

CHAPTER 1

South London...the 80s.

It was Saturday morning and Johnny Goulding was already up and buzzing with the kind of energy that only comes when you know that your mates and football are on the agenda. The sun was poking through the net curtains and lighting up his small bedsit like a spotlight on a stage. On the dressing table, his battered alarm clock ticked along next to a can of Lynx and a half-empty bottle of Brut.

The bedsit is a small but tidy room with neutral-toned walls and a large window that let in natural light. There was a single bed with crisp white linen sheets in one corner, beside the dressing table and chair. Opposite, was the simple wardrobe and a set of shelves. A kitchenette with a mini fridge, sink and a two-burner hob was neatly tucked against one wall, while a small rug added a touch of warmth to the otherwise minimal space.

The transistor radio belted out '*Lessons in Love*' by Level 42. The beat pumped through the room, mixing with the scent of aftershave and the low hum of anticipation.

Johnny Goulding was the kind of lad who could turn heads without trying too hard. In his early twenties, with a confident swagger and film-star good looks he was one of the Firm's top boys. His life revolved around three things: Football, music and fashion and in that order. Though they all blended into one buzzing culture that he lived and breathed.

He stood in front of his wardrobe and flicked through the hangers like he was curating a gallery. Johnny brushed past a couple of old Ska T-shirts and a denim jacket.

"Not a chance, not today," Johnny muttered to himself.

Today was about being a proper Casual.

After a minute of careful thought and low muttering to himself, he pulled out a Fred Perry polo shirt. It was navy with a white trim.

"Classic," Johnny muttered as he held it up in front of the mirror. "Smart, but not trying too hard."

Next up was his best pair of jeans. They were dark denim and tapered in just right and still stiff enough to show that they've not seen too many wild nights out. Johnny lay them across his bed and then crouched down to pull out his Adidas trainers from the bottom of the wardrobe.

Johnny had cleaned them the night before. They were spotless.

"*Looking right is everything*," Johnny thought as he dressed himself in front of the mirror.

In the background the song changed to '*Word Up*' by Cameo.

He stood tall and a slight grin crept across his face as he turned from side to side.

"Yeah, you'll do," Johnny said with a nod.

He turned sharply to pick up his wallet, patted his back pocket for reassurance and then grabbed his keys from the dressing table.

Johnny locked his bedsit with a sharp click and then slipped the keys into his pocket and turned towards the stairs. He bounded down the narrow steps two at a time, the soles of his trainers thudding lightly on the threadbare carpet. As he reached the first landing, raised voices stopped him in his tracks.

"He's at it again," Johnny hissed.

His neighbours, the husband and wife from the flat below, were in the middle of a fierce argument. The woman's voice was sharp with frustration, the man's was louder, angrier. Just as Johnny stepped into view the husband raised his hand, his fingers were curled and his jaw clenched.

"Oi," Johnny said firmly. "I've told you, Everard. You take your hand to her again and I'll knock you spark out."

Everard lowered his hand.

"I'm sick to the back teeth of hearing you come home drunk and start giving it the big one." Johnny said as he stepped closer.

Everard remained quiet.

"Knock it off, right?"

"Yeah, right." Everard muttered.

Johnny stepped out of the front door and paused on the doorstep, as the heavy wooden door thudded closed behind him. He stood still for a moment and breathed in the cool, grimy tang of a London weekend morning. Around him was the distant sound of traffic, the smell of fried bacon from the café on the corner and the faint smell of petrol in the air. He closed his eyes and let the flavour of it settle on his chest and then exhaled slowly.

With a half-smile he strolled over to his silver fox coloured Cortina MK2 1600E with its once-glossy paint now dulled by time and weather. On the windscreen, where the tax disc should have been, a handwritten note read: 'Tax in Post'

Johnny opened the driver's door, slid in and gave the door a firm slam behind him. He turned the ignition key...once...twice...the engine coughed and churned but refused to catch.

"Come on, come on!" Johnny yelled out.

One final whine and then silence.

The battery was dead.

"You bastard!" Johnny cried out as he slammed both hands down on the steering wheel. The crack of skin on plastic echoed around the car.

Boiling with frustration, Johnny shoved the door open and stepped out. He scanned the street, just as a black cab came into view. He raised his arm and waved it down.

"Hello mate," Johnny said as he opened the door and stepped in.

"Where to guv?" the taxi driver asked as he turned off his for-hire sign.

"The Londoners Arms, Old Kent Road."

"No problem," the taxi driver said as he pulled away.

"Poxy car has broken down...again," Johnny said to fill the silence.

"Maybe it's time to get another."

"I'm bloody polo, mate. No money for another motor just yet."

"What is it?"

"1600E,"

"MOT?"

"Nah."

"Tax?"

"Nah."

"And it doesn't run?"

"I don't know anything about motors."

"It's a parts motor at best then?"

Johnny nodded.

"I'll give you twenty quid for it," the taxi driver said as he looked into his rear-view mirror.

"It's got to be worth more in parts," Johnny said.

"It is if you can be bothered to strip them out and find buyers."

"It's yours," Johnny said after a few seconds pause.

"Are you about tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah, but not too early. If all goes well, I'll have an overnight visitor."

"I'll stop by about 11.30am, alright?"

"Sure."

The taxi turned into the Old Kent Road with its tyres humming against the tarmac as it joined the slow weekend traffic. Johnny leaned against the window with his eyes scanning the familiar sprawl of South London life. Some of the pubs, still shuttered but readying for the midday crowd, the greasy cafes with steamed up windows and the chip shops opening early

with their vinegar tang drifting into the street. It all rolled into the pages of a well-worn book for Johnny. These places raised him just as much, if not more than school ever had. His first pint, his first tear up with the firm and the first time he got his end away.

As the taxi rolled on, a powerful swell rose in his chest. It was half pride and half ache. This was his manor. His history was etched into every grimy brick and glowing shop sign.

It was match day and Johnny felt unshakably alive.

The taxi came to a halt.

"How much mate?"

"It's alright, it's on me. You boys have a good day today and I'll see you in the morning."

"Cheers," Johnny said as stepped out of the taxi and patted the roof.

The Londoners Arms stood bold and brazen on a corner of the Old Kent Road. It's red-brick exterior was soot-smudged and weather beaten. The old painted sign hung slightly askew above the door. A lion rampant clutching a pint glass in one paw and a football in the other. The windows were frosted with years of cigarette smoke and the brass handles were worn smooth by decades of rough hands. Outside a few of the younger lot smoked fags and laughed. Their voices were loud and had to compete with the rumble of passing traffic, while a thick fog of lager, aftershave and bravado seeped from the doorway.

"*Let's have it!*" Johnny thought as a surge of adrenaline washed over him.

Inside, the place roared with life. The pub was packed shoulder-to-shoulder with football casuals, broad chested, tattooed and brimming with energy. Laughter cracked off the walls like fireworks, pint glasses clinked constantly and stories flew thick through the air in half-truths and half legend. The walls were stained in history: Framed photos of past awaydays, signed shirts in glass cases and newspaper clippings of matches and mayhem. This was the Firm's pub and it was known from Portsmouth to Newcastle. A place where outsiders didn't last long, and reputations were either made or broken in the space of a pint. For those on the inside, it was sacred ground, loud, lawless and loyal to the bone.

"Oi, Oi, saveloy!" Russell Drew called out when he spotted Johnny.

Johnny raised his hand and beamed.

Russell was a man who made an instant impression. He was a printer by trade with a solid reputation for good work but it was the many lucrative fiddles on the side that kept his pockets lined and his wardrobe full of all the latest designer gear. Johnny and Russell had been best mates since school. Russell was loyal, quick with the banter and generous to a fault.

"Hello mate, alright?"

One of the lads stood up and gave Johnny his seat.

"Cheers," Johnny said as he sat down.

Russell took a fiver out his pocket and held it up.

Alfie Dunn, the landlord acknowledged him with a nod as Russell ran his finger over the table and the empty glasses.

Alfie Dunn, the landlord, was the kind of man that left a distinct mark. With his broad shoulders, hands like shovels and a voice that carried right across the busy pub, he was every bit the product of his era. In the 1960s Alfie had been a proper handful and had carved out a reputation as one of the most effective doormen in the city. He had worked the doors from Soho to Shoreditch and had no affiliation with either the Krays or the Richardson's. The nights had been long but the pay was decent, and the company...if he played his cards right...was even better. Alfie knew the rules and the rhythm of the nightlife, and he didn't mind getting his hands dirty when things got out of line. One night, a loud mouth punter had one too many and started causing grief inside the club, shouting, pushing and acting like the big man. Alfie didn't waste any time. He grabbed him firmly by the arm and frogmarched the drunk through the thumping music and swirling smoke, and threw him out into the cold night air like he was yesterday's news. The bloke hit the pavement and smashed his head against the kerb.

The drunk died instantly and Alfie found himself doing a ten stretch for manslaughter.

Alfie was never one to walk around giving it large, but he didn't take liberties from anyone. Behind the bar at the Londoners Arms, he still carried the same presence. It was the firm's pub but...it was Alfie's kingdom.

"Fuck me, Russ, you smell like a tart," Johnny said as Clare placed a tray of lagers on the table.

"It's about time you knocked that Brut shit on the head and got yourself a drop of Aramis."

Clare was the latest barmaid to join Alfie's team.

"Have one yourself," Russell said as he placed a couple of notes on the table.

Clare smiled.

"I'd love a pop at that," Johnny muttered. "I could drink her bloody bath water."

"You never learn, do you," Russell said sarcastically.

"What do you mean?" Johnny asked before taking a sip from his lager.

"You can't get all soppy over the latest pretty face mate. The chances are it's just another polished nut job wearing Max Factor."

"So, are you saying that you wouldn't?"

Russell chuckled and then took a long sip from his glass.

"I'd smash the granny out of it... and then leave."

"That's harsh."

Russell smiled and then winked.

"What you see is what you get. Look it's just my opinion, but... once you've mastered the urge to smash it, the illusion shatters and you'll see most women for what they truly are."

"Enlighten us," Johnny said as Martin Woods pulled up a chair and joined them.

"What's that?" Martin asked as he placed his pint on the table.

"Our resident guru is about to pass on some of his infinite wisdom. He reckons he's sussed out women."

"I said most women, not all...there's a big difference."

"Well, come on," Martin said as he leaned in.

"From my observations and in my own experience, once you've mastered the urge not to smash it, the illusion shatters."

"Go on," Martin Persisted.

"Then you'll see them for what they truly are."

"And that is?"

"Boring, rude, entitled, annoying, costly and bloody ungrateful."

"Do you truly believe that?"

Russell nodded.

"So, having a regular bird on tap and all that isn't on the cards for you?"

"Controlling the urge between your legs is the key," Russell said. "Oh, I'll keep playing the field until I find the right one to score with."

"Nice football pun," Johnny said as he raised his glass.

"It's typical, ain't it?" Martin said as he shook his head.

"What do you mean?"

"Matey here, is wedged up and beating birds off with a shitty stick and the rest of us are having to work at it."

"Why don't you have a pop at Debs?"

All three lads turned sharply to see Debbie and Tammy standing by the jukebox.

Debbie had a natural, working-class attractiveness with an easy charm. Her hair was dark and styled in a way that complimented her confident and yet approachable demeanour.

"That would be nice," Martin muttered.

Debs was dressed in tight jeans, high heels and a white top that accentuated her curves perfectly.

"Been there," Russell whispered over his pint.

"Most of the pub has," Johnny replied in a tone barely above a whisper.

"There's definitely something about her," Martin said as Debs looked up and stared directly at him.

There was a roughness in her eyes, a reflection of someone who knew how to survive and manipulate her surroundings.

"When getting your end away no longer clouds your judgement, you'll see what I see."

Debs shot Martin a flirty smile before turning away and speaking with a bunch of lads who had joined them. She was openly flirtatious and was clearly enjoying the attention of the men around her.

"Debs is a nice bird, Martin, but she aint a keeper. Believe me, mate, beneath that playful exterior, she's cunning and calculating. Debs knows exactly how to get what she wants."

Martin watched her as she used her sexuality to charm the men around her.

"Once you get to grips with their behaviour, and underlying motives, it all starts to make sense."

"All this from a bloke who got laid three times in the last week," Johnny said with a hint of envy.

"Splash a bit of cash, and tell them what they want to hear and those drawers are almost guaranteed to drop."

"You piss me off sometimes," Martin said. "Three times, you lucky bastard! I haven't had a sniff in months."

Russell sank the last of his lager and then reached into his pocket.

"It's alright, I'll get these," Johnny said.

Russell shook his head vehemently.

"I've had a nice little tickle this week. I've got this new geezer on the firm that promotes bands and stuff. All cash in hand."

"You'll get caught one of these days."

"Not a chance," Russell said with a broad smile. "I've wedged the shop-floor manager in. He's happy with a few extra quid and asks no questions."

"Sweet," Johnny said as Russell beckoned Clare to bring them another round.

Moments later, Clare placed another tray of drinks on the table.

"Cheers, darling," Russell said as he handed her a note. "Keep the change."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, of course," Russell said as he reached for the pint. "Do you know Martin?"

"I don't think we've met."

Martin immediately rose to his feet and held out his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Martin.” Clare said with a broad smile.

Almost immediately Martin buried his hands deep into his pockets as if trying to anchor himself while shifting awkwardly from one foot to another.

“And you,” Martin said as his throat dried.

His shoulders became hunched, not from a bad posture, but like he was subconsciously trying to make himself look smaller.

Martin’s smile was nervous and a little tight around the edges. He was trying but the lads could see that he was clearly out of his depth.

His eyes flicked between Johnny, Russell and Clare. He appeared to be relying on his mates to keep the momentum going.

When Clare chuckled confidently, Martin visibly tensed and didn’t know where to put his hands. One briefly went to rub the back of his neck while his face flushed a little.

“Well,” Clare said with an awkward smile, “It was nice to meet you...Martin”

Martin watched as she turned sharply on her heels and strode back to the bar.

“You could have been in there,” Johnny said with a slight chuckle.

“Bollocks!” Martin hissed as he sat back down and reached for his lager.

Both Johnny and Russell burst out laughing.

“Hello Clare,” Russell said in a silly voice while holding out a limp hand.

“Bollocks to you too!”

Several lads approached the table, Johnny looked up and acknowledged them.

“Buster wants a word.”

Buster Collins was top boy and led the Firm.

Johnny and Russell grabbed their pints and headed across the bar.

Buster was a clear 6’2” tall with a broad muscular build.

“Alright boys?” Buster said with a nod.

His presence was commanding and his cold eyes reflected a mixture of detached amusement and dangerous intent. He was dressed in a blue Sergio top, blue jeans and was sporting a stylish wedge hairstyle. Buster carried himself like he was in charge of everything around him.

Buster was the embodiment of fearlessness and a man who knew his place in the world and more importantly he knew everyone else’s place as well. He had an innate understanding of the terrace scene and the pecking order of it. To his firm he was top boy, respected, feared and loved, all in equal measure.

“Right, I’ve just had word that the Pompey boys are on the rattler.”

Buster’s inner circle listened intently.

“My source reckons that they’ve put together a right naughty little firm... a proper turnout.”

“Fuck them,” Johnny said as he raised his glass.

“It gets better,” Buster continued.

“Go on,” Russell said enthusiastically.

“The cheeky little fuckers are planning to turn us over here.”

“You must be kidding,” Russell said as he placed his empty glass on the table. “Here...The Londoners Arms?”

“They’re deluded if they think they can turn us over on our manor.”

“What’s the plan, Buster?”

“I’m going to make a few calls, rally the troops, get the numbers and take it to them.”

“Nice one.”

The word was out and the pub buzzed with an electric kind of energy. It was the kind that hummed just beneath the surface before boiling over. Voices were raised, not in anger but in a familiar, raucous way that only happened when anticipation met camaraderie.

Buster slammed his pint down on the table, he was practically bouncing in his trainers.

“This is it, boys...we’ll have our own Battle of Waterloo!”