

It started with a kiss . . .

Well, not exactly. More a look of passionate hunger, when I dreamed up an imaginary hot-headed 1960's East End of London girl (Annie Bailey) who had a massive crush on local up-and-coming gangster Max Carter. Straight away, I understood Annie's feelings when Max ended up engaged to her goody-two-shoes sister Ruthie, I understood how badly Annie behaved and how cataclysmic that 'crush' became when she was perched between one rival gang (Max's) and another (the Delaneys).

Reader, I couldn't get the thing down on paper fast enough! I rattled it off in no time, forgot to number the pages, shivered in my shoes at my own audacity while I stood in the Post Office queue and sent it off to six agents.

I waited.

I shivered a bit more, because I was living in a council flat and couldn't afford to run the heating. I'd typed the whole of *Dirty Game* while wearing an overcoat and using a monitor lent to me by a kind neighbour because I couldn't afford to buy a new one when my own packed up. I was told by well-meaning people that I should Get A Proper Job. Seriously! When I knew I was holding this story, this *fabulous* story of conflict and hate and desire, in my hands and that someone *had* to put it into print.

Well, someone did. Also, someone paid me a six-figure sum for *Dirty Game* plus two more Annie books – *Black Widow* and *Scarlet Women*.

So, my writing career began.

The truth was, I'd always wanted to be a writer. As a child I'd scribbled down stories, or told stories in needlework class, or put on puppet shows I'd scripted. All through my teenage years I'd written westerns and adventures and sci-fi pieces. All through my twenties I'd written romantic comedies. I'd even tried to get a few of those published, only to fall at the last hurdle. One exasperated agent said to me when I'd pestered him once too often: 'Why don't you write straight crime? Why fiddle around trying to be funny?'

So, straight crime it was. And finally, miraculously, I found my writing voice and Annie Bailey sauntered into my head and stopped there. Seven books about her followed, and three about another very gutsy heroine Ruby Darke, and seven stand-alone novels too. Then my editor pointed out to me that it's 15 years since that very first Annie book *Dirty Game* was published. She's right! I wish I knew where all that time's gone, but I have to say, it's been a lot of fun. I've bought a house, slogged over the keyboard, sold a house, slogged a bit more, bought another house, moved, slogged on . . . you get the picture. Mostly, it's been the perfect life for a homebody introvert who likes to just plod along at her own pace. I've been blessed with great helpers and fantastic fans. So thank you, one and all. Now I've got to get back to the keyboard, I sense another book coming . . .

Love

Jessie x

JESSIE KEANE

Never Go Back


HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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1

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To Cliff

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Annie Carter is one of those strong, compulsive female characters that I love to write, and judging from all the five-star reviews that my series of books about her have received, it's extremely gratifying to see that my readers love her too. This novel – *Never Go Back* – dives deep into Annie's background and Max's backstory too, spanning both their lives and the lives of their families from East End 1950s poverty right through to the 1990s.

I

Queenie Carter and her sister had always despised one another.

‘She’s such a moaner,’ Queenie said about Nora.

‘She’s a bit of a *tart*,’ Nora sniffed, disapproving of Queenie’s liking for Bill Haley when he got up on stage with that ridiculous kiss-curl of his and belted out ‘Shake Rattle and Roll’.

Nora had married early, and her husband, a dock worker called Ted Dawkins, had very tidily dropped dead one night after exiting the docks, falling gracefully into the gutter not six months after their wedding. He left Nora a young widow, with a small sum that she took down to Brighton, to set up a bed and breakfast establishment and make a bit of money off the tourists.

Queenie was warm-hearted, bold, loud and loving – the polar opposite of her plain, prudish older sister. Queenie fell recklessly in love and married an East End boy, a Carter who, much to her eventual disappointment, did *not* drop dead but lived on – and on – lazy, feckless, *useless* son of a bitch that he was.

She named them all herself, her three boys, her beloved sons, because her ale-soaked liability of a husband was neither use nor ornament – and by the time he made his mind up about anything, she’d already made the decision and

acted upon it. He lounged day after day in his chair, complaining about the government, drinking beer and doing a fabulous impression of fuck-all. Marriage was a huge disappointment to Queenie. She grew bitter and resentful and she quickly lost interest in the once-handsome man she'd wed back in her optimistic girlhood, when she'd still had hopes and dreams to cling to. Bit by bit, all her passion for the man drained away in the face of his apathy. But she had to have *some* focus, so as the years went by, all her attention was lavished upon her sons.

Queenie's boys were her pride and joy. They were great boys, lovely boys, and she'd chew the head off anyone who said different. Her husband had at least managed three good things in his life – he'd given her delicate baby Edward, and Jonjo the rough-and-tumble middle son. And – best of all – there was the eldest, Max, the handsome one, the brightest too. Max was her favourite really, but you mustn't show favouritism. She knew that, so she did her best to hide it. Two years between each of them, and although Queenie was skint for a great part of the time – the war was not long over and there was still rationing – she made sure her boys wanted for little. She often went hungry herself to achieve that.

Boys were always into mischief. They weren't like girls. She'd wanted a girl of course – what mother did not? – but that hadn't happened. So she had to content herself with her three boys, and yes, they were often getting into trouble – Max especially. First with him it was a flat refusal to be told what to do at school. Then he'd be skiving off, leading his little brothers on wild chases, and the school inspector would be round and they'd have to turn the radio off and all be quiet and hide until the fucker went away.

‘You little . . .’ Dad would say, hoisting himself out of his chair long enough to raise a threatening hand to his eldest.

‘You leave him alone!’ Queenie would snap as Max darted out of reach behind her, too quick to be caught by his slothful father.

So, Max was the leader, the young prince, the heir apparent. Lumpish, slow-thinking Jonjo trailed after him, and Edward – Eddie – tried to keep up, but couldn’t. Max was slight as a boy, not tall, not thick-set, but he had a commanding way about him. Jonjo was bigger, bulkier, but lacked Max’s brain. You could imagine Jonjo running to fat in his middle years; his sheer size meant that he found it easy to intimidate smaller, weaker boys – like Eddie, who was almost girlish in his fragility. Jonjo often mocked him for it.

‘We can’t all be the same,’ Queenie often said, pulling Eddie in for a cuddle. ‘Jonjo, go out and play with Max and stop pushing our Eddie in the nettles while you’re out there, all right? Or you’ll see the back of my hand and no bloody supper.’

For a long while, the three boys thought their mum might even be one of those peculiar vegetarian types, because they had meat to eat, but she never touched it. It was only later on, as they grew older, that they realised she was simply giving the best of the food to them and doing without herself.

So, they grew. Max left school early on and joined one of the East End gyms for the boxing.

‘He’s so bloody scrawny, he’ll get knocked to fuck,’ said his dad, laughing, relishing the idea of the pushy little sod getting a pasting.

But Max didn’t. He became stronger and he fought dirty. Queensbury rules? He laughed at the very idea. Slowly, the weedy boy with the thousand-yard stare grew muscular. And

his dad gave up trying to take a swipe at him. Maybe Max wouldn't strike back at his own father, but his dad wasn't prepared to chance it. Sensing his wife's preference for her eldest son, Max's dad was often tempted to give the bolshie nipper a smack. But he suspected he might one of these fine days get knocked flat on his arse if he did, not only by Max himself but by Queenie too, who could be a right dragon when the mood was on her.

Jonjo joined the gym too, encouraged by Max's example. Not little Eddie, though – it was all a bit too physical, too rough, for him.

Then one day Max came home and found Queenie weeping in the front room.

'What is it, Mum?' he asked.

Dad was gone. He'd packed a bag that morning and fucked off. Queenie wouldn't miss him – Max knew that – but Dad had earned a bit on the Corona lorries sometimes and now they didn't have even that small wage coming in. Queenie quickly got another job cleaning. That made three jobs she had on the go, so she could at least still put food on the table for her lads. But she was never there when they needed her. Jonjo and Eddie were dragging themselves up, more or less. And as the man of the house now, the head of the household, Max was making up his own rules as he went along.

The Carters were barely scratching a living, hiding from the rent man, buying stuff on tick and then struggling to pay for it. Max hated that. He hated his father for running out on them and making a bad situation even worse than it already was. He was determined that this wasn't going to last. One way or another, he was going to break out of this downbeat endless struggle that made up their lives. He was going to be *rich*.

2

All through his growing up and into adulthood, Max felt the weight of the world upon his shoulders. He worried constantly about Mum. She wasn't strong. He looked at her pale, tired face and drooping shoulders and felt under intense pressure, felt that he should, he *must*, do something to change their situation. He was forever thinking up new and inventive ways of bringing in cash, because he could see quite clearly that Queenie was just about working herself to death. She was in and out of the house at all hours with her cleaning jobs. He knew she was struggling and he was determined to help out.

Max knew that he didn't have the application to turn pro as a boxer. He was altogether too bright and too wary of managers and promoters, too concerned about ending up punch-drunk and addled like so many did in that business. Jonjo might have given it a shot, if only he'd had the merest bit of self-discipline, which he did not. Boxing or crime – those were the only ways out of penury on the dirt-poor streets of the post-war East End, so Max decided that crime it was going to have to be.

Max and his old gang from schooldays still hung around together, loitering around the dance halls, getting into trouble. Steve Taylor had been working as a self-employed window cleaner. He even had his own round, he was sorted, but Max's

siren call was loud and it was lucrative, so Steve chucked that in and joined Max's firm as a breaker. Tone Barton's father earned good money around Bermondsey on the docks, and for a while it looked like Tone might follow his dad into that, because it paid well enough. Dock worker's houses had fitted carpets, TVs and the latest radiograms – and every so often a crate of goods got damaged by being dropped onto the concrete unloading bay – usually deliberately – and so there was always a surfeit of marketable stuff to sell.

But Tone didn't fancy that work and he could see the way things were going around London, dock work thinning out by the day. He liked – because of his dad's comfy lifestyle – the luxury of having money on the hip. But more than that, he liked cars. He dreamed of being Stirling Moss one day. Fat chance, but he could dream. So when Max asked Tone if he wanted to join up as driver for the firm, and offered him a cut of any profits for the privilege, Tone jumped at it.

Sometimes the firm stole wages from shops and factories, using skeleton keys an old lag down The Grapes had sold to Max. The keys worked a treat, usually – hardly any of the businesses had alarms fitted.

'Piece of piss,' said Tone, parking a van he'd appropriated outside a hardware store.

Steve hopped out and went and tried a skeleton key in the shop lock. It didn't work. Glancing left and right, he got out his matches and let the black smoke run over the key. Then he put it back in the lock, waggled it, drew it back out. Now he could see from the smoke's outline where the thing was jamming. He went back to the van where Max and Jonjo were waiting, with Tone at the wheel.

'No good?' asked Max.

‘Don’t fit. Can’t get it in,’ said Steve.

‘Ought to stick some hair round it, you’d find the opening quick enough then,’ said Jonjo with a grin.

Max took the key and applied the file. ‘That should do it,’ he said, and handed it back to Steve.

Steve jumped down out of the van and went back to the shop door. This time, it worked. He nodded back at the van. Max and Jonjo piled out but Tone stayed put, with the motor running.

The three of them went inside the hardware shop. They moved around among the piles of screws, hammers, paint pots and saws, noting what was worth taking and intending to set off any hidden alarms. Then they went back outside, locked up and sat in the van again. Tone moved it down the road a safe distance, just on the remote possibility that the place was connected to the local nick. When the police failed to show up within half an hour, Max knew the coast was clear, and the place was theirs for the taking. That place – and many, many others.

An even easier game was the protection rackets, and Max got into that very early, setting up fights in clubs all around the city and then coming in with his tasty mates after the event with offers of coverage, for a price. Mostly the owners jumped at the chance, not realising they’d been set up, so Max started earning better. Apart from getting established in the protection business, he was also getting to be an expert thief.

He looted Dorothy Perkins one day, nabbing a fistful of fivers from inside the cashier’s box and legging it out to the door to where his mate Tone was waiting behind the wheel of an old Armstrong Siddeley car. That worked out fine, but Max didn’t like the risk and he didn’t attempt it again. You

could only do so many sudden little jobs like that, then sooner or later the Bill were going to be aware and then they'd grab you and there'd be a three-person cell in Wandsworth with your name on it. And there was no way Max was *ever* going to prison.

3

‘Gawd! She looks like *him*, don’t she?’

While the teenage Max Carter was busy out on the rob, Auntie Maureen, Connie Bailey’s sister, was leaning over Annie Bailey’s cradle and looking disapproving.

Annie was a dark-haired, red-faced little scrap, newly born, who bawled the place down night and day. Annie heard the same thing said about her when she was five years old, and ten, and fifteen. Somehow, she had committed the crime of the century by the simple act of arriving on earth looking like her own father.

Connie, Annie’s mother, had another daughter too. Ruthie was two years older than Annie, and a sweeter, more obedient child altogether. Ruthie played quietly with her toys, Ruthie studied at school, Ruthie toed the line. Ruthie was pale, mousy-haired, wouldn’t say boo to a goose. Annie was Technicolor while Ruthie was black and white. The more cuffs around the ear Annie got for being disobedient, the more she misbehaved. She didn’t care. Dad called her his little princess and she was happy. So what if Mum hated her?

But then Dad left.

‘You are *just* like your father!’ Connie would rage at her youngest daughter.

After Dad’s departure, Annie learned to keep well out of Connie’s way.

‘She don’t mean it,’ Ruthie would whisper to her in the night. ‘Not really.’

But Annie thought that Connie *did* mean it. When she wasn’t drinking and cursing her husband for having it away on his toes, she was taking a swipe at Annie over just about anything, because – Annie could never be allowed to forget – she looked like her father, and that, in the Bailey household, was unforgivable.

‘She’s the dead spit of him, that girl,’ Auntie Maureen would hiss. ‘Ain’t she? Got that look in her eye like she don’t give a damn for nothing.’

Annie grew up and became used to the fact that even the sight of her seemed to aggravate her mother.

‘Maybe ease up on the drink,’ Maureen said to Connie.

Drunk or sober, Connie would always take one look at Annie, see her missing husband staring back at her, and hit the roof.

So Annie grew a hard shell around her heart.

She’d loved her dad and he’d abandoned her. Maybe all the men in her future life would be nothing but a search for that missing father figure, the beloved Daddy who’d run out on her. She hated her mother and was despised in return. So what? She would cope. She grew into a beauty, eclipsing poor little goody-two-shoes Ruthie. And she grew up hard. She had to.