

## CHAPTER 11

The Bailey family was re-united early the following week. Karen and baby Sharron came home to 36C Meadow Road. Colin had persuaded Fat Eric to let him have leave to be with his family for the first few days at least but his boss was adamant that Colin report back for work on the Monday night.

Karen and Sharron had bonded well enough in the hospital but Kath Smith noticed when she dropped in on one of her very frequent visits that Colin doted on Sharron and that she seemed to reserve her best behaviour just for him.

“Proper Daddy’s girl that one’s going to be,” she told Susan when she came round to the flat to pick her up on her way home from an evening shift at Graceland’s.

Kath Smith was right. Sharron’s first beaming smile was reserved for her Dad and when she made those first faltering steps just before the end of November it was her father’s outstretched arms that she headed for. Karen had a lot of help from her mother in those early months. Kath Smith looked after Sharron on her own during part of the day so that Karen could slip in beside Colin and catch up on some well needed sleep.

Colin for his part was sleeping as long as he was able with the baby kicking off now and then, plus all the cacophony of sound associated with living on a busy estate. When he could though, he made up for lost time with his wife having sex without making too much noise and disturbing his mother-in-law or the baby.

Karen had to cope on her own through the night when Colin was working and her mother was tucked up in her own bed. This was when Karen was alone with her thoughts and she kept returning to the night that Sharron was born and how all her dreams of two or maybe three kids had been ripped away. She had an aching gap in her heart which just wouldn’t go away. Her daughter was growing up in front of her eyes and as each little milestone was reached Karen couldn’t enjoy them like Colin clearly did.

Each milestone was another reminder.

“This is the last time you’ll ever experience this with a child of yours,” she heard a voice say in her head on each occasion.

She never spoke about any of these feelings to Colin or indeed to anyone. She kept them bottled up inside where they kept eating away at her.

Sharron’s first Christmas was spent at home as they had planned. They had a little tree and some lights; they watched as Sharron tore the wrapping paper off her presents. Sharon cooked them a roast chicken dinner and the little family had a special day, just the three of them, until late afternoon when Susan picked them up in her car and whisked them over to the Smith’s for another cooked meal. Well you didn’t think Karen’s Dad and her brothers would change the habits of a lifetime did you? They had been at it since about eleven o’clock and were half-drunk and half asleep in equal measure.

Karen, Susan and her Mum played with Sharron and exchanged some more little gifts. Colin sat and nursed a large tumbler of whisky that Tom Smith had forced on him when they had walked through the door. The TV was on in the background but no-one was paying it much attention.

“What a way to spend Christmas Day,” groaned Colin “I wish we could all go home.”

He shut out the background noise and turned his attention to his father.

He tried to remember his father ever playing with him at Christmas or any other time if it came to that, but although he had glimpses of days and events where he spent time with his son, his father was never happy with him. He was always shouting at Colin, telling him he was useless, that he'd never amount to anything. He had fallen off his bicycle a couple of times when his Dad was teaching him to ride it; he had hated the water at the swimming pool because it smelled and stung his eyes when his Dad tried to teach him how to swim.

Colin never showed any interest in any type of sport and this was a constant source of annoyance to his father who had been out summer and winter taking part in all sorts of activities from a very early age. He knew he wouldn't be like that with his own daughter. He would care for her and help her to do anything and everything she wanted to try her hand at. If she wasn't interested then he'd accept that and they'd move on to something new.

He decided that enough was enough. His checks on the various documents he had uncovered in the tunnels at work relating to his father and his partner had convinced Colin he knew where they were living and what the pattern of their daily movements was. His resolution for the New Year just around the corner was to find a way to remove his father's name from his little list.

He raised his glass and made a silent toast; a big welcome to 1987, a fond farewell to Mr. Adam Bailey of Newton Bridge.

"Come on Col sweetheart," called Karen "your dinner's on the table."

Colin levered himself out of the chair and made his way unsteadily to the table which was laden with all varieties of vegetables steaming away in their serving bowls. Kath Smith emerged from the kitchen followed by her daughters with large plates already laden with turkey, stuffing, pigs-in-blankets and roast parsnips.

Colin groaned. How on earth was he supposed to finish this lot after the meal Karen had cooked them at home? He groaned again when Kath Smith announced "There's a lovely pudding and brandy sauce to follow, so let's see some empty plates."

Susan dropped them off at home later that evening. Little Sharron was out for the count with all the fuss that had been made of her while Karen and Colin were stuffed with all the food they'd eaten and were hardly able to get out of the car and indoors. Once Susan had driven away and they had shut the door on the outside world, they sat on the sofa and watched TV. Karen was being visited by her own personal demons as she glanced down at her daughter sleeping peacefully in her little carry-cot.

Colin was trying to work out how to spend less time at the Smith's without upsetting Karen; he also wanted her mother to spend less time 'popping in' so that he could spend more time with Sharron. When Sharron stirred as if on cue, he picked her up and cuddled her and as her head lay on his shoulder and her breath blew warmly on his left ear he began to devise a plan for his father's day of reckoning.

On the other side of town in the leafy suburbs, Fat Eric had been busy. He'd been pressing the flesh over the Christmas holidays. Whenever it had been possible to get away for a couple of hours from his wife he was round at Penny's for one version and on other occasions he had been signing up some new clients at various functions. This took place at dinners and balls where the great and the good of the business world in the local area got together to pat themselves on the back for screwing more money out of their customers than in the previous twelve months.

As a result of Eric's efforts Penny had a glow about her and as for work Colin discovered he was going to be a lot busier than before Christmas. This put a few of his non-work related activities on hold

for a while. He managed to find time though to hone the blade on his knife until it was so sharp he daren't touch it for fear of slicing the top of his thumb off.

Colin had to endure another drink fuelled celebration when Sharron had her first birthday. Fortunately, he managed to avoid doubling up on the meals this time but the Smith's were never ones to let an event such as that go by without a proper party. The cake with its one candle was lost on the table at their house among the bottles of beer, wine and spirits.

Sharron played, laughed and cried her way through her party and was passed from one person to another until her head must have been spinning. When everyone was tired and quiet reigned over the Smith house for a brief moment, Sharron slid off her mother's lap and headed across the front room towards Colin.

"Dada Dada," she went, uttering her first proper words. Colin felt himself fighting back a tear. He was shocked that he could feel emotion like that.

"Where did that come from?" he scoffed.

Karen was chuffed to bits that Sharron had started to talk but was a little miffed that despite her trying to coach Sharron to say 'Mama' for the past couple of months, her daughter had chosen to say her father's name first. Karen's Mum looked at her Susan and the look that passed between them spoke a thousand words.

One Saturday morning in the middle of February Colin slipped out of the flat when Karen was still asleep. His mother-in-law was sat in front of the TV with Sharron playing on the rug in front of her.

He found the shop he was looking for in Church Street. A family owned cycle shop with the guy behind the counter on his last legs and no-one standing by to take the place over when he popped his clogs. Colin reckoned he could buy the things he needed to refurbish the old bike in here and if he had cause to use it when crossing his parents off his list or another 'project', then should the law ever come round to ask questions about someone buying spare parts, this guy would either be dead and gone and the shop boarded up, or he'd struggle to remember who was in earlier that day let alone a couple of weeks or months ago.

Colin's plans were for the long term as we have seen over the time since we met him. He wasn't going to be rushed. He wanted to make certain he was successful in achieving his goals, but he wasn't going to take unnecessary risks, or act in haste so that he might get caught. The bike would serve its purpose of ferrying him around the maze of tunnels to create that precious spare time. One day, when Colin had a specific purpose behind venturing outside on the bike, he would go through the hidden steel door, cross the hillside to the trail and make the descent towards Harrington End. With any luck, he hoped as he left the shop with his tyres, inner tubes and brake pads, this shop will have gone to the wall by then.

Colin couldn't really hide his purchases from Kath Smith when he got back home.

Karen was in the kitchen and called out "Hi Col darling. Wanna slice of toast?"

He put the things behind the sofa under the window, knowing Karen wouldn't be moving furniture around to clean up anytime soon. He flopped down next to his mother-in-law. Sharron came straight to him and stretched her chubby little arms out to be picked up.

He scooped her up lovingly and when Kath Smith asked, "Been buying things then?"

"Not for me, Wally Kerr asked me to pick a couple of things up for him. He can't get into town at the weekend, what with his back, his chest and all his other problems."

This seemed to satisfy her and when her daughter emerged from the kitchen with a plate full of toast and jam, it was soon forgotten and she munched away on her toast and switched her attention back to the children's programmes on the television. Colin breathed a sigh of satisfaction and kissed Sharron on top of her head.

When he left for work the following Monday night Colin collected his spare parts for his bicycle and got them out of the flat without Karen noticing. It was Sharron's bath time and it was pandemonium in the Bailey household as Karen tried to pacify her daughter who wanted 'Daddy play'.

No matter how many times she told Sharron "Daddy's got to go to work darling," her daughter smacked her hands down on the surface of the sudsy bath water and drenched her Mum and most of the tiny bathroom. Karen was close to tears, even closer to giving Sharron a good slap, but she loved her little girl without question. Even though she appeared to love her father more; even on days like today when she was being a proper little madam. Karen smothered her in a large warm towel and tickled her under the chin.

Sharron giggled just as much as she did when Colin did it and when Karen had struggled to get Sharron into her pyjamas so that they could sit on the sofa and look at a book before bedtime they were as close and as happy as they had ever been.

At work, Colin was struggling to keep up with the number of tasks that had been left for him.

"It's manic these days what with these extra clients we've taken on." moaned Colin.

He considered complaining to Fat Eric but suddenly realised if it looked like he couldn't cope, he might find an extra pair of hands working down here with him and that wouldn't do at all.

So using that brain of his, which he generally put into neutral when he clocked in as he found the tasks pretty repetitive and mundane, he prioritised the tasks, then made out his own schedule. This new worksheet showed him exactly where he would be and at what time. He was able to finish a set of tasks within a couple of minutes of a check-in time and the nearest checkpoint was always outside the side tunnel in which he was working.

By the third shift that week he had done it again. He had created a spare hour or so to be able to work on the bike. There were a couple of low priority jobs outstanding, but he knew he could deal with them tomorrow night. Nobody was going to have a go at him about jobs that the client wasn't chasing. They'd get it sometime Friday anyway after he'd delivered it to the office in the morning as he left.

Colin removed the old parts from the bicycle and fitted the new ones. It wasn't rocket science, but just in case, he'd taken the precaution of asking the old guy in Church Street if he had a brochure on 'looking after your bicycle' and he had had shelves of booklets with diagrams that actually helped.

As they were gathering dust, with the low level of trade the shop experienced, he told Colin to help himself as it was "Good to see a youngster riding a bike these days."

A few squirts of WD40 and some lubricating oil in all the relevant places, and the bicycle was ready for a trial run. Colin had eventually mastered the art of riding by himself, after his father had given up teaching him in disgust, so he was soon belting up and down the tunnels and gently applying the brakes in case he had set them a bit 'sharp'.

He didn't want to slam them on and go over the handlebars. If he collided with something hard, like a rock wall he could be down here spark out when the police, the ambulance men and Eric came down to see what was up.

"No" Colin said to himself "gently does it. Anyway, that's enough fun for tonight it must ne nearly

knocking-off time.”

The work continued at the same hectic pace through March and April. Colin left a note for Eric one morning asking if he could work longer shifts, perhaps starting two hours earlier. This would mean he would overlap with the day staff and although he wasn't keen on mixing with them again, not that he let on to his boss mind you, he knew the early morning hours were when he needed to be alone with some free time.

Colin got an immediate response. The next night when he clocked in, there was a letter from Eric.

“No problem Colin, an excellent suggestion. Carry on for as long as this high demand period lasts. I can't afford to pay you any more for it though. Submit the hours and you can take time off in lieu when it's convenient to the company.”

Colin read the handwritten note through a couple of times. Happy days!

Colin felt he was on a winner; he was going to get out of the flat for a couple more hours a day, he would have plenty of spare time thanks to the new system he had devised and when he had some time saved up he would be out and about tidying up his little list at long last.

One thing puzzled him. How come Eric had hand written the note? What was Penny doing with herself? He found out the answer to that on Sunday when he and Karen took Sharron to the park and let her play on the swings. It would have been nice to use the other pieces of equipment in the little play area, but the local kids had wrecked the place and the swings were the only bit still functional.

Colin saw Penny and Eric deep in conversation across the road on the other side of the park. They didn't see Colin and his little family. Colin realised why Penny had a 'glow' after the Christmas break. Judging by the size and shape of her, she was expecting a little Eric.

“That's torn it,” he chuckled “his missus will take him to the cleaner's and I hate to think what Penny's husband in Germany will have to say. Separated they may be, but I wouldn't want to be in Fat Eric's shoes if he finds out. What an interesting afternoon.”

The long shifts began and Colin grafted away as hard as he had ever worked. His system helped him create little packets of time that he used checking and double checking his father's details, plus those of Stella Lloyd. He left nothing to chance. He also looked at some records pertaining to his mother, then some concerning Verona Ambrose and Verona's brother Leroy who appeared to have run into a spot of bother with the law not long after leaving school and was getting a reputation as a part-time crook and full-time waste of space.

Colin rubbed his hands as he filed things back where he had found them and cycled off on his refurbished steed to do a time-check. As he stamped his card he made a mental note to work on a method of bypassing this system or cheating it somehow. That was for another night. For the rest of this shift he would sort out a few more jobs on the list and listen to his AC/DC album at full volume and enjoy being taken out of himself and into a different world.