

**Jessie Keane – BLACK WIDOW (Harper Collins Paperback)**

PROLOGUE  
1970

Terror filled Charlie 'The Dip' Foster's world.

Charlie had earned his nickname by being a great 'dipper' or pickpocket as a child. From there he'd graduated with honors to GBH and armed robbery; he'd worked his way up the ranks of the Delaney mob, one of London's finest, until he was Redmond Delaney's right hand man, his most trusted lieutenant, so he was no fool.

He knew he was doomed.

Some heavy faces had brought him to Smithfield meat market and he knew he was in *big* trouble.

They were Carter boys.

For the Cockney Carters and the Irish incomers the Delaneys, the streets of the East End were a war zone. Always had been, always would be.

They'd snatched him, worked him over. Taken him by surprise.

He'd been at his girl's twenty-first birthday party, key of the door. They'd been bopping the night away, they'd got all amorous and gone outside for a bit of how's-yer-father, and he'd been caught with his trousers down – literally.

So now here he was.

*Doomed.*

They'd laughed as they put him up here. They'd hung him up by his jacket collar from a hook while joking about meat being well hung. Then they'd left him here while they stood around chatting. Killing time. *Waiting for something*, he thought. Or somebody.

Charlie was a tough bastard but right now he was scared shitless.

It was the noise. The awful noise of that thing coming down on the wooden block. Charlie's brain was agile, quick like his fingers, you didn't get well up in the mobs without having a few brain cells up top, but now his brain kept faltering. That *noise*.

*Thunk!*

That thing on wood.

*Thunk!*

Chopping through flesh and bone.

He tried again to get his hands free from their bindings, but again he failed. He slumped again, exhausted.

He dangled there, limp, fearful, worn out.

And the smell in here. The *stink*.

The smell of meat, of death. Pigs' heads surrounded him, the skin flayed from the flesh. Their eyes stared at him blindly. Sides of beef nudged him, smearing him with blood.

The cleaver came down again and a trotter thumped on to the floor.

*Thunk!*

*Oh God help me*, he thought.

He knew he'd done bad things. Hurt people. Robbed people. *Bad* things. So perhaps God wasn't listening.

The butcher with the gentle eyes and the blood-stained apron went on chopping patiently away at the meat.

*Dead meat*, thought Charlie. *That's what I am*.

Sweat was dripping from his chin on to the concrete floor, even though it was cold in here.

*Gonna die right here*, thought Charlie.

But now the boys who had been slumped around, chatting, straightened up and fell silent.

Something was happening.

Someone had arrived.

Now he could see through his stinging eyes that there was a woman approaching. A tall woman, dressed in black.

Dark straight hair falling on to her shoulders and dark green eyes that were just this side of crazy. A real looker, though. Black coat. Black leather gloves. *Like the angel of death*.

There was a heavy on either side of her. Known faces. Jimmy Bond, he knew that bastard of old. Jimmy was moving off to the left and watching, his eyes going from the woman to Charlie, back and forth, back and forth.

The woman stopped walking several paces away and stared up at Charlie.

He gulped.

'You're Charlie Foster,' the woman said. Her voice was low and husky. 'Are you wondering who I am, Charlie? Or do you know?'

Hanging up here was killing him. His head ached, his shoulders were agony. Charlie gulped again, couldn't speak.

'I'm Annie Carter,' she said.

*Fuck it, he thought. That's it. I'm dead.*

Not for the first time, Phil Fibbert wondered what he was doing out in the arse end of nowhere with the hot Mediterranean sun blazing down and making him sweat and curse as he dangled, strapped on, from the top of the telephone pole.

'How's it going?' shouted up Blondie from below.

Phil glanced down. Sweat dripped into his eyes. His calves quivered with effort as he stood braced on the metal struts. Fucking idiot, he'd only just got up here, how did he *think* it was going? But he bit back a sharp reply. Blondie down there was paying the bills. Plus, the man had mad eyes. There was a funhouse party going on in that guy's head. Stuff upsetting him for a game of soldiers.

'Okay,' Phil shouted back.

The girl was down there too, blonde hair, tits to die for straining against a tight white t-shirt. She was looking up and shielding her baby blues from the glare with upraised arms. He was on a job with a lunatic and a fucking tart, how sensible was that?

But the money.

He kept his mind on the money.

Phil found an unused pair on the cable. This was a simple REMOB or remote observation job. Or Tap and Trace, if you wanted it in layman's terms. He was muscular, squat, powerful, dark-haired. His hands were large, dusted with dark hair, the fingers spatulate; but now they worked with the delicacy of a surgeon, fastening on the crocodile clips, setting up the relay. He unraveled the wire and tossed the roll down to Blondie. Then he made his way down the pole, jumping the last four feet and landing in a puff of pink dust. He went to the back of the dirty old van and connected the handset. Then he looked at Blondie.

'Job done,' he said. 'Whatever calls they make, we get to hear them too.'

The tall blond man nodded, satisfied. He looked at the blonde woman. At the dark muscular man. Their contact had tipped them off, given them the perfect time to strike. That time was *now*.

'Are we ready then?' he asked them, twitching about like always. Couldn't seem to keep still for a moment.

They nodded.

The blond man reached into the back of the van and pulled out three dark wool hoods. Slits for eyes, a slit for a mouth. He dished them out, pulled his own over his bright straight blond hair.

Waited until the other two were similarly concealed. The girl was tugging on a shabby old anorak to hide the tits. She zipped it shut, put the hood up, nodded. *Ready.*

'Let the games begin,' said Blondie, and pulled out the gun.

Ten seconds before the pool house exploded, everything at the Majorcan *finca* was normal. Later, Annie would distinctly remember that. The bay that encircled their hideaway was silent but for the rush and suck of the turquoise sea against the pink-toned rocks far below. Sparrows were drinking at the edge of the pool.

*Normal.*

Max's younger brother Jonjo was visiting. Jonjo was sprawled out in bathing trunks on a sunbed, beer belly bronzed and oiled, torpid in the noonday sun. His latest blonde floozy was sprawled beside him in the bottom half of a red bikini. Max was in the pool, doing strong overarm laps. Max liked to keep himself fit. Layla was indoors, changing into her swimsuit.

*Normal.*

Annie would always remember that.

Or as normal as it got, with Jonjo and his blonde - this one was called Jeanette, but there had been so many of them that Annie barely ever registered their names any more - here on a visit. Annie hated Jonjo with a passion, but she never let it show. He treated women like dishrags.

'Feed 'em, fuck 'em, then forget 'em,' was Jonjo's motto.

Annie knew her loathing of Jonjo was mutual. Jonjo hated any woman having any sort of influence on his brother. Most particularly he hated any woman with brains. The Carter boys stood together against the world, and Jonjo saw women - Annie included - as mere embellishments.

Thank God Max had always been different. Max had been her lover, her companion, the father of their daughter. *Layla*. Her little star. Four years old last Christmas, the apple of her father's eye. Their beautiful dark-haired daughter, whom Max adored. When Annie looked into Layla's face she saw herself there. Her own dark green eyes, not Max's steely blue ones. Her own straight nose and full lips and even her own cocoa-brown hair, not Max's which was black.

Annie had loved Layla obsessively since the moment the Majorcan midwife had laid her, newborn, in her arms. Born out of wedlock, of course, and that had bothered Annie but only for Layla's sake.

At that time Max was still married to Ruthie, Annie's sister, although that marriage had been a non-starter. Mostly Annie's fault, of course, and she knew it. So she hadn't complained. But Max had done a wonderful thing for her. He had tracked Ruthie down, got the divorce quickly in order, and married Annie four years ago.

*Four years.*

Incredible to think so much time had passed they'd left England's shores. They'd been here ever since, in this beautiful private place. At first the days passed in a happy haze. Dinner at little restaurants in the hills. Visits to Valdemossa to see the monastery up in the silent blue-hazed mountains. Trips in to Palma to marvel at the cathedral and saunter along the little alleyways and spend too much in the shops and eat lunch on the quay.

They hadn't intended to stay, but stay they had. Annie didn't miss London's grey skies; even in February, as now, the sun shone in Majorca; and Max showed no inclination to get back either.

Soon they would have to think about schooling for Layla, but not yet.

Jonjo visited now and again to let Max know what was happening with the family firm, and Max seemed content with that. Apart from Jonjo - and of course the blondes - no one disturbed them.

A middle-aged Majorcan couple occupied a little villa up by the gate and tended to their needs. Inez cleaned and cooked, Rufio saw to the pool and the maintenance of the *finca* and took a machete to the date palms every spring to cut their old leaves away and make them look pristine.

All was peace and tranquillity.

But when Jonjo visited, things were different. Then there was tension. Jonjo and Max sat out late into the night on the terrace, the night humming with cicadas. Tiny lizards clung to the walls above the terrace lights. The air was warm and dense from the heat of the day. They discussed family business, drank San Miguel and smoked cigars, and women were not welcome. Max became cooler, harder. Jonjo whispered in his ear and Max listened. Sometimes his eyes would stray to Annie while he listened to what Jonjo had to say. Annie understood - or she tried to - but some of the blondes rebelled.

'He could be in bed with me, why sit up half the night talking?' Jeanette complained to Annie one morning. 'We're here for a nice holiday, and half the time he ignores me.'

Annie hoped Jeanette didn't share that thought with Jonjo, but by lunchtime next day it was obvious the silly bint had. Jeanette was sporting an angry-looking bruise on her right cheekbone, and her expression was sulky.

*Jonjo and his blondes*, thought Annie with distaste. Annie wore a discreet black swimsuit by the pool, but Jeanette seemed intent on going completely nude if only she could. Anything to catch Jonjo's attention.

Annie glanced over at Jeanette, lying there with her heavy naked breasts exposed to the Mediterranean sun. She'd even asked Annie once if anyone would mind if she slipped the bottom half off.

'Yes,' said Annie coldly. 'I'd mind. Keep covered up, please.'

Jeanette had looked at her and sneered.

'I dunno what you're acting all posh for,' she said. 'I know all about you.'

'Oh yeah? What do you know?' Annie lifted her Ray Bans and looked at the girl.

What a royal pain in the arse Jeanette was. Yesterday had been great, because Jeanette had unexpectedly asked to borrow Rufio's dusty, ugly, rear-engined old Renault to go shopping in Palma. The peace had been wonderful. But now she was *back*. And running off at the mouth, as usual.

'I know you worked as a tart. I know you snatched your own sister's man. You got no cause to act all hoity-toity.'

Annie dropped the Ray Bans back in place and lay back with a sigh.

'You know nothing and you understand even less,' she said.

'Oh yeah? Well I-'

Annie lifted the Ray Bans again. Her eyes were dark ice as she stared at the girl. 'You keep that evil trap shut, or I'll have your stupid arse out of here on the next flight,' she hissed.

Jeanette fell silent.

Jonjo and his *fucking* blondes. Jeanette was among the worst of them, dim to a fault and full of meaningless chatter and always flaunting herself, so sometimes Jonjo did take notice of her. After one or two overly flirtatious incidents beside the pool, Annie had to have a word with him about what she considered to be suitable behaviour in front of a four-year-old child. It hadn't endeared her to him, but fuck him. This was her home, hers and Max's, and if he wanted to come here then he would have to follow their rules and keep his dick in his trousers unless he was in the privacy of the bedroom.

On the whole, Jonjo was good with Layla. He played with her in the pool, chased her around the grounds, made her scream with laughter. Jonjo had a way with kids. Different when they got older, of course. Once Layla hit puberty, Annie knew that Jonjo would treat her as he treated all adult women – with contempt and suspicion.

Still, all was quiet for now. Annie relished the moment. She could hear Layla singing in her bedroom, some silly French song she and Max had been learning together. '*Ma chandelle est morte... pretez-moi sa porte.*'

Annie felt a surge of pride. She could barely speak a word of Mallorquin, or even Castilian Spanish, but thanks to Max's good ear for languages and the cheerful chatter of Inez, their daughter was going to be multi-lingual.

Jonjo was snoring like a hog, Jeanette had shut her yap for five minutes and Max was scything rapidly through the water. Annie watched him and felt the familiar sadness grip her heart and squeeze it. Over the past few months, Max had changed toward her. Once he had clearly adored her, but now he had become her harshest critic, sniping at her constantly, belittling her.

Annie had caught him looking at her sometimes, watching her with a cold, critical eye. She was bewildered by it, saddened by it, and all that she could hope for was that this was just a mood, brought about by some problem with the firm back in London, and would pass – before it totally destroyed any love she had left for him.

She glanced at her Rolex, a present from her working girls back in the days when she had been Princess Ann, the Mayfair Madam.

A lifetime ago, it seemed now.

A time when she'd got mixed up with the Carter and the Delaney mobs, before she'd run two brothels, one in Limehouse, the other in Mayfair. All gone now, all forgotten. Except when Jonjo called and reminded her of it all. She hated it when Jonjo called.

It was nearly one o'clock. Inez usually called in at twelve-thirty to fix lunch, then she and Rufio took their *siesta*. She was late, but then the Majorcans were never hot on timekeeping. Everything was *manyana*. Tomorrow, things would get done. Today ... maybe not.

All was ... *normal*.

And then Annie's world exploded, and normality was forgotten.