sweep her off to bed, just as he’d swept her off her feet when she’d first met him. Then they’d cuddle up together under the covers, on the lovely horsehair mattress that her dad had got for them specially, and watch the light of the moon from their bedroom window.

But not now! she thought angrily as she stomped across the grass, the moon above her shining brightly as if to spite her. She was all alone, and it was all wrong, and it wouldn’t be happening again. *You’re a bloody shower, Reggie Hudson!* she huffed to herself as she approached the dark house. This bloody marriage was going to see some changes. That was a promise.

Chapter 2

1923

Annie stretched out her spine, pressing her palms against her hips and groaning. Trying to scrub her step, even from a squatting position, was really the last thing she should be doing in her condition. Not right now. Not with this niggle in her back all the time. And given how much of an effort it had taken even to get down on her haunches, she decided, it would be as nothing compared to the effort it would take to pull herself back up.

Her lower back was hurting now, really quite badly, and a ripple of anxiety ran through her. She was ten days past term now and something told her that the baby inside her knew it. That it was just waiting, the little bleeder, for the worst possible moment, which, given she was out the front, attempting to get down far enough to scrub her front step, might just be now.

She bent back to her task again, scouring swiftly, anxious to finish now. Anxious to have everything ready for when this little one came into the world. Would she be blessed with a boy this time? She hoped so.

Not that she didn't love her little Margaret, her precious daughter, who had probably saved her. But she really wanted a boy this time. For Reggie.

She'd been punished. She knew that. They both had. Punished by a vengeful God, for their wickedness before they'd

married. He'd taken their firstborn, their dear little son, Frank, conceived out of wedlock and born just eight and a half months after. Snatched him from them before he was even a year old.

She could hardly bear to bring the pictures of that day to mind, even now. If she so much as *thought* about it – and she couldn't help but think about it, what with a new baby imminent – the images would tumble in, swirling round and round her head, making her feel so sick and panicky that it was all she could do to try and shoo them away again. And it wasn't like it had been a disease that had taken him, either. It had been an apple, just a ruddy piece of apple, that was all, that had done for her cherished firstborn. Choked him dead – killing him even as she watched. There'd been nothing anyone could have done – they'd all said that to her, everyone. Reggie too, but Annie still felt he blamed her.

Didn't matter anyway. She'd been punished, and that was all there was to it. Reggie could never blame her as much as she blamed herself.

Annie gave up, puffing as she rose again, and glared at her next-door neighbour. It was always the same: Agnes Flanagan, queen of the perfect ox-blood doorstep, happily scrubbing away at hers with a stiff wire brush, getting a right lather on it with her trusty bar of soap. 'You'll scrub the bloody paint off if you carry on,' Annie said, feeling an irrational amount of irritation that, right now, at least, she couldn't have a nice, sparkling step too.

But she couldn't – not with a belly the size of a baby hippo. With a belly, in fact, full of *this bloody baby* – where was it? Hopefully on its way, she thought, feeling her back twinge again.

'Oh, be quiet, Annie,' Agnes snapped. 'Stop being such an old sourpuss. It's jealousy is what it is, plain and simple. You're

only narked because you know your old man will notice mine's the cleanest.'

Reggie wouldn't. Annie knew that. He probably couldn't have cared less. Wouldn't even notice, because these days he seemed to prefer his time at the bloody pub. So much for the honeymoon ruddy period. Even so, just Agnes thinking that he might made Annie annoyed with her. If she hadn't been so immobile she might have leapt the fence separating them and given Agnes a slap – just for being as annoying as she always was.

Which she had been, ever since they'd moved in two years back. An Irish couple in their thirties, they couldn't have kids, apparently. Which meant they didn't have any kids cluttering up their house, which for some reason seemed to make them feel superior. And it meant she had time, did Agnes Flanagan, something Annie sorely lacked. Time to have the cleanest windows, the shiniest step, the tidiest garden.

But she'd show the Flanagans. Show everyone, in fact. Once this little one was born, she'd *definitely* show them. They'd been talking about it, and Reggie had made her a promise – to dig up the garden and lay some turf for a proper lawn. Annie couldn't wait to see the old cow's face when she saw that.

'Shut your cakehole, Agnes,' she said now, anxious to get her own jibe in. 'If your old man had a job, maybe he wouldn't have the time to spend on women's work. You only come out to the step so you can do your gossiping. It doesn't even *need* cleaning. Stan only painted it again last week.'

'Oh, my old man should get a job, should he?' Agnes huffed, standing up now the better to waggle a finger in Annie's direction. She was fond of doing that. Assuming the ten or so years that separated them gave her permission to carry on like she was Annie's mother. 'I'll have you know, girl,' she added, 'that

he has a chance of a *great* job. The railways are setting on and he's been told he's in with a chance. Now, that's a *job*,' she said, pausing to let the emphasis sink in. 'Hmm, let me see ... What is it your man does now? Oh yes, that's right. He waits on up at the Punch Bowl, doesn't he? When he's not up there blind drunk, that is.'

Annie flinched as the pain left her back and gripped her abdomen. Gripped it hard, like a fist. Like a vice. Oh, how she wanted to fly for the old witch next door, but now definitely wasn't the time. She was in labour. She knew the signs. And she knew time was short – little Margaret had been so quick she'd fairly fallen out. So instead, she leaned towards her neighbour and gripped the fencing between the houses. 'Agnes! Go get the midwife, will you?'

Her neighbour's demeanour changed instantly. 'Oh, Annie,' she said, looking anxious now. 'Is it your time? Is it the baby?' She dropped the brush and raised her hands to her cheeks. 'Oh, sweet Jesus, what'll I do?'

'Just get the bloody midwife!' Annie screamed as it hit her very forcefully that the pains were coming quicker now, and that her little one was spark out in her cot indoors, oblivious. 'Then come straight back here and watch our Margaret for me!' she added, trying to keep her legs from buckling. 'Don't stand there looking gormless, Agnes. Go!'

Agnes seemed to get the message then, abandoning the soap as well as the brush, then running down her path and out onto the estate. Thankfully, the local midwife only lived a few streets away and if there were no other babies being born that day – and fingers crossed there wouldn't be – Agnes would find her home and ready to be called out.

Feeling reasonably calm now she knew help was on the way, Annie supported herself using the wall, and waited for the

latest pain to subside before staggering back into the house. Once there she knew she had to try and think straight. Margaret was still asleep, curled into a comma in the cot Reggie had made for her, and for a moment or two Annie dithered about waking her. It was almost dinner-time though, and she'd soon be needing a feed. And if things started moving quickly, there'd be no chance of giving her one.

Decided, Annie moved towards the cot. She had to nurse her. And quickly, before the next contraction came – she knew only too well that it might be hours before she was fit enough to do it later. Groaning with the effort, she hauled her daughter from the cot, bringing the blankets with her, then settled into the big chair, better to get her breast out from under her pinny. 'Come on, baby,' she soothed to the semi-conscious toddler. 'Shh, there, come on. Time you had your tea.'

Margaret was angry. And so she would be. She'd been disturbed from her slumbers. She kicked and fussed, at first refusing to take the breast. 'Come on, you little bugger,' Annie soothed, wincing as Margaret's teeth clamped round her tender skin. 'Make the most of it. You'll be having to share it soon. Either that, or it'll be down to the wet nurse with you,' she gently joked. 'And knowing her, it'll come out sour!'

Margaret relaxed eventually and started to suckle, but as the pain started building again Annie knew it wouldn't last – and, sure enough, as Annie writhed beneath her, Margaret snapped her head back angrily. 'Mammy, no!' she yelled, smacking Annie's breast hard and kicking her. 'Want bread! Want bread!'

'Hush, Margaret,' Annie soothed, trying to keep her voice from rising. The pain deep within her was becoming unbearable. If she didn't coax her daughter down now, she'd end up falling off anyway. It was just so hard to sit, when she felt

compelled to bear down. It was coming. There was no doubt. It was coming.

'Down you get,' she said, gently urging Margaret to climb off of her. 'Baby's coming now. Remember Mammy's baby in her tummy? Baby's coming now –'

'Baby?' Margaret's glass-blue eyes widened. 'Baby, baby, baby!'

She shuffled down now, energised, and ran towards the cold hearth. 'Baby!' she squealed, picking up a stray piece of coal, scribbling on lino with it as Annie convulsed in pain again.

She needed to be down there with her daughter, Annie realised. There was no point in even thinking about her bed now. She needed to be down on the floor where Margaret was. And quickly.

This wasn't the way I'd planned it! she thought irritably, lifting her skirt.

Agnes and the midwife rushed into the living room together, just at the point when Charles Hudson made his entrance. He slithered out, huge and glistening – a ten pounder, it turned out – and with a pair of lungs any town crier would have been proud of.

'Oh! It's a little boy, Annie!' Agnes cried, her voice breaking. 'A little gift from God to replace your Frank.'

Agnes had never known Frank. She and Stan had moved into their house in Broomfields a while after he'd died, but Annie knew her neighbour's emotion was genuine, and felt an unexpected rush of warmth towards her. She felt like crying too, her eyes filling with tears as she held both her babies, wishing above all that Reggie were home to hold his son. She gazed down at the angry pink bundle swaddled close to her chest. He'd be the light of Reggie's life, she just knew it.