

The Take

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Prologue

1984

Lena Summers looked at her eldest daughter in abject disbelief. ‘You are joking?’

Jackie Jackson laughed noisily. She had a loud laugh that made her sound very jolly. Very happy. It was a laugh that belied the vindictive nature beneath it.

‘He’ll love it, Mum, and after six years in poke he’ll be ready for a party.’

Lena shook her head at her daughter and sighed. ‘Are you off your head? A party for him after the stunts he’s pulled over the years?’ The anger was in her voice now. ‘He was still romancing trollops while he was banged up!’

Jackie closed her eyes as if the action would blot out the truths her mother was pointing out to her. She knew him better than *anyone*, she didn’t need this constant barrage about her husband.

‘Will you stop it, Mum. He’s me husband, the father of my kids. It will all work out now he has learned his lesson.’

Lena puffed her lips out in astonishment. ‘Are you on drugs again?’

Jackie sighed heavily, trying her hardest not to scream at the woman in front of her. ‘Don’t be silly. I want to welcome him home, that’s all.’

‘Well, I ain’t going.’

Jackie shrugged her ample shoulders. ‘Suit your fucking self.’

Joseph Summers snapped his head above the newspaper as he growled, 'Don't you talk to your mother like that.'

Jackie stretched her face in comic surprise and said sarcastically, as if talking to a baby, 'Aw, I see, Dad. Need to borrow a few quid, eh?'

Lena suppressed a smile. Jackie, for all her faults, had an uncanny knack of hitting the proverbial nail right on the head. Her husband shoved his face back in the paper and Jackie grinned at her mother.

'Oh, *come*, Mum, all *his* family's going to be there.'

Lena tossed her head and, picking up her cigarettes, said nastily, 'All the more reason to keep away then. Nothing but fucking trouble, the Jacksons. Look at the last time we got together with them.'

Jackie was annoyed again and it showed, her heavy features screwed up as she tried with obvious difficulty to suppress her fury.

'You caused all that, Mum, and you know it,' she said through gritted teeth.

She was clenching her fists now, and Lena stared at her eldest daughter, marvelling at her colossal anger. Even as a child she had been like that, one word and off she went into a frenzy of rage.

There were tears in her daughter's eyes. Lena knew she had to diffuse the anger now or face the consequences, and quite frankly she was tired, tired and more than a little interested to see what prison had done to her son-in-law.

'All right then, keep your hair on.'

'Well I ain't fucking going.' Joe got up and stamped from the room, and they heard him putting the kettle on in the kitchen.

'I'll get him there, don't worry.'

She was regretting her decision already.

'Look at him, anyone would think he'd just got out of prison!'

The men laughed.

They could see their friend's spotty behind pumping away at the small Asian girl they had purchased for him the night before. He had actually been released the previous day from Shepton Mallet, where he had spent the last six weeks. It was an open prison, and his friends had picked him up in a limo with his girlfriend Tracey

and a large amount of alcohol in tow. Tracey had been worn out before they had even reached Dartford toll tunnel and he had dumped her at the Crossways Hotel, much to her chagrin. They had then made their way into London where he had shagged anything with a pulse. He was overdue for going home but not one of them had the guts to point that out to him. He was drunk, aggressive drunk, and no one wanted to start him off. Freddie Jackson was a handful, and as much as they loved him he was also an annoying fucker into the bargain.

He had just done six years of a nine-year sentence for firearms, attempted murder and a malicious wounding charge and he was proud of that fact. Inside he had mixed with what he saw as the cream of the underworld and he had come out of there thinking that he was now one of them.

The fact they were all doing in excess of fifteen years made no difference to Freddie Jackson. He was Sonny Corleone in his mind. He was a man to be reckoned with.

Freddie Jackson had worshipped Sonny, had never understood how they could have killed his character off. He had been the business, far more menacing than that short-arsed runt Michael. Freddie saw himself as the Godfather of the Southeast. Righting wrongs, causing untold hag and making his fortune into the bargain.

No more fucking about for him. He was after the main prize these days and he was determined to get it.

He rolled off the sweating girl. She was pretty and her vacant face reassured him of the usefulness of women.

He glanced at his watch and sighed. If he didn't get his arse in gear Jackie would have his nuts. He smiled at the girl, then, jumping from the bed, he said heartily, 'Come on boys, chop chop, I have to see a man about a witness statement!'

Danny Baxter groaned inwardly but outwardly he looked thrilled at the prospect. He had forgotten how frenetic and dangerous life with Freddie Jackson could be.

Freddie's cousin Jimmy Jackson smiled with the men. He was a watered-down version of Freddie and wanted to be like him. He had visited his cousin religiously and Freddie had appreciated that

fact. He liked the kid, he had heart. Plus he was only nine years younger than Freddie. They had a lot in common.

Today he would show Jimmy just what he was capable of.

Maggie Summers was fourteen but appeared eighteen. She had the look of her older sister but she was a tinier, sleeker version. She still had the wonderful skin of extreme youth and dainty white teeth that had not yet been tarred by years of smoking or neglect. Her blue eyes were big, wide-spaced and kind. Like her older sister she could take care of herself; unlike her older sister she didn't often have to. Yet.

At just five feet tall, she had long legs for her height and was completely unaware of how lovely she actually was. In her school uniform of black miniskirt, white shirt and navy-blue sweater she looked as if she was coming home from work instead of school, and that was the look she tried to create.

Lisa Dolan, a sometime friend and occasional enemy, said gaily, 'Your sister having a party tonight, then?'

Maggie nodded. 'I am just going to give her a hand. Want to come with me?'

Lisa grinned happily. 'Yeah!'

If she helped she was guaranteed an invite. They dropped into step beside one another. Lisa, a dark-haired girl with buck teeth, said quietly, 'Here, Maggie, according to Gina, Freddie Jackson got out *yesterday*. That can't be true, can it?'

Maggie sighed. Gina Davis was Tracey Davis's sister, which meant there might be a grain of truth in her claims. It also meant Jackie would go ballistic if she heard about it. Tracey had been seeing Freddie when he had been arrested, but she had had the sense to keep away from the trial. Maggie had assumed it had fizzled out, but it seemed she was wrong. Her Mum had gone on and on about it, hating the way her sister's husband humiliated her all the time. Lena had gone round after the girl herself and been assured it was well and truly over by Tracey's irate father. Tracey had only been fifteen at the time. In the last four years she had produced twin boys and Freddie couldn't get the blame for them as they were only

eighteen months old. Truth be told, even Tracey had no idea who the father was, but she was Freddie Jackson's type, big, breathing and with a pair of breasts. Those, according to Lena, were all the criteria needed.

Maggie had a working knowledge of everything and everyone in her world thanks to her mother. Lena had the handle on everyone, and what she didn't know she had an uncanny knack of ferreting out. But she hadn't heard anything about Freddie getting out early till now.

'I hate that Gina, she's a liar and if my sister knew what she had said . . .'

Maggie left the sentence unfinished, getting her point across without too much detail. Lisa would not want to be cross-examined by Jackie, so hopefully she would keep that morsel of information to herself.

Lisa, paler now but forewarned, changed the subject quickly.

Leon Butcher was a small, tubby man with tobacco-stained teeth and a lager belly. He lived in a two-bedroomed council flat with his elderly mother and a collection of jetsam. He was an Uncle, in other words, and he lent small amounts on property, usually jewellery. Today he was looking at an eighteen-carat gold and diamond eternity ring. It was a beauty, first-grade diamonds, lovely setting. He smiled at the young girl in front of him who had obviously stolen it from a relative. She had the sunken eyes of the smack head and he said gently, 'A fifty, that's all.'

It was worth ten times that and she knew it.

He threw it on the grubby kitchen table and removed his eyeglass, then lit a cigarette and pulled on it deeply. He could wait. He had played this game many times before.

After an age the girl said quietly, 'OK.'

He went to the kitchen drawer and took out a wad of money, and as he turned back to face her he saw Freddie Jackson standing in the doorway.

'Hello, Leon.' Freddie grinned drunkenly. 'Is that money for me?'
The girl stood up unsteadily, sensing the atmosphere.

‘Hand it over, that’s my compensation.’

Leon passed it to him with shaking hands.

Freddie quickly counted off five twenties and gave them to the girl. ‘That your ring, sweetheart?’

She nodded.

‘Take it with you, love, and forget you were ever here, OK?’ He smiled at her and his handsome face suddenly looked friendly, approachable.

She took the ring and left the flat as quickly as possible.

‘On our own, eh, Leon?’ He walked towards the smaller man menacingly.

‘What do you want, Freddie?’

Jackson looked down at him for a few seconds before saying quietly, ‘What do I want, Leon? I want you.’

As he nugged Leon, the man dropped to his knees. Then bringing back his leg Freddie kned Leon in the face, sending his head crashing backwards into the melamine kitchen cabinets. Dropping sideways, Leon curled himself into a ball and took the kicking doled out quietly and stoically. Finally spent, Freddie looked down at the bloody mass before him and said, ‘I dare you to press fucking charges, you grassing cunt. Now where’s the tom?’

Leon was in agony and a swift kick to the groin had him yelping out, ‘In the bedroom.’

Dragging the man up none too gently Freddie threw him across the room. ‘Get it.’

He followed Leon into the small bedroom, watching as he pulled a wooden box with difficulty from under the bed.

Opening it, Freddie saw it was full to the brim with wads of money as well as a small fortune in jewellery. He picked up the box and put it under his arm.

‘You cost me six years, Leon. You better move away soon because I will always be back, you hear me?’

Leon was still standing and Freddie had a sneaking admiration for him because of that. He had given him a good trouncing, the man would be pissing blood for weeks. But he had made his point.

Leon had only been a witness, through no fault of his own. Filth

had made him testify, he was aware of that, but it still didn't lessen Leon's crime in his eyes. He should have gone and done his stir like a man, not served Freddie up as an alternative.

As he left the flat he was whistling. Not a bad day's work by anyone's standards.

Danny Baxter saw him walking back towards the limo with the box under his arm, and grinned as Freddie stopped to chat up a girl with a baby in a pushchair. On this estate there were plenty of girls like that, and they were Freddie's cup of tea inasmuch as they had a little flat and no real life, and if he bunged them a few quid they were eternally grateful.

'He never stops sniffing out strange, does he?'

Danny sighed. At nineteen, Freddie's cousin Jimmy had a lot to learn about Freddie Jackson. 'This ain't got nothing to do with being banged up, Freddie's always been like it. We used to call him "Ever Ready". If you could see some of the sights he's shagged!' Freddie got in the car and said loudly, 'I heard that, Danny boy. Like I told you, the ugly ones are the best – grateful, see.'

They all laughed.

'Let's get up the pub, eh?'

'Don't you think you should go home and see Jackie and the kids, Fred?'

Freddie Jackson laughed loudly at his young cousin's words.

'No, I fucking don't, Jimmy. Fuck me, soon that's *all* I'll be seeing, morning, noon and fucking night! To the pub, boy, and don't spare the horses!'

It was seven thirty and the Jackson house was filling up with people, the banners were all in place and the sandwiches and chicken legs were waiting to be consumed.

The whole place smelled of Rive Gauche, soap on a rope and coleslaw.

The kids were scrubbed and dressed up, as was Jackie, and there was still no sign of Freddie Jackson.

The ancient stereo was playing 'Use It Up And Wear It Out'

by Odyssey and Maggie thought the song title was more than appropriate for her brother-in-law's homecoming.

Where was he, and more to the point where was Jimmy?

Maggie saw her mother roll her eyes in her father's direction and knew that Jackie had seen the gesture too. Jackie looked lovely in a powder-blue top with huge shoulder pads and a long black skirt, and even though both were a little too tight, she was elegant. Her hair was blow-dried around her face and she was wearing too much make-up as usual, but that had always been her style. The glitter on her eyelids made her look sexy, and she had beautiful eyes. If only she could understand just how good looking she could be.

She was also hammering the wine, which was not a good sign.

'Where the fuck is he?' Her dad's voice was loud and could be heard even above the music playing.

'Leave it, Joe.' Lena's voice was lower, trying to prevent a scene.

'You dragged me here, woman, so I have every right to ask where the fucking party boy is.'

'He's just got out of nick, he will be in the pub with his mates where you normally are after a stretch.'

'I always came home first, Lena, be fair.'

He was wrong-footed now and, knowing his wife's knack of causing a major war over a few badly chosen words, he retreated quickly as she knew he would. But he hated the way Jackson treated his eldest child. He used her, he had left her with three kids and enough debt to sink the *Titanic*, and she still treated him like he was something special. When would that stupid girl learn? He was a waster, a user, a fucking leech.

Jackie was bad enough on her own but with Freddie Jackson pressing all the wrong buttons she would be a nightmare. She didn't just love him, she tried to absorb him into her. Freddie was like a cancer eating away at his daughter and her jealousy knew no bounds where he was concerned.

Now it would all start once more, after six years of relative quiet, and he wasn't sure he could cope with it again.

* * *

Maddie Jackson was a small woman with greeny-blue eyes and a small cupid's bow mouth. Her slight frame belied a strength of character and a violent temper that even her large daughter-in-law was in awe of. Her only son was the apple of her eye and she would not have one word said against him by anyone. She had lied and perjured herself for him on many occasions from his school to the Old Bailey, and now her baby was coming home she could barely contain her excitement.

She glanced around the small council house and took in every detail. It wasn't her clean but in fairness to Jackie she tried her best. Not that she would ever tell her that of course. Renewing her drink she walked sedately back into the front room and, seeing her husband talking to a young girl, she sighed inwardly. He would never change. All the time he had a hole in his arse, as her mother used to say, and over the years she had seen the truth of that remark many times. He had fathered three outside children and slept with her sister and her best friend yet she still loved him, so who was the bigger fool?

Putting together a plate of food for her husband she walked over to him and saw with relief the girl take the opportunity to get away from him.

Freddie Jackson Senior took the food gratefully and then inspected the chicken leg. He took a large bite and said through the mouthful of food, 'He better get his arse in gear. I ain't hanging about all night for him.'

He didn't mean it, she knew that he was looking forward to seeing his boy. He was, after all, a mirror image of himself as a young man and who could resist that? Who could resist seeing themselves replicated in another human being? He loved his boy even while he was jealous of his youth. Freddie Senior had kept his charm, but drink and debauchery had quickly put paid to his handsome looks. Her son must have inherited one of her genes, though, because no matter what he did Freddie still looked good.

Maddie saw Jackie throw back another glass of wine in seconds and recognised the warning signs of her daughter-in-law's phenomenal temper. Jackie's face sank somehow, as if the life was draining

from it, and her eyes became hooded. She looked as if she was on drugs and, knowing Jackie, she probably was.

Maddie watched the girl's mother pushing her towards the kitchen and trying to calm her down. At times like this she was sorry for Jackie, was reminded of herself as a young woman, not in looks but in the bewilderment at the treatment from a man who she adored.

A man who could not even come home to see his children, but had to spend the day with his friends as usual. Six years banged up and nothing had really changed.

The pub was packed, the music was thumping and everyone was treating Freddie to drinks. He was a Face now. He was twenty-eight years old, he had done a lump and he was also a different man to the one who had gone away all those years ago. He was regaling them with stories of people they had only ever heard about but who he assured them were his blood brothers now.

Jimmy was worried about how fast time was passing while his cousin looked like he had no intentions of going home at any time. Let alone in time for his own party.

'Come on, Freddie, we got to get a move on. There's a big party at your house in your honour.' Jimmy's voice was high now, it was gone nine o'clock and he knew there would be murders. 'All the family will be there and your mum's dying to see you.'

He knew that mention of his mother would lessen Freddie's anger.

Freddie stared at the younger man for a few moments before hugging him tightly to him and kissing the top of his head. 'You are a fucking good kid, Jimmy me boy.'

Jimmy basked in his cousin's pleasure.

'You're the business, Freddie, everyone knows that.'

It was what he wanted to hear, needed to hear.

'Come on, guys, grab a few bottles, it's back home to the horror of family life for me.' Freddie squeezed a few choice behinds as they walked from the pub, pointing towards a particular girl every few seconds and smiling at them.

Jimmy saw Donny Baxter wink at him with respect, and understood for the first time ever what made his cousin enjoy his reputation so much. Little Jimmy was buzzing, but Little Jimmy was also a six-foot-two man with the want inside him now.

Freddie was home and all would be right with his world.

Maddie saw the girl making sheep's eyes at her husband once more. Time was she would have caused murders, but nowadays she was glad in some ways since it kept him from wearing her out on a nightly basis. She just wished he wouldn't chat them up in front of her, it was humiliating.

What was it that made these men so desirable?

The violence? The feeling of only being alive when you were around them? The danger of knowing they could be gone again in days, hours even?

And Freddie was the same, he was like the spit out of his father's mouth. That was another one of her mother's sayings.

As if Maddie's thoughts had conjured him up her son pulled up outside the house in a large white stretch limousine. As he fell out of the door she could hear his raucous laughter. He was drunk. Happy drunk, but drunk all the same.

Still, she consoled herself, and justified her son's abandonment of his family by thinking no one could blame him. Banged up all that time, he would need to let off steam.

Kimberley, Dianna and Roxanna watched as their father strode up the overgrown garden path and, walking straight past them without even a glance in their direction, burst into the house.

Kimberley, the eldest and therefore old enough to remember the fighting and the arguing, said little. The two younger ones had eyes rounded with excitement. The man their mother harked on about constantly had just breezed past them smelling of brandy, cigarettes and unwashed clothes.

A small retinue of friends followed him sheepishly into the house. Unlike Freddie, they were aware that they should have been here hours ago.

Jimmy's father, James, watched carefully – he, like his wife, Deirdre, had never rated Freddie, and their son's worship of him worried them.

Jackie heard her husband's booming voice and ran from the kitchen on her high heels, her face a bright red mass of anger and also excitement.

'Freddie!' She jumped into his arms and he held her off the ground with difficulty, hugging her tightly before putting her down roughly.

'Fuck me, girl, you weigh a fucking ton! But don't worry, I'll soon shag you back into shape.'

He looked around him happily, proud of his quip, thinking he was the man. After all he was the reason they were all there in the first place.

Jackie's family stared at him in disbelief as Jackie herself beamed with positive happiness.

The King was home, so God help the Queen.