

Secrets on The Estate

Mel Sherratt

Praise for Mel Sherratt

'There's a lot of young crime writers that I've just met for the first time. There's one called Mel Sherratt; she's very interesting.' **Ian Rankin.**

'Sherratt is a unique voice in detective fiction, capturing the terror of abused women far better than any male writer.' **Mail on Sunday.**

'A writer to watch out for.' **Mandasue Heller.**

'Uncompromising, powerful and very real – an important new voice.' **David Mark.**

'The worst terrors are always those that hide closest to home.' **Elizabeth Haynes.**

Books by Mel Sherratt

Somewhere to Hide (The Estate Series)

Behind a Closed Door (The Estate Series)

Fighting for Survival (The Estate Series)

Secrets on the Estate

Taunting the Dead (A DS Allie Shenton Novel)

Watching over You

Coming 2015

Follow the Leader (A DS Allie Shenton Novel)

Only the Brave (A DS Allie Shenton Novel)

Written in the Scars (The Estate Series)

SECRETS ON THE ESTATE

Mel Sherratt

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Introduction

I really enjoy writing books on *The Estate* but which genre do they fit into? They are a mish-mash of women's fiction, psychological suspense and crime thriller. They are too dark for women's fiction alone – although the subject matters and issues are often referred to in this genre, too light in places for crime thrillers and often not enough for the psychological suspense readers out there. I thought I'd ask my readers – most of whom said they were crime thrillers... hmm.

As soon as people know that I was once a housing officer and that I've written a novel on a housing estate, the next question is always 'is it based on an estate you use to work on?' That's usually followed by 'have you written about any real people in the books?' The answer to both questions is no. The idea behind the series is there is good and bad in everyone, no matter what their background and upbringing. Everyone has a dark side; even the most dangerous people have a heart. Josie Mellor is my urban angel. I wanted a character that had to be non-judgmental, who had to distance herself from reality when she went home to her 'normal' life. I wanted to show that, no matter what our circumstances, underneath we are all the same. I suppose it's down to the old adage, nature versus nurture.

My hopes for the series? I'd like readers to go through emotional journeys with the characters from *The Mitchell Estate* and feel happy for them when they 'better' themselves too. I want to show hidden crimes, things that happen to someone else behind closed doors – gritty content but happy endings, hope and encouragement.

So I'm going to go with my own genre of grit-lit – where drama meets crime.

Where is The Mitchell Estate?

I've based *The Mitchell Estate* in the fictional city of Stockleigh, but it's anywhere you'll find dysfunctional families such as the Gallagher's (*Shameless*). It's anywhere the teachers try their best to educate the kids in schools similar to *Waterloo Road*. It's anywhere you'll find Del Boy and Rodney in a high-rise block of flats living close to *The Royle Family*. It isn't far from *Happy Valley*. There are houses similar to those shown on *Life of Grime*, characters like the ones from *The Street* and *Accused*, hoping to be controlled by *Law and Order UK*. At times it's as miserable as *Eastenders*: often it's reminiscent of an episode from *The Jeremy Kyle Show*. In a nutshell, *The Estate* is laugh a minute, cry a minute, crime a minute. But it's always where you will find a friend – someone to help you up again when you've been knocked down to your lowest.

What's in this book?

SECRETS ON THE ESTATE contains diary entries written by some of the main characters from the first three books in the series. There are also diary entries from a few of the new characters that will be featured in the next book, *WRITTEN IN THE SCARS*. And

there are also a few 'secrets from the author' too, plus 'snippets from Josie Mellor,' as well as prologues for the first three books. Please note that the diary entries are written in character, so any grammatical errors are there purposely.

So, pound those streets, open those doors, pull back those curtains and take a peep into the lives of the people from The Estate...

JOSIE MELLOR

– Housing Officer.

I never had any intentions of becoming a housing officer. I left school and went to college and then applied for the first job I could, which was as a receptionist at Mitchell Housing Association's main head office. I had my mum to look after then. She was housebound so it was easy for me to pop back home most lunch times. But then a job came up on the estate itself, at the local housing association office. They were after an admin assistant and, although my mum wasn't happy, I applied for it and was successful. I did that for a couple of years before being promoted to a housing officer.

People I knew thought I'd gone out of my mind. Didn't I see enough heartbreak in the news every day? Well, yes, but I'm a good listener, and a problem solver. I hoped that I could make a bad day seem that little bit better by helping, even in a small way. I wanted to work with people who I could build up a rapport with and visit on a regular basis. A job with a feel-good factor – what could be better than that?

There are good tenants and bad tenants on the Mitchell Estate as much as there are good people and bad people on every street, in every town or city. The

estate is split in two by a main road, Davy Road, that travels the length of the estate. The locals know the two areas either side as the mitch and the hell. Living on the mitch is the better choice - living on the hell, well, it goes without saying, I think. But when I say choice, there isn't any. Tenants are placed where we have empty properties. Houses on the mitch hardly ever come empty, unless someone passes away or does a runner. Properties on the hell hardly ever stay tenanted. It's ridiculous to have stigmas attached to addresses, though, don't you think?

If I can help my tenants, I will. I'm a firm believer in giving anyone a second chance, but I won't be walked over. If I have to be tough to get things done, I can be - and I will be. And if things don't get done? Well, that's where my persuasion tactics comes into play.

Here's an average week in my working life on THE ESTATE:

Monday

Bloody typical. Two days of sunshine and all hell has broke loose. Gina Bradley's twins have been scrapping on Vincent Square again. One of the windows at Shop&Save went through again. Mr Neblin and his son have been arguing in the street again. Mrs Marshall has rung to complain about her neighbour's party that continued outside until half past three on Sunday morning. The car that was dumped at the back of Clarence Avenue on Thursday has reportedly been burnt out on Friday night. And it isn't even half past ten yet: roll on home time! Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork. Complaint, complaint, complaint. That's all my job seems to be.

Tuesday

I have an eviction lined up for ten thirty today. Usually evictions happen to tenants who haven't exactly been model citizens but this one is really breaking my heart. Mr and Mrs Alexander lost their three-year-old son last year from leukemia. Since then, Mr Alexander has been involved in a fight at The White Lion and been harassed by the man he thumped ever since. He ended up losing his job; because of the grief, he couldn't focus on anything. Mrs Alexander has tried everything to get him to accept that Caleb has gone and they need to move on, even though she's suffering still herself. Any fool can see that and at least she's tried to keep everything running smoothly. Now I'm due to evict them this morning. They are in massive rent arrears. I wish I could pay it off myself and get them back on the straight and narrow. But I can't. God knows what will happen to them. It's too painful to think about.

Wednesday

One of my favourite tenant's has died. Her son came in to tell me first thing - couldn't get it off my mind for the rest of the day. Mrs Turner was a darling. She was seventy-eight, yet she could give the kids a run for their money. Every time I visited, she'd insist on giving me three bags of sweets for the girls back at the office. And it doesn't help when Mrs Barker from the next street rang me to say that she was next in line for a bungalow and she wanted that one. She doesn't care that there's a family in mourning. All she sees is it working to her advantage. The word vulture comes to mind.

Thursday

Another monthly team meeting followed by the monthly police liaison meeting. Then on to a tenant participation meeting, and then a complaint up on Davy Road. And my manager wonders why I never get time to finish anything. I've been listening to people droning on all day when I really needed to tackle the mountain of complaints overflowing in my in-tray. The problem with going to so many meetings is that, not only does it take up my time, but also I come away with projects and tasks to do before the next one! Still, the police liaison meeting was interesting. Heard a lot of gossip, very good gossip indeed. Looks like some of my tenants are going to get a rude awakening when Operation Spirit starts next month. I can't wait.

Friday

I love that Friday feeling but, in this job, Friday's are really no different. And there's always a teenager that gets thrown out by their parents after an argument and insists there's no chance of reconciliation and nowhere else for them to stay. Homelessness interviews take up so much time, checking into backgrounds and reasons but it's the ringing round of hostels that takes the most effort. And they'll probably all be full as usual which means that either the kid sleeps rough, will go back to their parents with their tail between their legs (which usually happens by Monday no matter what I do) or end up in a bed and breakfast paid for by the tax payer. Just one case like this and my planned day's work has gone out of the window. I'm so far behind. Roll on next week.

SECRETS FROM
SOMEWHERE
TO HIDE

Cath Mason has learned to be tough. The things she's seen growing up on the Mitchell Estate, she's had to be. Yet, even broken and beaten by life at times, she's still the first person a woman in need of help seeks out.

At Cath's house, there is safety in numbers as well as a place to hide from domestic abuse. No matter what trouble comes to her door, she won't turn anyone away – because she knows what it's like to live with secrets.

But now a problem from her past has come back to haunt her, and she's the one faced with a dilemma. What should she do first – help or be helped – despite being unsure she'll ever be ready to confront her own demons?

With danger around every corner, can Cath protect herself as well as the women whose safety is her paramount concern? Or has the potential for revenge already gone a step too far?

CATH MASON, Christopher Avenue.

If I didn't have a secret of my own, things might be much better for me. But what I did in my past will haunt me forever. And I'm not sure any man would want to know me and give me his love if he knew what I'd done. I mean, what kind of woman in her right mind would do that?

I suppose that's why I want to help vulnerable women. If only *I'd* had someone to talk to when I was a teenager, perhaps I wouldn't feel so guilty now. So if I can be a friend to anyone, help them in any way to get on with their lives, and possibly leave their mistakes and demons behind, then maybe that's my purpose in life now. Everyone needs a friend, and everyone needs a chance in life, surely?

When I first had the idea to run some kind of halfway house for vulnerable female teenagers, I had lots of opposition. I'm not qualified but I do have life experience. And I don't want to be a social worker. I want to be a link between those services and the girls that come to stay with me. It's usually a short-term visit; just enough to get them back on their feet again. Well, apart from Jess Myatt who has been with me for nearly a year now. She's a volatile one, but actually I think we quite like to tell each other what to do. It works out well,

most of the time.

I also have a secret weapon. I have Josie Mellor. She's a housing officer based on the estate. Even I don't like people who are sent to read me the riot act and tell me how to live my life. But Josie is different. She may have an authoritative head on her shoulders but she cares too. That's what sets her apart from anyone else who works at the housing association. Most of the other staff are nice, helpful even, but Josie goes the extra mile. And helping me out to allow me to look after these girls was no mean feat.

People are always asking me why I do what I do. It's mainly down to my own background as a child. I was a latch-key kid back in my day. Jeez, I'm only thirty-six, and I'm making myself sound like I'm in my fifties. My mum was an alcoholic, barely able to look after herself, let alone a child. I did my best but when she died, I was fifteen with nowhere to go but into council care. I hated it.

Sure, it changed my life forever, but I tried not to let it label me. I wanted off the estate but getting a dead-end job and having money in my pocket stopped all my ambition. Besides, I come from The Mitchell Estate. How was I going to get a swanky job in London or Manchester? I couldn't even get a *good* job in Stockleigh.

And then I met my husband, Rich, when I was nineteen. He was my soul mate until the day he died. He was thirty-six. It's been three years now since the night he fell down a flight of steps on the way home from the pub and hit his head. Such a tragic death - if only he hadn't fallen so heavily, he might have survived. He'd have been battered and bruised, but alive.

Losing someone you love and trust with all your heart, I thought I might never get over it. But slowly, with the help of my friends, I managed to get by. Day

by day, week by week, month by month. And do you know what? Life isn't too bad at all. Yes, I have a house full of hormonal women most of the time, but at least I feel I serve a purpose. And, like I said, I don't profess to being a social worker - Lord knows they have a tough enough job. But sometimes the girls I take in, all they need is someone who will give them routine, show them how to manage their lives and their feelings, but equally, someone they don't see as too authoritative. That's where I come in.

JESS MYATT, Christopher Avenue.

Christ, it's hot this morning. Not that it's going to bother me at all. I'm not about to set off to work in a noisy factory or be stuck behind a till at Shop&Save all day – even if anyone *would* employ me. I haven't got anything to offer anyone. Which is why I'm still in bed at ten thirty. What's the point of getting up – apart from to put on a layer of sun tan lotion and chill in the garden later?

Secretly, I do hope life won't always be as boring as this. Don't get me wrong, I like staying at Cath's house. It's far better than where I came from. I had a shit time living with my olds. Even at seventeen, they say that I'm out of control but that's not true. I'm just my own woman.

My dad is an alcoholic, you see. I don't know how my mum puts up with him. She lets him walk all over her and when I defend her, when he's going off on one and laying into her, I'm the one who gets in trouble when I stop him. I've lost count of how many times he's attacked me. I've lost count of how many times I've attacked him too, but I was protecting my mum. Now he's kicked me out, she's left on her own with him. I hate it, but what can I do? He won't even let me in the house to see her any more. Sometimes we meet in secret in the city centre,

and I text her often. As long as she deletes them before he checks her phone, she's okay.

It's really quiet at Cath's house at the moment. There's only me and Cheryl here and she's out more than she's in. Cheryl's always off her head on some drug or another. I get into so much trouble because of her. She tries to blame me for everything, and now people think *I'm* a troublemaker. If she ever has another go at me, I'll give her what for. She doesn't scare me. I am Jess Myatt, the Myatty one, geddit – the mighty one, ha ha ha.

Cheryl is only a couple of years older than me, but she's SO streetwise. I thought I could hold my own but she sells her body for drugs. I would NEVER do that. Okay, I take what the cops call recreational drugs every now and then, just to improve my mood. But selling my body? Ugh, no way. Imagine all those men with their hands all over you. That's not my style. But then again, I've never been hooked on drugs.

Let's face it though, there's nothing else to do around here except make your own entertainment. The pubs are closing, people are moving away if they have any sense. But The Mitchell Estate isn't that depraved, compared to some around the country. Living in the Midlands doesn't sound as bad as living in the east end of London, right? I mean, I've read a couple of books by Martina Cole, she tells it like it is. I wouldn't like to live where her books are set. No sirree.

It's funny, I want someone new to come and stay with Cath so I can have some company but, equally, I don't want anyone here because I like being the centre of her attention. If anyone else comes, Cath's all over them and then I get pushed out.

But it would be great if the next person to come and stay would be someone I could be friends with, Someone I could go out with, have a laugh with, share make-up and clothes. Really, all I want is a friend. I'm so bored.

BECKY WARD, Christopher Avenue.

Today is my sixteenth birthday but nobody in my family cares about it. Well, my dad gave me a card with a tenner in it, but that's about his limit. He has no feelings for me whatsoever and there's nothing I can do to change that. I don't know what I ever did wrong for him not to love me. My mum died when I was young and I was looked after by my nan until I was eleven. But then my nan died and that's when everything changed for me. I had to live with my dad again and that's when my uncle started to... do things to me. It's why I'm lying here, shaking like a leaf. I know he'll come creeping up the stairs when he's drunk, like he does every Saturday night.

I think I'm pregnant again. If I am, I'm keeping the baby this time. Bethany Johnson at school says that girls can get their own flats paid for by the social if they get pregnant; says they shoot to the top of the housing priorities list. She should know. Her mum works as a dinner lady at the old folk's home. Bethany's mum knows everything. She is like a bloody oracle. I wish I had a mum like Bethany.

I wish I had a mum.

Oh, God, I can hear someone coming up the stairs.

If the footsteps go past, I'll be okay. Sometimes they

do because it's my dad going for a pee. But if they stop outside my door for a second before continuing, then I know it's John. And then I know that he's coming back once he's been to the bathroom. With his rancid breath and his rough hands, and his fists clenched if I refuse to let him do what he wants with me. You'd think I'd know better at this age. I got punched and held down when I was younger but after a while, I realised it was easier to give in. Let him do what he wanted and get on with my life until the next time.

No one would believe me, he would say.

More recently John would say that no one would believe that I hadn't wanted him to fuck me for the past few years. As if it was my fault, as if I led him on.

And the worst thing of all - I think my dad must know.

I know you might be reading this and judging me for staying here. But I tried running away once and it got me nowhere. I was picked up by the police after a few days as I wandered around Salford. I was glad mostly. Sleeping rough wasn't what I thought it would be.

Don't judge me unless you've lived my life, though. I won't put up with this forever. Once I'm strong enough, I will leave and this time it will be for good. And before I go, I will make my mark so that everyone knows what I had to put up with every week.

I doubt anyone will miss me though.

In fact, I'm sure they won't.

SNIPPETS FROM JOSIE MELLOR

**While you were out:
Left five letters on your desk. Can you run the
gauntlet for the rent collectors this afternoon?**

Because I'm always going out on the estate, I'm often asked to hand deliver letters to tenants. This isn't just to keep the postage bill down to a minimum. This is to ensure that a tenant can't say they haven't received the letter.

One of the letters I dread delivering is a rent arrears letter. I call it, 'running the gauntlet' – getting a letter through a letterbox as quietly as possible, running like hell back down the path and screeching off in my car before anyone can collar me. Over some time, and after lots of abuse, I've developed quite a knack to it.

Today, I'm off to see Mr Amison. Mr Amison works on the side – as in he claims benefits for being ill but he also works cash-in-hand. We all know that but we can't prove it. But for now we've stopped his benefits and he's after our blood.

My car is parked so that it can't be seen if Mr Amison looks out of his window. When I'm delivering letters,

if the gate is noisy when it opens and closes, I'm at a disadvantage. Best are the properties where the gates have been stolen as I can easily slip in unnoticed.

So I'm in through the gap where the gate should have been, sneaking up the path with my heart in my mouth, glancing at the windows for any signs of life. So far, so good. I push up the letterbox, drop the letter to the floor and let the letterbox fall silently. I'm only halfway down the path, legging it back to my car when the front door is thrown open so hard it bounces off the wall of the porch.

'Oy! You! Where do you think you're going?'

Cringing, I pause for a moment before turning to face the giant with the round belly. His face is a mass of purple rage. And he hasn't even opened the envelope. I can see it scrunched up in his hands. So, I do what I always do. I smile politely, ready to deny everything.

'Yes, Mr Amison.'

'What the fuck is this?'

'There's no need to swear.'

'I'll swear if I fucking well want to. Is this another letter about my rent?'

'I'm not sure. I've only been asked to deliver it. I don't know what it says.'

'Oh, don't give me that shit. You know perfectly well what it's about.'

I take a couple of steps down the path towards my car as I hear him tearing at the envelope. I'm at the end of the path where the gate should be before I realise that he's right behind me. Then he's grabbing hold of my collar.

'Gerrof me!'

He shoves the letter into my chest. 'You can take this back to that office of yours and tell them to shove it where the sun don't shine. You're not having a penny off me.'

I've been chased down the path on many occasions. I've been sworn at, spat at but I haven't been assaulted. Usually if I let people say their piece, no matter how intimidating the situation, then I can get away unhurt.

So I stay quiet, which usually does the trick to calm the likes of Mr Amison down. What's the use of mouthing off at someone who isn't going to retaliate? His arms drop, the letter falls to the floor and there it stays as I walk away.

'That's right, run back to the safety of your office, you frigging coward.' Mr Amison can't resist one more dig.

I walk to my car trying not to trip over my feet in my haste, drive to the next street and park up again. Then I start shaking profusely and burst into tears. I hate running the gauntlet at times.

Secrets from the author - Creating THE ESTATE Series

For many, a series of crime novels usually involves one or two major characters plus a few minor characters that appear in every book. I like nothing better than following a character through a series, seeing that character growing and changing through every 'episode'. But I'm also a huge fan of Jimmy McGovern and I really enjoy how he writes series' such as *The Street* and *Accused*, by taking a different character's story for each episode.

With THE ESTATE Series, I wanted the estate itself to be the major character. It's the main reason why I chose to base it in the fictional city of Stockleigh. I wanted to give readers a sense that the estate could be around the corner from anywhere. Indeed, I've had numerous emails from readers saying they know of an estate just like The Mitchell Estate not far from where they live, so it seems to be working.

Next, I decided to have several minor characters in each book and then focus the main plots and subplots around one or two extra main characters. For instance, in *SOMEWHERE TO HIDE*, the main character is Cath Mason but you also hear a lot from housing officer, Josie Mellor. Josie then goes on to become the main character in *BEHIND A CLOSED DOOR*. Gina Bradley, a,

how-shall-I-put-it-politely, nasty piece of work appears a little in book one and book two – as do members of her family – and then she becomes one of the main characters in *FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL*, book three.

WRITTEN IN THE SCARS is the next book in the series. I'm taking a minor character, Donna Adams, forward from *FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL* and concentrating on the rest of her family as well as a few more characters. And in book five, planned for 2015, I'm going to bring the main characters from all four books together again. If a character in another author's book has got under my skin, I often want to know more about them once the story is finished. It's another thing I get asked about all the time. So, next year, there will be a chance to catch up and see how some of the characters' lives have changed since their stories ended.

CHERYL MORTON, Christopher Avenue.

I don't mind living with Cath Mason, and I like her, but sometime she gets right up my nose. She has rules, see. I have to be in by a certain time every night. And I have to do all these stupid chores, as if I'm an unpaid home help. Sometimes when she has a go at me, I have a go back. I'll hold my own but only because I know how far to push her and when to stop. Some of the girls she has staying with her are okay, but some of them are evil little bitches that deserve a good slapping. They get it too, if they lip me when I'm on one. Like Jess. She thinks she's a friend of mine but I don't do friends anymore.

I've been to prison - well, juvie - and I don't want to go there again. It was only for a few weeks and I know I can hack it, but what's the point of going back inside? I've been there, worn the T-shirt and quite frankly, I couldn't stand all the whining girls who thought that they shouldn't be locked up just because they did a bit of thieving. Thieving is thieving, isn't it? It's still breaking the sodding law.

I wish I could get off drugs, though. They've ruined my looks completely and my hair is always in need of a wash but I can't be bothered with it. I remember the days when I had good skin too, and looked healthy, not

like the bag of bones I am now. But then again, if I'm on something what does it matter anyway? As long as I can get loaded, I don't care. I don't look the best of people with a needle in my vein, do I? No one is going to fancy me like that. I sell my body as well. It's not something I'm proud of but needs must. Luckily, lots of the men at The White Lion fancy a quick blowjob in the men's toilets.

It hasn't always been like this. Two years ago I wasn't hooked at all, but after getting pregnant and my fella accusing me of sleeping around rather than taking responsibility, well, I went off the rails. I was sixteen and on my own. And when I had the baby taken from me, the only thing I could have looked after, cared for and loved, that would have made my life complete, I went off the rails even more. I took more drugs to block out the pain, and it helped for a while. But then I'd remember again and take something else and, well, you get the picture. Still, at least when I'm at Cath's house, I feel safe. I'm lucky to be allowed to stay there really. Cath's told me that if I ever go back to prison there won't be a bed for me when I come out again. One strike and I'm out.

Like I said, I don't mind Cath. She's a good sort really. I've laughed with her, cried with her, and she's sat with me when I'm ill. She's even taken me to counsellors, and drug rehab to see if she can get me sorted out. It does help for a while. Cath does her best - I am lucky to have her on side, but I know I'll let her down eventually. I always do. I always let everyone down. There's not enough to do on The Mitchell Estate. The No Hope Estate, I call it.

I do believe that one day I'll clean myself up and start again. I lie in bed when my mind is ticking over, hoping and praying that one day I'll have a husband, and a family and a nice house, somewhere off this scabby estate. I'll get a job and a good education and move away.

I will, I know I will. I have to believe that or else I'll go mad, or off the rails completely. And that wouldn't be good for me at all.

MATT SIMPSON, Caretaker, The Community House.

It's quite a challenge going to work in a place like the Mitchell Estate. I've heard lots about it and I know it's a far cry from Buxton where I come from. I'm going to be the maintenance manager at the estate's community house. I know it doesn't sound very glamorous but I'm good at being Jack-of-all-Trades. Some would say that I'm good with my hands, but me, it would be very tongue in cheek. I like a laugh but not at other people's expenses, if that doesn't sound too snooty!

I was interviewed by Josie Mellor and a couple of other people from Mitchell Housing Association. I warmed to Josie immediately. I could tell she was the sort of person who would go out of her way to help anyone. Yes, there *are* such people. I'd call her a community champion, if I'm honest. It seems that she rallies round for folk, gets them back on their feet. Like me, she roots for the underdog. I like helping people too.

The other reason I moved away from Buxton was because I split up with my wife after twenty years of marriage. I'm forty-five now and I don't ever want to get married again. She hurt me so much. Sue, that's my soon to be ex-wife, was having an affair. Not just a short fling, the type you hear about all the time, maybe to think she

was still attractive in middle age. No, she'd been screwing someone else for nearly all of the twenty years we were married. He wasn't my best mate, but he wasn't far off and it hit me like a juggernaut when I eventually found out. How the hell I didn't know was beyond me - maybe I'd missed the signs purposely, because it seemed, as usual, that I was the only one who didn't know about it.

So I've moved away. I didn't want to see her in the town at all, especially not with him. He left his wife and three kids to be with Sue. We never got to have kids of our own, sadly.

I wonder if they're still happy now they are living together as a couple. It's the excitement of an affair, I guess, that makes it so good. Once the chase has gone, who knows if they will survive? I hope they don't. I hope they do. I just wish I hadn't been tricked along the way, made a fool of.

Eventually, I'd like to settle down with someone and start again, but all in good time. And I suppose every cloud has a silver lining, right? If I was still with Sue, then I wouldn't be heading to the Mitchell Estate to start my new job...

DANNY BRADLEY, Stanley Avenue.

Everyone on the Mitchell Estate is a dosser - me included. It's my choice to be that way. Why would I go to work to earn a pittance when I can stay at home, in bed all day if I want to, and go out on the rob every night? I pay my own way, don't I? And I have a few mates who know I'm top dog, so they do most of the dirty work for me if I need them to. Who wouldn't do it if they could get away with it?

I've lived on the estate all my life. I'm twenty now and still living with the olds and my twin sisters - they are a right pain in the arse. They're so frigging loud, always arguing and shouting and screaming like girls do. They're sixteen now, fuck knows what they'll be like when they're older. But as long as they don't bother me, we get by okay.

Mum and Dad are a pain too but at least they can't stop me from doing what I want. I'd floor my old man if he ever had a go at me, I swear. He thinks he's hard but he's not hard enough. He's never done a day's work in his life either - well, not legally, like. He works cash-in-hand all the time, only getting clocked by the social every now and then.

I wouldn't swap where I live for nothing. And I wouldn't swap my life either. I love being a scrounger. I

don't give a flying fuck what anyone thinks of me. I need a car - I'll nick it. I need money - I'll go out on the rob and trade what I get in the pub. There's always someone after a bargain in there. If I need something from a store, I'll go out and lift it. I don't mind anything dangerous. And it's good when someone gives me a shout-out too, lets me know when there is a 'bargain' coming up. If I can make a few bob on a deal, I'll do it. I should have been called Del Boy instead of Danny.

Thing is though, I don't want to be doing small jobs all my life. I want to be someone. To be known, to be a face. Well, you have to aim for something, goals and all that.

Not everyone gets on with me though. I've been trying to get in with this new bloke, Austin Forrester, but so far he doesn't want to know me. I don't know why - I even showed him my gun, thinking it would impress him. It's not loaded but it looks so fucking awesome. That's where I'm off now, to the White Lion to see if I can do business with him. I wish the Red Lion wasn't boarded up - it was far better in there. Much more of an atmosphere as it was on the bottom of the estate.

So, don't let anyone fool you. Life on the estate is a doddle.

SNIPPETS FROM JOSIE MELLOR

Domestic violence – Heartbreak Hotel

Showing prospective tenants around a property can be a pleasure or a downright nightmare. Respectful people look around a property, taking in everything I've said and showing me where they can improve things, or do minor repairs themselves rather than complain about every scratch or dent. Disrespectful people moan about everything they can find wrong and insist we repair it all, knowing full well that we won't. And then there are the grateful people, like the women in need of a roof over their heads rather than face another night of terror waiting for their man to come home and give them a beating.

I often see mums with kids in tow fleeing from their violent partners. I'd show them around an empty house that they'd have to furnish, carpet and decorate, basically start again, because they couldn't bring anything with them but their clothes. I've have women crying with me at the property viewing, telling me why they have to get away, showing me some of their bruises. Most of them

have at least two or three kids. It's truly heartbreaking but at the same time it's liberating to know that I might be able to help someone. The only problem I encounter is that some women can't be helped. No matter how strong they think they'd be on their own, when their man shows up they either let them move into the new property, hence start the cycle again or they go back to their previous home with him. I never get angry with these tenants, mostly women but on occasion males too, as how can I put myself in their position and try to tell them not to go back. Some are brave and see it out and stay in their new properties. Some become great friends as I help them out over the coming months. Some don't make it pass the first month, the first week. Some don't even move in. Their fear was too much to conquer. I often wonder what happened to them. I hope they got a good chance in life. All of them deserved better.

Secrets from the author - What's in a title?

Titles are a really important part of a book. It's the first thing that catches a reader's eye and usually accompanies a cover that captures the very essence of it completely. But how hard is it to find the right one? Some authors write the book and think of a title at the end. Some write the book and the title naturally evolves. Some publishers even buy books and then change the original title. Me, I like to work with a title before I start writing. It doesn't necessarily end up being the right title but I do have to have one.

The three books so far in THE ESTATE series all began with different titles. SOMEWHERE TO HIDE started life as The Caretaker because the main character in that book, Cath Mason, runs a halfway house for homeless young females. Nowhere to Hide would have been a great title but had already been used a few times so from that, I thought of SOMEWHERE TO HIDE, which was better because Cath is offering them refuge.

BEHIND A CLOSED DOOR actually started off called THE ESTATE, before changing to Urban Angel. Josie Mellor, one of two main characters, is a housing officer with a big heart so I thought the name was apt but it was at a time when vampire, werewolf and angel

stories were popular so I had to choose something more fitting. Behind Closed Doors was quite a popular title choice already, so I changed it slightly to BEHIND A CLOSED DOOR.

At first, FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL was going to be called The Scummy Side of the Street as it is predominantly about Stanley Avenue. Then, as it's a book about girl gangs and bloodshed as well as survival, I chose the title Only Women Bleed. But as I wanted the books to be read by a female and a male audience, I didn't think this was right either. It took me a long time to find a suitable title for this one but in the end I was listening to a Katy Perry album and I came up with it from a line in a song. The tag line for the book, 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' came from a Kelly Clarkson single too.

And when I wanted a name for the series, I went all the way back to the original title of the first book and called it THE ESTATE.

The title for the next book, WRITTEN IN THE SCARS, has always been that since I first came up with the plot ideas. That too came from a line in a song – Pink's *Just give me a Reason*. Book five has a title too – but that won't be revealed until next year. I'm not usually secretive but it has become more and more perfect as the book has evolved.

A snippet from
ARCHIE MEREDITH,
Christopher Avenue.

‘Will you shut that racket up?’ Archie shouted out through the window.

‘Oy, Archie, you make more noise than us when you’re hanging out of there yelling. Do you know that, you silly old fart?’

‘Less of your cheek, Jess Myatt!’

‘Come back to bed, Archie. You’ll only antagonise them and they’ll get even louder.’

‘It’s just not on, Mary. Talk about trying to get a good night’s kip before getting up for work tomorrow when all I can hear is them coming in drunk at two in the morning.’

‘I know, but you won’t stop them. They’re young and –’

‘I was young once too, just like them and I never made that much noise.’

‘Oh, I bet you did.’ Mary patted the duvet. ‘Come on, love. Come back to bed.’

Archie sighed and came away from the window. ‘I don’t know why we should have to put up with it. We’ve been here for twenty years and I’m sick of all the noise. I need my sleep.’

'I know, love. Come on, snuggle into me and keep me warm.'

Archie smiled, even though his wife couldn't see him in the dark. They'd been married for twenty-nine years, and if it weren't for Mary being struck down by multiple sclerosis in her prime, and those bloody noisy girls across the road at Cath Mason's house, everything would be fine.

Archie was always worrying about her. It was the reason he was still awake in the early hours. Mary was due to go for more tests. She'd been having pains in her chest for a while; the doctor had thought it might be something and nothing, just a viral infection that she found hard to get rid of but he'd wanted it checking out anyway. They were off there in the morning.

He didn't think he'd cope without Mary, worried about her on the way home from work every day too, wondering if she'd had an attack while he wasn't there. He dreaded the thought of coming home one day to find her... no, he wouldn't think about it.

He turned towards her and cuddled into her back.

'Archibald Meredith, I hope you're not getting fresh with me,' she teased.

'Oh, I wouldn't do that at two am.'

'I should think not.'

'I would at three am though. Let's hope those bloody girls wake me then too.'

LIZ MCKENZIE,
Bernard Place.

I hate that I'm so weak. There I said it. I hate that I'm walked over, controlled by a man and scared of my own shadow. I hate that my daughter suffers too. Chloe is only eight and the way she has to creep around as quiet as a mouse whenever Kevin is home isn't what a child should be doing at that age. She should be enjoying herself, running around the garden and squealing with her friends, playing games and laughing loudly. She shouldn't be shut away in her room so that she doesn't get the wrath of her father. She shouldn't be scared to open her mouth and only speak when spoken to. To everyone outside she behaves like a model child, but I know different. It's because she is terrified of her father.

He's never hit her, thankfully. He just takes his temper out on me. Most of the time he hits me so that it can't be seen. I've had bruises all over my arms, chest, punches and kicks to the stomach, feet stamped on. I've even had the occasional bite as he's been angry enough to just lash out with his mouth. So, you see, to the outside world everything looks okay in our household. But once that door closes on us, I feel like a prisoner in my own home.

I wish I had somewhere to go with Chloe. Somewhere that we could hide away, safe in the knowledge that even

if he did find us, we would have enough support to make sure he didn't get near us. Maybe that way he wouldn't be angry after a while. He has a terrible temper but he also has a low boredom threshold. Maybe if we could hold out somewhere for a few months, he might get the message and not be able to control me. I might grow strong enough to face him then.

That's why I hate myself so much. I AM weak. I always will be weak. I have no money, and no way of making any. I haven't been to work for so long now that I would be lost in today's technology. Chloe is more up on those kind of things than me. That's his thing. When he's done with me, and maybe feeling guilty, he spoils Chloe. He buys her something expensive so that she won't think ill of him. He tries to turn her against me. Thankfully, I know he will never have the power to do that. Chloe is a bright girl, she can see through her father's tricks. She can see him for what he is.

I need to get away from Kevin. He scares me so much at times that I'm sure one day he will do me real harm. And then what will happen to Chloe?

KEVIN MCKENZIE,
Bernard Place.

Another letter from the housing association came today. I found it behind the clock. Liz obviously wasn't going to give it to me. Did she think I wasn't going to find it? Stupid bitch.

It's another complaint. Banging doors this time. It has to be those interfering bastards next door who've said something. If they don't watch out, I'll be round there too and put my foot through one of their doors. And if that stupid bitch from the housing office doesn't watch what she's doing, then I'm going to make a complaint about her too. She can go screw herself. Not that anyone would want to screw her. I mean, have you seen the scrawny bitch? She must be eight stone wet through. How she stands up to some of the people on this estate, I'll never understand. How she does the job she does I'll never understand either. People like me giving her abuse all the time for interfering.

It's always the same around here, someone poking their nose into my business. I work hard and I pay my rent, not like some of the scroungers on the estate. Sure, I go out for a drink every now and then too. Of course I might be a bit noisy when I come in, but it's not often, two or three times a week. And it used to be Liz that

made all the noise but I always told her to be quiet - or words to that effect. She's learned over time not to scream when I hit her. Clever woman. And of course, most of the time, I hit her where it won't be seen. Clever me.

My life is so boring. I mean, our marriage is crap now. At one time, Liz used to be so much fun. It was good when we first got married. But then she started to dress up and make herself nice for other men, and I wasn't having that. She's *my* woman, no one gets to ogle her. So I made sure she was covered up when we went out. I made sure she calmed her make-up down and didn't wear provocative clothes. And she knows what would happen if I catch her looking at another man. If she dares to look, she'll get what for. Do you know what that means? Well, I'll leave you to work that one out.

I'm not mean. I give Liz money every week, enough for food and bills and clothes for our daughter, Chloe. Not too much money, just enough so that she won't fritter it away. And she doesn't need much as she just sits on her arse all day, she doesn't go to work.

Just lately, though, my daughter has become a bit wary of me. I can see it in Chloe's eyes, and her smile isn't quite there. Sometime she flinches when I go near her. I know that's because Liz is poisoning her young mind. An eight-year-old child shouldn't be told tales by her mother. Liz thinks I don't know how close they are getting. She thinks I don't see what she is doing - scheming, manipulating, turning Chloe against me. What kind of a mother does that?

I've seen that distant look in Liz's eyes too. As if she isn't with me when we fuck. Her eyes seem to blank over, there's no emotion. But that turns me on even more. Power. We only have sex when I want it. And if I want it in the garden at three am in the morning, then that's

what we do. She's a good girl really, always does as she's told and doesn't complain too much. But I wonder if she ever thinks she'd be better off without me. Some marriages crumble eventually.

Liz wanted another child but I'm not going through all that noise and mess and crap again. I like a tidy house. Even Chloe knows to tidy up after herself the MINUTE she is told. She'll be a good wife in the future for someone, will Chloe. She'll be able to cook and clean like her mother, maybe bring up her own children. If she finds the right man, a bit like her dad, she won't go wrong at all.

In the back of my mind, I know Liz will never leave me. She knows that if she ever dares, I will find her. I will hunt her down and I will do her harm. If she takes Chloe with her, I will do her even more harm. She wouldn't dare defy me and let's face it, where would she go?

Secret Scenes - Josie Mellor and PC Andy Baxter,

A deleted scene from SOMEWHERE TO HIDE

Josie was busy at The Workshop, sitting at her desk behind a mound of paperwork. She looked up as a knock came on the door.

‘Hey there,’ she greeted. ‘To what do I owe this pleasure?’

PC Andy Baxter smiled as he sat down opposite her at the desk. ‘I’m after a favour.’

‘Who is it this time? Or do I take a guess at the Bradley twins?’

Andy gave a huge sigh. ‘They have no idea of the amount of paperwork I have to complete because of all their cheap tricks.’

Andy, one of several police officers based around the Mitchell Estate, had been a member of the police force for fifteen years, since he’d joined as a probationer. Josie and Andy had work memories to rival any whodunit, tales to make any straight hair curl. They were used to joining forces when things got heavy: a tenant wouldn’t go quietly when evicted; someone needed help when they’d been assaulted, sometimes even the presence of

a more authoritative uniform when music was being played too loud. It was a two-way deal. Josie would often find out gossip that came in useful for Andy; Andy would share inside information with Josie.

‘What have they been up to this time?’ Josie put down her pen.

‘I’ve a feeling they were responsible for an assault over on Vincent Square the other night.’

She sighed. ‘You know how Gina and Pete Bradley treat their kids. They’re dragged up, not brought up. I wish I could wipe my hands of the lot of them sometimes.’

‘I thought you had when you came to work here.’

‘I thought so too.’

Before coming to The Workshop, Josie had been working full-time as a housing officer on the Mitchell Estate for nine years. This year, she’d had a number of cases to get stuck into but also a major project to get The Workshop up and running. The local council had been given funding to provide an enterprise centre in a run-down sheltered housing block. All its elderly residents had been moved to the new purpose-built Poplar Court with all its mod-cons and lack of anti-social behaviour. Josie had been left with a shell but even a small amount of imagination could see its potential. In a short space of time, she’d seen the project to fruition and, as a result, had been seconded to the role of The Workshop’s manager. Add to that her time at the residents’ community house and her ongoing cases on the estate, such as working with the Bradley family, and there was never a dull day.

‘Any idea how to tackle it this time?’ Josie added when they’d been left with their individual thoughts for a moment.

‘I thought maybe we could do a joint visit,’ Andy suggested. ‘See if you can get something out of them.’

Josie raised her eyebrows. ‘Me, talk the Bradley twins

around to confessing?’

Andy grinned. ‘You’re good at it and, without you I don’t stand a chance of getting over the doorstep. But you can.’

‘*Sometimes* I can.’

‘More than me, at any rate.’

Josie screwed up her face and then nodded. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I’ll have a go. But,’ she added as Andy smiled again, ‘I can’t work miracles. If they don’t want to talk, I can’t make them.’

Andy jumped to his feet triumphantly. ‘Josie, if they won’t talk to you, they won’t talk to anyone.’

CHLOE MCKENZIE, Christopher Avenue (aged 8).

I often get scared my dad will hurt my mum too much. He treats my mum so bad. My mum does her best for him and he is always shouting at her. He is always saying nasty things to her. They think I don't know how much they argue but I hear them all the time. He wakes me up when he shouts. He always bangs the doors and then tells Mum to stop crying.

I saw him hit her once. I daren't sneak down the stairs again in case I get into trouble. What if he sees me and then hurts Mum even more? That would be my fault. I try to be quiet when he is around so that he won't get mad. I don't speak much, so that he can't pick on me.

He buys me nice things but I wish he would buy Mum lots of nice things too. She always wears the same clothes, dark and grey, not like the other mum's I see when she comes to fetch me from school. They wear all sorts of bright colours, and skirts and show their arms. When it's warm, Mum wears long sleeves. She thinks I don't know why. But I do. I have seen her bruises.

Sometimes I wish I had a nice dad like my friend Brittany. Her mum and dad are so kind and they laugh and smile at each other all the time. Whenever I go to Brittany's house, I can be as noisy as I like. Brittany and

me sometimes run around the garden screaming at the top of our voices and we are not told off unless we get really loud. And they do things together as a family. I don't go anywhere with Mum and Dad together, like the cinema or the shops, or even to the park. I spend lots of time with Mum and I like that. Mum always makes me smile, makes me feel happy when there are just the two of us. I love my mum so much.

I wish my dad would leave so that we could be happy without him. I wish he would stop hurting Mum. She shouldn't have to put up with his angry moods all the time. That's not what most dad's are like.

I would even leave all my toys behind if we could just go somewhere without him. Somewhere Mum would feel safe. Somewhere that I wouldn't hear her crying when Dad isn't around.

AUSTIN FORRESTER

I wonder how long it will take me to get to Stockleigh. I'll have to find somewhere to doss once I'm there. Somewhere to hide out - I don't have money to dish out willy-nilly. I need to fend for myself. I can get benefits but I don't stay anywhere long enough, so it's a right pain in the arse filling in all the forms every time. I don't really have any fixed abode right now. It's easier. It means I can come and go to a certain extent, and if I do get myself in too much bother, then I can just do one. Most of the time though, it's me dishing out the punches - and I don't back down so usually I come out on top. I have to keep fighting - need to keep my spirits up, the adrenaline running. I need to keep fighting the urge to kill someone again.

Maybe there will be some home truths in Stockleigh - who knows what I'll find when I get there. One thing is for certain, you can guarantee I'm going to cause trouble.

SOMEWHERE TO HIDE - PROLOGUE

Liz McIntyre woke with a start when she heard the front door slam shut. She glanced at the clock: it was just gone midnight. A further check around assured her that the room was tidy. She jumped to her feet and rushed into the hallway.

‘Hi, had a good night?’ she asked her husband.

‘No.’ Kevin pushed past her. ‘Make me a drink. Coffee will do.’

In the kitchen, Liz’s hands shook as she filled the kettle with water. She hated Kevin when he was sober. Sober Kevin was far nastier than drunken Kevin. Quickly, she reached for his Super Dad mug.

‘I’ll have some toast while you’re at it,’ he shouted through to her.

When she went back into the living room, Kevin was sprawled on the settee, flicking through the television channels.

Liz placed the mug and plate on the coffee table. ‘Is it okay if I go to bed now?’ she spoke quietly.

‘No. You can stay here until I tell you otherwise.’ His eyes came up to rest on hers. ‘Right here, next to me.’

Liz willed her legs to bend and sat down. Twenty minutes later, Kevin had finished his meal, finished his

drink and finished with her as he fastened his trousers again.

‘Not very exciting, but at least you’re clean and tidy,’ he said as he stood up.

Liz wrapped her dressing gown around her body. Maybe now he’d let her leave the room.

‘Why did you do that?’

Before she could reply, he grabbed her hair and pulled her to her feet. Liz gasped as dark menacing eyes glared at her.

‘Answer me!’

‘I – I don’t understand what –’

‘The minute I got off you, you covered yourself up. Do I repulse you that much?’

‘No! I was cold, that’s all.’

‘You lying bitch.’ Kevin tugged at the belt. ‘You don’t look so good yourself.’ Through the thin material of her nightdress, he squeezed her breast, causing her to gasp out in pain. ‘Look at you. Not even a decent handful. You’re nothing but skin and bones. I wonder what other people would think of you. Take them off.’

A moment’s hesitation.

‘Take them off or I’ll rip them off.’

Liz shrugged off the gown, letting it drop to the floor.

‘And the rest.’

‘Please, Kevin.’

‘Please, Kevin,’ he mimicked. ‘Take it off.’

In silence, she removed her nightdress. Standing naked before him, she covered her breasts with a forearm.

Kevin pulled her by the elbow, marching her into the hallway. ‘Let’s see what other people think of your pathetic, skinny body,’ he said as he opened the front door and pushed her outside

Liz lurched forwards, landing with a thud on the front path. The gravel embedded itself into the skin of

her palms and knees but she stayed quiet.

'Down on all fours. That's a great pose for you,' Kevin sneered. 'You're nothing but an ungrateful bitch anyway. So if you act like a dog, expect to be treated like one.'

Hot tears welled in Liz's eyes as she tried to stay calm. It was the middle of March and although it wasn't too cold outside she was vulnerable. She had two people to think of right now, she didn't want Chloe to wake up. If she didn't play it cool, Kevin would make her stay outside all night. As if that wasn't bad enough, from the corner of her eye she noticed a curtain moving in the bedroom window of the house next door. Pushing her humiliation to the back of her mind, she looked up at him.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered, tears coming freely now.

Kevin leaned on the doorframe, one foot crossing the other, arms folded. His eyes seemed to be mocking her, daring her to come back at him and stand up for herself. Then he came outside. Liz flinched as he drew near but gently he helped her to stand up again. He turned over her hands, checking the bleeding palms.

'Ouch, they look sore.' He smiled. 'Come on in and I'll see to them.'

He took her into the kitchen and pulled out a chair at the table. While he rummaged around in the cupboards, she sat shaking. Finally, he found what he was looking for and held it up.

'TCP.' His grin was almost manic. 'It'll hurt but it's for your own good.'

Fear gripped Liz as she realised his intention. She moved away but he grabbed one of her hands, turned it palm up and poured the liquid over it.

By now an expert on pain from slaps, punches, even the odd bite, Liz braced herself. Waves of heat radiated through her hand and up her arm. She did the worse thing possible.

She screamed.

Kevin slapped her across the face, the whole weight of his body behind it. Her head reared to the right, knocking her off balance and she fell to the floor. She scrambled towards the door. Kevin grabbed her ankles and pulled her back towards him. She kicked out, still thinking she could get away if she was quick. But the pain in her palm was nothing like the pain of his heel digging into the top of her hand. She screamed again.

'Shut up,' he warned. 'If anyone alerts that stupid bitch from the housing association, you'll get more like this.' He punched her in the stomach.

'Please, stop,' she sobbed. 'I don't want to lose our baby.'

As his fists started to fly, Liz curled up into a ball. She fought for breath with every blow but she had to keep quiet until it was over. It was the only way she knew she would survive.

SECRETS FROM
BEHIND A
CLOSED DOOR

Working on the notorious Mitchell Estate, housing officer, Josie Mellor, faces challenges every day, but not nearly as many as those of her tenants.

Kelly Winterton is scared and alone after her partner has been jailed.

A victim of domestic abuse, Charlotte Hatfield has fled from her violent partner four times already. He'll probably kill her if he finds her this time.

Disowned by her family, someone is taking advantage of Amy Cartwright's vulnerability. Who can she turn to for support?

But Josie has her own problems to deal with too. As her home life deteriorates and she struggles to escape her controlling husband, she realises only a thin line separates her from the people she's trying to help.

When deadly violence erupts, will both she and her tenants become victims that no one will see?

KELLY COPELAND, Patrick Street.

I can't believe Scott has been in trouble again. He promised me after the last time he was arrested for thieving that he wouldn't do it anymore. I can hear you asking why do I stick with him. Well, for starters, he's my fella and I love him. He's okay with our daughter, Emily, and he always provides for me so that I don't have to go to work and put her into a child minders. People who are well off want to try living off the social for a while. They'd soon realise that it's hard, so forgive me if I turn a blind eye every now and then when we get a new flatscreen TV or a new microwave, or Scott comes back with knock-off designer gear. Everyone on the estate does it. We're not a unique couple in any way, shape or form. We do what's necessary to survive. Yes, I know. I can hear you scoffing too. It's just the way things are done on the Mitchell Estate.

Even so, just lately, it falls flat with me. I know most of the people on the estate don't have any ambition, but I want to do something with my life. I would love to pay my own way – earn a living, maybe from home so that I could still take care of Emily, and make Scott proud of me. Of course when I mention it to him, he just laughs and says 'why would you want to earn money when we

can claim all we need from the social and then thief anything else we want?' But what if Scott goes to prison? What the hell will I do then? Fuck, it doesn't even bear thinking about.

So we'll make this the best Christmas we can for the three of us and hope that when he is sentenced, come January, that he will still come home with us. It's looking very unlikely, we both know that. But if he does get sent down, his solicitor says it won't be for long, a few months max. It will seem like a lifetime for us being apart but we'll get by. I'll still be waiting for him when he comes out. Even though he does my head in at times, I do love him. And he tells me he loves me. Not sure I will forgive him though if he goes down again.

The Mitchell Estate sucks big time but at least we all look after our own, and we have a roof over our heads. I love living in Patrick Street. It's the first place I've ever had to call my own and I am so proud of it. I keep it immaculate, despite Scott and his untidiness. Sometimes I could kill him when he's been out all day and comes home covered in plaster dust or soil from a garden he's been digging over to get some money on the side. But for most of the time, I put up with him.

I miss my mum. I haven't seen her in years now, since she told me to leave that day. Things were getting tough at home for her and she wanted me out of the way. Of course I didn't want to leave her behind in the hands of that... that fucking monster but I had no choice.

Coming here to The Mitchell Estate and living with my Auntie Pam and Uncle John was the worse of two evils. But then Mum stopped answering my letters and now, I don't know what's happened to her. I think of her all the time. She doesn't even know that I'm a mum now, that she has a granddaughter. Pam and me tried to find her on lots of occasions but she just disappeared. It hurts

me to think that she lost touch but in a way, I suppose she did right by me by sending me to live with her sister. She knows where I am, even if I don't know where she is.

SCOTT JOHNSON,
Patrick Street.

I know I'm off to prison in the New Year, so I'm going to make this the best Christmas ever. I'm going to be out with the lads most nights, getting lashed like there's no tomorrow. I'll get so drunk to make up for what I might miss over the next few months. And if Kelly doesn't like it, then she can go fucking do one. This is my house, my life and if she wants to stay in it, then she can do as I say.

I do love Kelly but sometimes she gets right up my nose. She thinks she's better than everyone on the estate. She's always having a go at me for not having any ambition. That's not entirely true, though, I do have ambition. I want to go out on the take and not get caught - that's my goal. Of course, I've screwed that up now.

I suppose I'll have to get Jay Kirkwell to keep an eye on things for me. I don't want Kelly moving any other men in while I'm gone. I'm not having anyone go where I've been. Either she stays faithful to me or else I'll kick her out of the house. She doesn't have a leg to stand on as far as that's concerned, but she doesn't know the tenancy is just in my name. So I can do what I want. She's under my thumb anyway. She's there to cook and clean, and look after the place for me. She's there for me to shag too.

I'm not sure I love her anymore. I do tell her every now and then but only to keep her sweet. She's such a gullible bitch. She's a good-looking one, I'll give her that, but I don't think I'll stick with her forever.

I'd say my life is pretty comfortable if I weren't about to get sent down. The jobs I do on the side are good, the people I do them with are okay and we get by. But all this could change if the ruling goes against me. If I have that same woman judge as last time, then I'm a fucking goner. I know I got a boner for her as she was so hot - not my usual type I have to admit, far too old, but so fucking sexy. She hated me on sight! I'll have to be careful to smile nicely, wear my best clobber.

So you see, it's not so bad living on the Mitchell Estate. Life is what you make of it. I'm happy with my lot. As long as I don't have to go to work and get paid on the side as well as by the social, I'll do just fine. All I need to do is get this prison term over and done with and then get back to life as I know it. Things will never change for me. I'll always be willing to go and see a man about a dog. Take the next challenge. Make the next buck. It's the way I am. And Kelly knows it - she chooses it, doesn't she?

Kelly will wait for me, I'm certain of it. Stupid trusting cow, that she is.

JAY KIRKWELL,
Florence Avenue.

Life's pretty grim for me at the moment. I live with my mum - she's getting on now and has lots of health issues that are slowing her down. Both of my older brothers are doing time for armed robbery. And even though they're inside, they still cause havoc. Steve's had three years added to his sentence for attacking another prisoner. It's enough to send Mum grey if she wasn't that colour already.

And then there's my younger sister, Lynsey. Christ, does she know how to knock kids out. She's had so many men - I'm quite ashamed to say she has different fathers for them all. The latest bloke she's with is a loser too. I swear I'll swing for him if he gets her pregnant to add to the three she already has.

Lynsey doesn't see anything wrong in having more kids. She says it's for the social to pay for them and she gets more benefits every time she knocks one out. I get so embarrassed when I see her waddling around the estate, fag in her mouth, and her usual short skirt and low top, or tight leggings. Since having the kids, she's really let herself go and she's only twenty-two! But what can I do about it? She has a mind, of her own. She's independent - well, dependent on hand-outs from the government

but independent of her family. But then again, we are talking about Lynsey.

My mum worries me. She's so frail now, and I'm concerned that I can't take care of her enough. I can't be with her twenty-four-seven, nor would she expect it, but it's hard to think of her trying to cope when I'm not there. She is riddled with arthritis, finds the stairs a real chore now. I help as much as I can but I know it's not enough. I wish I could persuade her to get some help from outside but she says she doesn't want any busybodies coming in and washing her down, thank you very much. It's the little things she can't do, you see. And I can't do *that* for her. It's just not healthy. You'd think Lynsey would help out, being a woman too, but no. She says she is too busy looking after her own family. That's a lie - her kids are dragged up rather than brought up.

I don't have a job as such, but just because I'm a Kirkwell, people automatically think that I'm a scrounger. I'm not like my brothers, nor my sister, for that matter. I look after myself, take care of my body. I'm not a martyr to the gym or anything but I do a bit of kick-boxing to keep my strength up. It helps me get rid of the frustration too.

I've had a few women in my time but I'm single at the moment. There is one in particular that I'm smitten with. She's in love with someone else, though. I'm not sure why - I suppose she likes the bad boy. Maybe if I were more like my brothers, she would like me? Who knows? We get on well and I spend a fair bit of time with her, well, with her bloke actually, so I'm round their house more than my own. I wish I could find someone like her for myself.

So that's me - in need of the love of a good woman, but where can I find one of those? I'd be a good catch for anyone, I'm sure. Well, that's what Lynsey would say...

but she's been trying to marry me off for years. Says I'll make a good husband for someone. Any takers, anyone?

SNIPPETS FROM JOSIE MELLOR

**While you were out:
Mr Mansell's complaining about the noise from his
neighbour's - can you pacify him with a visit?**

A lot of my calls involve visiting elderly tenants. I have over a hundred one-bedroom bungalows on my patch so I often spend time visiting the same people. Mr Mansell is a moaner. If he doesn't have anything to moan about, I'm sure he'd moan about that. He's known as moaning Mansell back at the housing office; sometimes I have to be careful not to slip up when I'm out.

This particular day, it was quite cold outside and I welcomed being invited into his home for a short while. I practically disappeared into the old, collapsed seating as I sat down on his settee. He asked me if I'd like a drink with a wee totty in it. Even though I was working and driving, having seen the three inches of dog hair on the carpet, I would have declined. I listened to his complaint about the lady next door. He said that her television was too loud. Well, at least that's what I think he said. Honestly, I could barely hear him talking over the sound of his radio!

Then I had the shock of my life. Whilst talking, Mr Mansell stood up and proceeded to undo the belt on his corduroy trousers. My eyes widened as his hand moved to pull down the zip – the top button wasn't fastened as he couldn't manage it due to arthritis in his fingers. I tried in vain to get out of the settee and stand up again.

'Mr Mansell,' I began but he continued regardless.

My heart began to pound. I could feel the hairs standing up on my neck. I was going to meet my first flasher and it wouldn't be a particularly grand sight given the state of his blubber belly.

But before I could do anything else, do you know what Mr Mansell did next? While I was all of a dither, he tucked the tails of his shirt deep into his trousers, zipped himself up and refastened his belt without missing a word of his rant. As my heart settled back down to its normal pace, he didn't even realise what he'd done. Obviously there was no malice intended. So I sat back down, practically disappearing into the settee again.

Secrets from the author - Where do I get my ideas from?

People ask me that question all the time. The problem with writing books about ordinary people is that they come from *everywhere*. It may be a snippet overheard in the local supermarket. It may be an article in a newspaper. It may be a news bulletin on the radio or television. I have far too many ideas, if I'm honest. But that's people for you. We're complicated...

For instance, the idea for **SOMEWHERE TO HIDE** came from two sources. For eight years, I was a housing officer for the local authority. It isn't the people/tenants who I worked with on the estate that are the inspiration for my sub-plots, more the community spirit plus the background knowledge of the job that I use – especially in **BEHIND A CLOSED DOOR**. This book follows Josie Mellor, the main character, as she works on the estate and the cases she deals with.

The other angle was I watched an episode of a TV program, *The Secret Millionaire*. It featured a woman who looked after young teenage girls and I found her so inspirational – putting herself in danger at times but always trying to give the girls who came to stay with her some sense of belonging. I watched the program halfway through writing the first draft of **SOMEWHERE**

TO HIDE years ago, and it was a light bulb moment. It meant the book's main theme revolved about strong women. And as my writing is gritty and I like writing about fear and emotion, it was perfect.

And then there's SEX.

Sex is a *very* touchy subject. I often use it in my books as a tool - a leg up to another plot, you might say (not a leg over, now, now.) More recently, sex has played a major part in my new novel, a dark, somewhat erotic, psychological thriller, WATCHING OVER YOU. I like writing about the tension caused by love triangles. There's also something intriguing about someone who is happy with their current partner but drawn to another, like one of my characters, Allie Shenton, in TAUNTING THE DEAD. There's a whole 'did she - didn't she' written between the lines in that book. The sexual tension is there (I've been emailed about "THAT" kiss several times.) But I also understand that women don't fall for every good-looking evil man there is. I just wanted to create tension.

Sex can be wonderful between two people falling in love. It can be used to calm the storm in a break-up and make-up situation. It can bring people closer together: it can tear people apart. It can create families: it can break families. There is domestic abuse in most of my books but I'm often told that because I show two sides to situations, my stories offer hope, sometimes showing character's getting out of difficult circumstances. And then sex may become a whole different thing for that character once they are free to start again.

What makes a person stray? Chemistry? And how does this chemistry take over them or affect their lives? Is the chemistry forgotten with one meet or can it be obsessive? Or does the chemistry intensify the longer two people are together, even if it isn't supposed to? What makes a person start an affair when they know it's

wrong? Or is it wrong? Who are we to judge another?

I often watch pairs of dancers, on the ground or on ice, and see their passion coming across. I can almost feel the television crackling. There's nothing better than seeing that excitement build to a crescendo. I love watching stories unfold as they move too.

Attraction - how hard is it to resist someone who you genuinely like, care about even? No wonder so many affairs start at work when we often spend more time with our colleagues than our partners.

Still, for me as an author, it all makes for great plots.

STEWART MELLOR, Josie Mellor's husband.

Everyone thinks my wife is wonderful. Everyone except me, of course. I just think she's a nosy cow. Who in their right mind would want to be a housing officer on The Mitchell Estate? I thought she would have got over that by now and come to her senses, gone to the city centre and got a job there, far away from the riff-raff that can't be helped. Because, really, her role is to look after me.

Josie is too soft but, even so, I'm on to a good thing. I've a roof over my head, and she cooks and cleans and takes care of everything. We've been married for five years and, even though it was her house to start off with, it's half mine now surely? I'll contest it if she ever says differently.

Luckily, because I work shifts we hardly have time together too, which is great. You see, I married Josie for a reason - and it wasn't for love. I'm not going to tell you what the reason is, though. But suffice it to say, one day I will have what I've been waiting for and then I will walk away. It's going to be a great day when that happens. I can't wait.

I knew she was a pushover from the minute I met her. She wanted to be loved so much that it was easy to get my feet under the table, so to speak. And she's so

willing to please that she lets me get away with murder. Basically, it's like living at home with parents but with no rent to pay. Josie has no mortgage on this place so I'm stashing away every penny I can. She doesn't know that of course - she doesn't really know how much money I earn. And when I go in on overtime, all that gets stashed away too.

It's just a waiting game for me. So for now, I need to keep her sweet enough to think that everything is good. It's hard at times because I can't stand to be with her much these days. I have to put on a front. I have to pretend to love her, or else I'll be rumbled. If I'm ever found out, I could lose everything.

So, you see, that's why sometimes I can't understand how she does her job because she is so weak. She's gullible too. She believes everything I tell her without question. My life is one big lie. Doesn't she realise that I'm getting one over on her every day? Silly cow.

Still, as long as I can, I will. My secret is safe with me, and I'm quids in until that day.

AMY CARTWRIGHT, Clarence Avenue.

Sometimes I am so scared. I feel so alone since I had my baby. That's Reece - he's six months old now and he's a pretty good boy. But I'm only nineteen and it's hard to bring him up on my own, especially without any help from my mum or dad. My dad kicked me out when he found out I was pregnant last year. Even though my mum begged him to let me stay, he wasn't having any of it. He wanted me to tell him who the father is, you see and I'm not telling anyone that. I can't, because if HE finds out, then I am dead meat. He says he will beat me up if I tell anyone. He says no one will believe me anyway, but I know stuff. Like, I know there are tests that prove that Reece is his son. I mean, you can't hide a baby can you?

People think I'm stupid, but I'm not. Well, not that stupid anyway. Dad says I'm one brick short of a load and mum says that I am bit behind in my years. Apparently I have the mental age of a thirteen-year-old, even though I'm nineteen. I'm not really sure what that means and I daren't ask anyone because they will think I am stupider - they will, won't they?

I cried when I found out I was pregnant. That's when I went to Mitchell Housing Association and I met Josie Mellor. Josie tried talking my dad round first. Then she

tried to talk to my mum and get her to talk him round. When it was obvious he wasn't going to change his mind, she got me this flat and sorted me out with some second-hand furniture. Mum comes to see me every now and then. She doesn't tell Dad though - she'd get the wrath of him if he knew she was coming to see me. I don't think I did anything wrong though - do you? I mean, all I did was have a baby.

All I want is to be happy with Reece. I can cope with him most of the time. He cries a lot and he smells a lot too but I keep him as clean and as tidy as I can. Josie comes to see me every week. She helps me with my money so that I have enough to pay my bills and get food. She wants me to go to the baby and toddler group at the community house but I'm not sure if I will go or not. I don't fit in with the people there. They look at me because I am so young to have a baby. I don't know why. There are lots of young girls on the estate with babies, not just me.

I wish I could meet a nice man who would look after me and Reece. Reece would like that, I'm sure. He would have someone to play football with and to mess around and fight with. I can't do that with Reece. What do mum's do with little boys? I know - I'll get him some cars, if I can find some money from somewhere. Reece's dad should pay money, I think, but he doesn't. He says he doesn't work so he doesn't have to pay anything. Is that right? I think I will ask Josie when I see her. Josie will know. She knows everything. I'm so glad I get to see her every week. I would be lost without Josie.

CHARLOTTE HATFIELD, Michael Place.

Shit, if next-door's gate bangs in the wind one more time, I swear I'll wet myself. Look at me, I'm scared of my own shadow, and it isn't as if I haven't been in this position before. Nathan always finds me.

I'm scared one day that he'll harm one of the kids. I can take the beatings but I don't want my kids hurt. He's an animal. He doesn't realise what he's doing. I know he will catch up with me eventually, but for now, I'm one step ahead again.

Being on the run from a violent man with four kids in tow is hard. I live in fear of every knock on the front door, every car door that slams outside, every time someone shouts. If he finds me this time, I'm dead. He told me that the last time he searched us out, after he'd smashed my head against the wall. He said that if he had to come looking for me again, he would kill me. And where would the kids be then? If I was dead, he would be in prison for my murder and they would have no parents at all

I know what you're thinking. Well, I know two things you're thinking. Yes, they are all his kids. We have three boys, and a girl. Poppy has only just been born. So far he doesn't know that because he doesn't know where we are.

For the past three months we've been in a hostel, only just getting the keys to a house on The Mitchell Estate. I don't have much furniture yet and only a bit of money. I don't even have the happy smile to put on for the kids. I just want to lie down in a dark room and go to sleep. But I can't even do that. I can't sleep for listening out for Nathan.

And why did I get involved with him? Oh, the usual crap really. He was lovely at first, until I moved in with him and then I became his possession. When I was pregnant with the twins, Callum and Jake, he beat me up one night after he'd come in from the pub, accused me of staring at some bloke when we'd been in Shop&Save together earlier. I hadn't been staring at anyone. The bloke just smiled, that's all, and I smiled back. Well, normal people do that, don't they? Normal friendly people.

That's when things went from bad to worse. And when I found out I was pregnant with Joshua, well, I knew everyone would say I told you so if I said what was really happening behind closed doors.

I wish I could go home to Leeds and stay with my family. I know they would help me to get away from Nathan but I'm too ashamed to ask. And now Poppy is here, I'm scared he will hurt her too.

Each night I go to bed, I'm thankful that I've got through another day. I pray that he won't find me. Because if he does find me this time, I'm not sure I'll survive another attack. Not if the last one was anything to go by. He packs a mean punch, does Nathan.

SNIPPETS FROM JOSIE MELLOR

While you were out: Abandoned vehicle in Arnold Avenue. Mrs Barker complaining it's blocking the entry to her garage. White Ford Fiesta, no tax.

I knew straightaway who the car belonged to. A tenant from Bernard Place, Philip Matson, happened to have abandoned his vehicle a couple of streets from his home. I'd asked him to move it three times so far and a game of cat and mouse began as he moved it to somewhere else inappropriate so I'd have to start all over again.

I called round to see him over in Bernard Place but all I got was grief from his dogs locked in the house. With no further contact after trying his mobile phone for the rest of the day, I sent a letter this time explaining that if the car wasn't removed in three working days, I would remove it and charge him for it. The bill would have been ten times as much as he would pay to have it scrapped.

On the day Matson would have received the letter, I was driving down Davy Road wondering whether I was going to eat the salad sandwiches I'd prepared for my diet or forgo it and call at the chippie. Suddenly I saw a huge plume of treacle-black smoke coming from behind

the houses. Tearing over the speed humps, I rounded the corner into Arnold Avenue, only to find the abandoned vehicle well and truly alight. Matson had set fire to it rather than pay for it to be removed. Of course I couldn't prove that so we ended up footing the bill to remove the vehicle. We also had to make good the surface of the garage forecourt and a garage door that was burnt a little too.

And Philip Matson? He stood watching amongst the large group of people who'd come out to see what all the commotion was about. The fire brigade were called out to distinguish the vehicle and make it safe. Still, I had a great time with the firemen, even though I missed my dinner.

Secrets from the author - Never judge a book by its cover...

Never judge a book by its cover – or so they say. But very often in my previous role as a housing officer, I'd do just that. And very often, I'd be proved wrong. Back in the late nineties, when properties weren't as scarce as they are now, part of my role was to show prospective tenants around empty properties. I'd get a call to go out on a viewing and show someone a property that frankly wasn't fit for a dog to live in. I'm not talking about furnished properties. I'm talking about properties with bare floorboards, plaster falling off walls, damp patches, every room in need of decoration, kitchen units falling apart and don't get me started on the state of the bathrooms! Essentially, money pits.

Yet often this would have to be home for someone and they'd be expected to move in and leave all their problems outside on the pavement. More than likely, the property would have to be made ready for children to move into at the drop of a hat too. I'd often see mums with kids in tow fleeing from their violent partners. I'd show them around an empty house that they would have to furnish, carpet and decorate – basically, they'd be starting again because they couldn't bring anything with them but their clothes. I've had women crying

with me at the property viewing, telling me why they had to get away. Often, I'd cry with them. It was truly heartbreaking, but at the same time it was liberating to know that I might have helped someone.

I know that some people can't be helped. No matter how strong they think they'd be on their own, when their partner showed up they'd either let them move into the new property, hence start the cycle again, or they'd go back to their previous home with them. I never got annoyed with these tenants – how could I put myself in their position and try to tell them not to go back? Some were brave and stuck it out, staying in their new properties. They'd get on with the task-in-hand and I'd do a new tenant support call a couple of weeks later and find they'd made a house into a home. Some became great friends as I helped them out over the coming months. Some didn't make it pass the first month, the first week. Some didn't even move in. Their fear was too much to conquer. I often wonder what happened to them. I hope they got a good chance in life. All of them deserved better.

Why would anyone decide to go back to an abusive partner? Maybe it became too much – maybe not to live on their own, but because the fear of being found, dragged back to their home and beaten again wasn't something they wanted to go through. I think this is the reason why I write about domestic violence in my books. I want readers to empathise with characters if they choose to stay and also feel happy for them if they move on. Sometimes it isn't about choices.

I've never suffered domestic abuse but I do have some knowledge of it. It makes you look at things in a different way. So when you read about a woman, or a man, old or young, who has lived a life of terror, and you think 'I wouldn't put up with that' please think of some of the

alternatives out there for them. It's not often the running away that they are scared of – it's the consequences of getting caught.

PHILIP MATSON, Bernard Place.

My house is a dump. I mean, a proper shit hole. It's only because it's not mine, so I don't want to spend money on making it look better. The housing association said I could have a decorating grant when I moved in. Twenty-five quid a room. Twenty-five quid a room! What the fuck would that buy you? Maybe one tub of paint to whitewash everything but nowhere near enough for any wallpaper. And don't ask me to provide anything for it. I'm not using my hard-earned cash. Well, there would be hard-earned cash if I ever got a job, but that's beside the point.

So I guess it isn't my fault that it's a dump. If the association won't pay money to look after it, why should I bother? Besides, I've got bigger things to think about. Plus I don't intend on staying here much longer anyway. I'm going to be living with my bird soon, off this fucking scratty estate. She knows I won't go anywhere without my animals though. The dogs and the reptiles, well, they are a big part of my life and it's a case of 'love me, love my animals or fuck off.' That's the long and short of it.

Everyone wants a piece of me at the moment. I can't do anything without being watched. That housing officer is on my back again. She says I need to fill some forms

in to claim housing benefit. I'm not filling in any forms. I'm entitled to benefits, full stop. But she wants me to take my benefit letters into the office and prove that I'm not working. Well, can't she look it up on her computer or something? Why can't she do her job, without having a go at me all the time for not doing it for her? She can check, she can get off her arse and do something. After all, I pay for her wages really. Well, the tax payers do.

And then there's the nosy bitch across the street – who is going to get my boot in her face if she doesn't stop interfering. Every time I go out, she's leaning on her gatepost with a fag in her gob watching me. When I come back, she's still there! It's as if someone has given her a job as 'neighbourhood watch Phil Matson.' What does she do that for? I've shouted to her loads of times to wind her neck in and piss off indoors but she says she can stand where she wants. She can, she's right, but not staring into my house all the time.

She's one of the serial complainers, I reckon. She's waiting for me to do something that she can report me for; like last weekend's party. She was complaining the minute the first people turned up – so when the noise did finally kick off, the police couldn't be bothered to send anyone else around. It was a right laugh banging on her windows and front door, hearing her scream behind it as she thought we were going to kick it in and drag her outside. Who in their right mind would want to touch her? Ugh, she would turn me off, the silly bitch. She has no reason to worry about that!

I'll be on my way soon anyway. I'm not leaving any forwarding addresses but I will leave behind a few smashed windows or something like that. I'm not going to go without giving out a message. No one messes with me.

LEAH BRADLEY, Stanley Avenue.

I thought it would be good to get away from home, but I only moved a few doors away. My sister, Gina, and her family live four doors to my right and my mum and dad two doors away to my left. We're not a close family but it's better to have safety in numbers living in Stanley Avenue.

I didn't want to stay in Stanley Avenue. It's not the best place on the estate to live. I mean, actually it has a reputation for being one of the worst streets. So you'd think that Mitchell Housing Association would spread us Bradley's around so that we don't cause too much trouble in one place. But no, they are too dumb for that. They put us all on one street, to cause trouble together. Not a very good strategy in my opinion. Having said that, maybe the reason why I got a house so quickly was that no one really wants to live in Stanley Avenue.

There's only one street worse than ours and that's Clarence Avenue. It's not far from here, and there are real troublemakers living there. Druggies, prostitutes, dole-scroungers - you name them, Clarence Avenue has them. I wouldn't live there if they paid me. Stanley Avenue is like a lane in the countryside in comparison.

Gina hasn't mellowed over the years though, and

her attitude seems to have rubbed off on those girls of hers. Sixteen-year-old twins, far too big for the boots in my opinion. They hang around the square at night, terrorising people coming in and out of Shop&Save. If I see them, I go over and swipe their heads but they don't listen. They are just out for causing problems and making people's lives hell.

I bet you're reading this thinking I'm a scrounger too. Well I'm not, actually. I go to work and pay my way – you weren't expecting that, now, were you? Gina thinks I'm mad but, honestly if I stayed at home all day and then picked Samuel up from school and had only him to talk to, *then* I would go mad. I don't work long hours; I work twenty-five hours part-time on the twilight shift at Myatt's Pottery. I do four until nine. It's not a lot of money, but I can get tax credits too, and it's a job. Most of the time I get on with the girls. They know who the boss is when I'm around, and that suits me fine. Not that I am an *actual* boss. I just act like one, keep the girls under control. Some of them are as unruly as me, but with a slap around the face to teach them a few manners every now and then, they soon come round to my way of thinking.

I've been in this house for five years now, since Samuel was born and his father fucked off and left me. It's not easy, but it's far from hard with your mother living two doors away. She can look after Samuel at the drop of a hat and I can always stay out too. She's such a pushover but I love her to bits. I just wish she didn't let Gina and her family walk all over her quite as much. Our Gina didn't do too badly for herself, I suppose. She did okay with Pete. He provides for her, unofficially, so she doesn't have to go to work. Not that anyone would employ her, not with the mouth on her. She's one mean bitch too – always up for a fight. One day she'll have her

comeuppance, I'm sure.

Still, you can pick your friends but not your family, that's how the saying goes, doesn't it? Not a truer word - I certainly wouldn't pick any of mine.

RAY MOUNTFORD,
Housing Officer,
Mitchell Housing Association.

A housing officer? Who in their right mind would do this for a living, waste their time trying to control people who are way beyond control? They're all completely clueless on The Mitchell Estate. They're all scroungers too. Every woman seems to have at least three kids by different fathers. There's no work in any of them, except to push out babies one after the other. It's all to do with claiming more benefits, I reckon. The men aren't much better either. Most of them don't get out of bed until mid-afternoon, if at all. They don't want to work. They want the state to pay for them – make more kids, get more benefits. I call it the benefit mentality, passed down from generation to generation of work-shy people.

But me, I'm a lazy bastard too. I have a love/hate relationship with the tenants. I have it with my job too; it's mine so I'll do the least I can until it isn't. I can't be bothered doing more than the absolute minimum for my pay, so it suits me. There are plenty of places I can hide on the estate to have a kip or read the paper if I don't want to do anything.

Everyone knows I'm a lazy bastard. Our so-called

office manager, Sue, swanned off on secondment to the head office a few months ago. She comes to see us, checks in to see if we are doing okay without her. But no one is taking her place, so we can do what we want to a certain extent. As long as nothing really big goes down, we can pretty much get on with things and if we need her, we know where she is. Although, I'm not sure that would be much use now, if I'm honest. Sue's left us behind. I doubt she'll lower her standards to come back. I'm surprised she doesn't sanitise her hands on the way out. She can't wait to get away. The jammy cow.

Still, there's always the housing association's secret weapon, Josie Mellor. She's a bit too much of a goody-two shoes for my liking but she certainly makes my job easier at times. I'm the enforcer and she's the carer, but don't let her hear me saying that.

I have a lot of respect for Josie in that she tries to help some of the animals who live here but often she is proved wrong because she trusts too much. She sees the good in most people. I just see the bad in everyone. Seriously, if I didn't, things would go to pot around here. Plus there are certain tenants that she has a knack with that would just moan at me all day, so I let her deal with them. Minimum work required - that's me.

So you can see that, even if I didn't choose to do this job, it's okay for me, really. And as long as they keep paying me a wage, I will get away with doing as little as possible.

BEHIND A CLOSED DOOR - PROLOGUE

Of all the shenanigans that occurred on the estate, nothing sent shivers down Josie Mellor's spine more than a no-response call.

'Josie, it's Trevor. The alarm's going off at five Nursery Lane. No one's answering.'

'But that's Edie Rutter!' Josie grabbed her car keys, the phone still against her ear.

'Her son can't get there for about an hour,' Trevor continued. 'Any chance of you checking on her for me?'

'I'm already on my way.'

It took Josie less than five minutes to drive to Edie's home. She banged on the front door and lifted up the letterbox to shout through.

'Edie! It's Josie. Are you there?'

She looked through the window but could see no one in the front room. She raced around to the back and stood on her toes to look through the kitchen window. There didn't seem anything amiss, although she couldn't see the floor from where she was standing. She moved to the bedroom window, took off a woollen glove, and gave it a firm rap.

'Edie?'

Cursing her short legs, Josie moved aside a terracotta

plant pot, jumped up onto the low wall and looked inside. Screwing up her eyes, she tried to focus through the pattern of the netting.

In desperation, she began to lift up some of the pots around the tiny patio area. At her third attempt, she found what she was looking for. Moments later, she unlocked Edie's front door and stepped in. Please God, she prayed, don't let it be gruesome. Let her be asleep.

The television was on low as she stepped into the tiny porch. Through the slightly open door, she could see a foot in a pink slipper. Pushing it open, her hand shot to her mouth. Wide eyes stared straight at her. Edie was lying on her back, her head turned towards the door. There was a pool of blood around her ear.

Josie gagged. There was no life in Edie's eyes but she looked terrified. The buzzer for the lifeline system still hung round her neck; Josie had fitted it when Edie's husband had died. Alfred Rutter had left Edie broken-hearted and distraught – leaving Josie with the job of visiting her regularly to see that she was coping.

'God bless you, Edie Rutter,' Josie whispered into the silence of the room. It was then that she noticed the mess. The living room was littered with Edie's possessions; the lamp and its occasional table lay on its side, photographs were ripped from their frames and discarded, glass shards sprinkled like confetti, and the mahogany sideboard stood with its doors wide open, its contents slung across the carpet. And what was that on the poker? She shuddered.

A noise behind her made her jump.

'Fucking hell, Andy, you scared the shit out of me! Couldn't you have knocked to let me know you're here?'

'Sorry, the door was open. I heard the call and then I saw your car outside.'

Tears streamed down Josie's cheeks. Her hand shook

as she pointed at Edie. 'She's dead. And I don't think it was an accident.'

Andy took off his police helmet and a glove. He checked Edie's neck for a pulse. Then he held his palm in front of her mouth. But there was no sign of life.

'What the hell happened in here, Andy?' Josie asked. 'It's one thing to rob the old dears but another to take their lives as they try to defend what's theirs.'

'There are some nasty bastards out there. We can't protect everyone, no matter how hard we try.'

'How long do you think she's been there?' Josie glanced at the clock on the mantel piece. It was only nine thirty-two. 'All night, maybe?'

'Early hours, I suspect. She must have come round enough to raise the alarm before she died.'

Josie pointed to the poker lying on the rug, knowing better than to touch it. 'There's blood on that.'

Andy nodded before reaching for his radio. 'I'll get the team out, set the wheels in motion.'

When Josie didn't move, Andy placed a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

'How can anyone do that?' she asked. 'Even if it was an accident, someone left her there to die. That's beyond belief. It's so cruel.'

Andy sighed. 'Aren't you forgetting something?'

'What?'

'This is the Mitchell Estate.'

SECRETS FROM
FIGHTING FROM
SURVIVAL

When Caren Williams finds herself back on the estate she fought so hard to get away from, little does she realise she'll be living opposite her arch-enemy, Gina Bradley. Gina thinks she and her family rule Stanley Avenue so when Caren starts to become popular, she decides to hit her where it will hurt the most – she wants her husband.

Lonely and depressed, Ruth Millington finds it a constant struggle to get through the dark times. Spiralling out of control, maybe she should let Gina's husband help her out when he comes calling.

Twins Rachel and Claire Bradley, took control of the girl gang, the Mitchell Mob, when their leader was sent to a juvenile detention centre for assault. But Stacey Hunter is out now and wants to hold the position of top dog again. No one will back down - let battle commence.

Domestic abuse, brawling in the street, fighting on the square and conforming to peer pressure – it all comes down to holding your nerve. But this time not everyone will survive the notorious Stanley Avenue...

PC ANDY BAXTER, The Mitchell Estate.

I've been working on the Mitchell estate for years now. As jobs go, well, it's certainly full of variety. I worked on foot patrol as a beat bobby around the city for a while but when the chance came to transfer on to the Mitchell Estate, I jumped at it. I find it much better getting to know people in a smaller area. Even though sometimes they think you're scum because you're in authority, after a while, they start to trust you, know they can turn to you. More than that, they start to tell you things.

There are some streets I don't mind working on, but some are far worse than others. If I get a shout-out on the hell – that's the bottom and less favourable part of the estate – I can often be heard to give out a groan. If it's a family that is well-known to me, such as the Bradley's or the Kirkwell's, then it's a louder groan. Often, I only need to show up and peace is restored – noisy neighbours, petty disputes that get out of hand. Sometimes people want to see a policeman walking the beat. I do have a force car to use when it's necessary but a lot of the time, you'll see me walking up and down Davy Road. It's a bloody long road though; it goes the length of the estate. Sometimes I can walk up and down the street in an hour or so and no one bothers me. Other times it can take

hours if I'm called to one street or another off the main stretch to deal with things or chat to people. It keeps me fit, mind.

Josie Mellor, one of the housing officers on the estate, does a terrific job. Her colleague, Ray, isn't so decent as he's always moaning about the bad in everyone. But Josie isn't like that. She's always rooting for the underdog. She believes that even if someone is doing something wrong, that they can't be bad all of the time. 'Not everyone is as nasty as they make out,' she tells me over and over and I just grin, with a shake of my head. Josie has managed to get many tenants out of trouble on the estate too. If I'm called to a domestic and it's in office hours, I often call for her as she can usually help to restore the peace. And she is so encouraging. She has a work ethic to be proud of and she will never give in with a tenant unless it's the last straw. She thinks she fails people when they don't listen to her, when she has to get heavy with them, often evicting them at the final hour. I've seen her in tears because she's been so frustrated.

I'll go out of my way to help anyone but if there's a bad feeling about that person afterwards, then I'll back off and the law will be enforced as necessary. But the majority of these people are salt of the earth. They'd give you the shoes from your feet rather than see you do without. Whenever anyone needs help, I'll often see a whole street of neighbours rallying around to support someone, or get a campaign going if need be. Only last month, we had a fund-raising day for a young lad with terminal cancer, to send him and his family on a final holiday. He's only five, the poor kid. There were car washes and head shaves - men and women - darts matches and a car boot sale. Of course I had to draw a line at some bloke who was flogging some dodgy designer T-shirts. You always get someone trying to get one over you.

I hope cutbacks mean that I'll never lose my job on the Mitchell Estate. I really enjoy what I do.

GINA BRADLEY, Stanley Avenue.

I have the weight of everyone on my shoulders, no wonder I'm a dumpy little mare with no get-go. I mean, how would you survive living on the hell with three unruly kids and a husband that doesn't give a toss about you? I live in squalor because I know no better.

It's not my parents' fault. Well, that's what my mum keeps telling me. Maybe it's just living on this estate that's got the better of me. Maybe it got under my skin and crawled inside me. I'm talking crap, aren't I? But you try living in Stanley Avenue. The only good thing about it is that we are the top family, and that I do like. No one messes with the Bradley clan unless they're asking for trouble.

But is it really my fault I have disruptive twin girls who think it's good to go out and fight, cause trouble on the estate? Is it really my fault I have a husband who would rather work on the side and claim benefits than get a job? It's definitely not my fault that the schooling around here is crap and therefore my girls haven't learned anything. They're leaving school soon - Lord knows what I'll do with them then. There's nothing for them around here. I'll just have them under my feet all the time. Christ, I'm not looking forward to that.

Their brother Danny is always looking for trouble too. My Pete's never had a run in with the law. He's always been on their radar for this and that but he's a benefit thief, not a burglar or a robber. Whereas Danny, he's into bigger jobs. He doesn't tell me what he gets up to but I hear about it. And as much as I try to warn him away, he does what he wants. I can't control him anymore. Neither can his father. He's always nicking my bloody money as well. Only yesterday, I swear there was a twenty in my purse and now it's gone. But then again, that might have been one of the twins. They're all as bad as each other. What did I do to deserve them, I ask you?

Sometimes I wish I could do more with my life though. It does get pretty boring after a while. It's just that there's nothing to do for me around here either. And I wouldn't want to work anywhere like Shop&Save over on Vincent Square. All those people at your beck and call, not able to have a fag when I want, and who wants to dress up in green overalls and look like a stick of celery, for Christ's sake? I did work in the chippie for a couple of months, until they found out how much I was bringing home to feed the family after my shift. Well, who would miss a few portions of fish and chips, I ask you. I thought it would be a perk of the job!

That Josie Mellor is always trying to catch me out too. I hate people in authority and even though she seems friendly, she isn't. She doesn't care about anything except keeping the peace and making sure no one is screwing the benefit system. Well, I have news for her. Half the estate is at it. We don't have work in us, and we don't care.

So most of my days are spent doing nothing. I am bored half of the time but I'm not about to tell anyone that. Because I like doing nothing for the other half.

PETE BRADLEY, Stanley Avenue.

It's not so bad being a Bradley. At least we have a good reputation for getting things done and sorted out. Whether that's because we mainly fight our way out of trouble or because we're known for being nasty, I don't care. But life is okay most of the time. As long as I don't cross my wife too much, that is.

She's all right in small doses is my Gina. Okay, she's a lazy sod most of the time, and she sure as hell has let herself go since she's had the kids, but underneath all the nagging, you sometimes get to see a nice person every now and then. She doesn't have many friends though. The ones that she does have, well, let's just say I wouldn't want as friends. I wouldn't trust them at all and I'm sure they'd do anything to get the better of her.

Street gossip - that's what I call Gina. It's okay, she's quite proud of it, actually. She loves nothing more than finding out and sharing everyone else's business. What she doesn't know isn't worth knowing about. She enjoys spreading gossip - the 'don't tell anyone I've told you because I'm sworn to secrecy, but' sort of thing. Every one does it, come on now; don't tell me you're not into sharing gossip too.

What annoys Gina most is when everyone knows

something except the person the gossip is about. She says that makes people look like dicks. So she goes straight to the source of the gossip, tells it like it is. She should have been a private investigator. She would have been so good at it. If someone is grassing you up to the housing association, she can find out. If anyone has been robbed, she can find out who did it. Especially when something of importance has been nicked - or if some thoughtless little shit has taken something from someone without thinking. We had one lad who had his wheelchair stolen and she found out who he was before the police did. What type of callous bastard does that?

Except that it's all a facade, something she hides behind. Not having anyone to call a proper friend gets to her. She says it doesn't but I can tell. I know she only gossips about people because it makes her feel included. I don't think anyone will ever change her. It's why that housing officer is always snooping around here too. She calls with some sort of tale about our kids causing a nuisance, but goes away with lots more details of other people because Gina can't keep her mouth shut. She's going to get into trouble with it one day. She doesn't gossip about the family though. She loves me and the kids, her sister and her parents, and will protect us fiercely, even when she knows we are in the wrong. And we might not have the best-kept house in the avenue but we get by. I have a good life. I do a bit of work on the side during the day and spend the evenings in the pub with my mates.

Gina's always there for me, especially when I need seeing to, if you catch my drift. And she can run down to the chippie as fast as Usain Bolt if I offer to get her a battered fish. She's cute and cuddly is my Gina, and despite the grief I give her, I wouldn't want her any other way. Even with our ups and downs, I'd hate to lose her.

SNIPPETS FROM JOSIE MELLOR

**While you were out:
Court eviction details. 10.30 tomorrow morning.
Going ahead as planned.**

A tenant will have received numerous letters and visits from a housing officer to try and make things better before we have to evict them. It can take months to get tenants to court so the procedure isn't taken on lightly. It is a last resort. A couple of mornings before it's due to happen, it's booked into the duty diary as a possible. Nothing is definite until the case has been in front of the judge. A bailiff will be on standby to serve the eviction notice. Two housing officers will also be on standby to go along. It isn't possible to go alone because of the times we've been accused of stealing things when the tenants weren't around. It's all photographed now though. There's also a locksmith on standby if the keys aren't available (if the tenant won't hand them over at the time or if the tenant isn't in.) If there are no keys, the lock has to be chiselled out and the damage to make good again will be recharged to the tenant. If the keys are available, the

barrel of the lock will be changed only. It's just to stop some tenants who think nothing of coming back and stripping the house of its boiler, radiators, kitchen and bathroom units.

If a tenant is in rent arrears and brings in the cash five minutes before the eviction, it still has to go to court but obviously would be stopped. That's why we're all on standby. So once we get the phone call from the court that the eviction has gone through, it's all systems go.

Evictions – The Good

During my first week at the housing office, I was sneaked out with one of the other officers as they evicted a tenant from hell, Mr George. We'd requested police backup for this one as we expected things to get nasty. They did get nasty, to the point that Mr George was arrested for threatening behaviour, rushing at us with a metal curtain pole thrust high in the air.

Once we got into the property, and the growling dog had been shut in the downstairs loo for our own safety, we had a chance to look around. The rooms were in a dreadful state, doors with punch-holes in them, drawers missing from the kitchen units and don't get me started on the state of the bathroom. Mr George had even hacksawed the water pipes to disconnect the washer and the kitchen was flooded. We had to call a plumber out – not a happy chappy as it was three thirty and he'd be finished by four normally. Still, at least Mr George isn't our problem anymore. And he never came back. The last I heard of him was he was doing an eight year stretch for armed robbery.

Evictions – The Bad

One of the sad things about doing evictions is when decent tenants bury their heads in the sand because they can't pay their rent. By decent, I mean, tenants who will get up on a morning and earn a wage but can't cope with all their bills. Decent tenants who we would have tried to contact time after time to see if we could help them before things went too far.

One particular eviction for Mr and Mrs Talbot was set up for ten a.m. Mr and Mrs Talbot had two children of school age. They'd lived in the property for seven years. When Mr Talbot lost his job, they quickly went into rent arrears. But lately things had been looking up as he'd been in work again and managed to pay some of the debt off. Then he'd lost that contract too and no rent had been paid at all for six weeks. On the fourth visit to the magistrate's court, we were granted the eviction.

We rolled up at ten with a joiner to change the lock on the door and the bailiff to serve the eviction. After knocking on the door a few times, no one answered so we forced entry and the locks were changed. Going in to the house, it was clear that Mr and Mrs Talbot didn't think the eviction was going to happen. The house was as if they'd gone out that morning expecting to return. Breakfast dishes drying on the draining board. Food in the cupboards. An empty mug of tea and a half-eaten packet of biscuits on the coffee table. (Obviously we'd let the tenants back into the property to remove their belongings. They have twenty eight days after the eviction to do so, but under no circumstances can they get back into the house. They have lost their home. Even if they turn up with a wad of cash from a loan shark, they are too late.)

I've had lots of incidences where tenants haven't

believed the eviction would go through. Often, in the days when the doors and windows were sealed with steel units, we'd leave them in the property in the morning and come back in the evening to lock up, once they had their belongings outside. And I mean outside. If they couldn't get a van quick enough to move their stuff, it would be brought out onto the postage stamp lawn at the front. I've even helped tenants to move stuff onto the lawn in readiness. It didn't make me feel good. I know everyone has to pay their way but sometimes the other side of things, when you see kids toys out on that garden, it's a reminder of 'could we have done more?' It's fail with a capital F for me - FAIL. I do feel I should have done more and I worry about it until something else needs my attention. It doesn't make me feel good.

Evictions - The ugly

We were called to another property when the adjoining neighbour said she hadn't seen the tenant, Miss Johnson, for a few days but she could hear a cat crying. It was clear when we got there that Miss Johnson had done a moonlight flit but she'd left behind the cat and the tropical fish. When we got into the property, the stench was horrendous. The cat must have knocked over the tank to try and get some food. What remained of the fish – catfish we found out later – was all over the floor. The cat was taken to an animal lifeline to be re-homed.

It could also be dangerous to attend an eviction. If the tenant was there, the emotions would be charged and whoever was there from the council got it in the neck. I had one guy threaten to leave his puppy in the property and then throw it at me when I told him I needed vacant possession of the house. I caught it, thankfully. There would often be lots of drugs paraphernalia lying about in

some properties – sharps by the dozen, one time a whole loft full. One property had the kitchen ceiling and wall removed, making the upstairs dodgy to say the least so we weren't allowed to check every room until the damage was made safe.

Suffice it to say, that when an eviction is imminent, there's mixed feelings at the housing office.

Secrets from the author - On Writing

How do I write?

I'm a plotter. I start with an idea, I write brief biographies to get to know the main characters and then I write a beginning, middle and end for all their stories. I merge them altogether and then I start to fill the stories out until I have about twenty chapters. Those twenty chapters usually turn into between forty and fifty over the course of the second draft as I add in more plots and twists as they present themselves to me. There is nothing better than a new twist that develops just through writing that first draft.

Where do I write?

Early mornings, I type on a laptop, usually sitting on the settee – I find it's my most productive time so I enjoy a coffee or two while I'm at it. Later, I'll be in my office. When I'm getting near to the end of a draft or a rewrite and it starts to consume me, in the evenings I'm back to the laptop on the settee again, although sometimes it's in the kitchen as I drive my husband mad by tippy-tapping next to him when I go into the zone.

Why do I write?

I don't know why, I just have to. I've been writing in some form or other since I was a teenager. I've read every how-to book imaginable over the years – and in every kind of genre and discipline to try and find my voice. It wasn't until 2004 that I started to take it seriously and, even now, writing my tenth book, I'm still learning something new with every draft I complete. I hope I never stop learning.

When do I write?

Unless I am in 'finish first draft or re-write mode,' I find I do anything *but* write. So I have to write for long periods and quickly. It works for me but it might not work for everyone. When I start a book, I struggle with self-doubt but the more I write, the longer the writing sessions become. When I was working full-time as well, I'd start off with a target of 3,500 words per week, 500 words per day (often I didn't do any writing at first so the target would build up and up and UP). Then I'd move to 1000 words per day, then 1500 and so on. Now, having the luxury of being able to write full-time, although there is so much more to do on the business side of things, I aim for 15,000 words every week that I am drafting a book or fifteen pages per day of editing. You'll often find that I go off radar when I start a book. My blog posts become fewer, my online presence a little sketchy as writing has to come first. I mark my completed word total on a wall calendar for encouragement. Once the draft takes off, I find it hard to stop. But the first 100 pages for me are the killer. Can I really do it again?

What do I write about?

Alongside writing TAUNTING THE DEAD which is a police procedural, I write about life on The Mitchell Estate. I also have a standalone psychological thriller, WATCHING OVER YOU – think Single White Female meets Fatal Attraction, a tale of love and murderous obsession.

RACHEL BRADLEY, Stanley Avenue.

It's not easy being Rachel Bradley. It's not easy being a Bradley, come to think of it. Everywhere I go, people look down their noses at us - that's me and my sister, Claire. She's my twin. We're sixteen and part of the Mitchell Mob.

I found out the best thing in the world yesterday. Stacey Hunter has been sent down. She hit an old woman and has been locked up in juvie. And while I don't like what she did to the woman, it means she won't be around to control the gang, so I'm going to step in, with Claire as my second-in-command, of course. *Before* any of the other girls do. They all think they're strong enough, but they aren't. And safety in numbers, with Claire by my side, no one will mess with us. Together we will rule the estate!

There are eleven of us in the Mitchell Mob and we're all lairy bitches. We have a right laugh, getting up to mischief, as the olds would say. It's a great rush causing trouble. Stacey Hunter is my competition, my opposition really if you want to put it that way. But now that she is out of the picture for a while, I'm going to take control. I'm prepared for a showdown, though. I know some of the girls - Laila and Charlie, for instance - won't swap

sides without a fight, so it will have to be knuckles at dawn. I suppose we'll have to jump a few of the girls first, show them who are the strongest before they all come on side. I don't think that will take too long, and then once we have them, when Stacey does come out, we'll keep them. By then, we'll prove to the rest of the Mitchell Mob that our side is best. I'm going to make sure that Stacey Hunter is forgotten about – that when she does come out, no one will want to be around her anymore. They'll want to stick with me and Claire. It's a good plan, don't you think?

Except that it scares me to death. Everyone thinks I'm hard but I'm not really. Sometimes I get a bit mad and it makes me respond in an angry manner, but I don't want to be like this. I just feel like it's expected of me at times, you know, so I react that way on purpose. I'm a Bradley - no one messes with us, that's what our olds tell us all the time. That's what Danny says to us all the time. So we have to live up to our reputation, right?

It's good to cause trouble on the estate though, especially across on the square. We have to liven up our lives somehow. If it isn't with a drink, it's a quick shag here and there, or a brick through someone's window. We're into wrecking cars at the moment, you know, kicking off mirrors, scratching the panels, bricking the windows, nicking the car badges. We do anything for a dare. I can't see much harm in it.

I just wish Claire would toughen up a bit at times. I can see how scared she gets; she gives it away in her eyes. And I hear her crying too sometimes at night. I can't comfort her too much though. She needs to learn to get through it and toughen up. It won't get any better. I know me and her should really gang up together and stop all the fighting, turn away from it, but we're in too deep now. It's only a matter of time before one of us

gets really hurt. We've all seen Stacey Hunter's knife. I carry one too sometimes. I have to. It's the only chance of survival around here.

But one thing I know for sure is that no matter what, no matter how rough it gets out there, Claire will always be with me. She might be the weaker of us, but I know I can always rely on her.

CLAIRE BRADLEY, Stanley Avenue.

It's not easy being Claire Bradley. Not when you have a twin sister like Rachel, anyway. Most of the time, Rachel is everything I want to be. She's feisty, isn't scared of anything, with a right kick-ass attitude, and she looks after me like a good sister should. She's stubborn too - so when someone tells her she can't do something, she has to prove them wrong. Only last month she had a run in with Stacey - that's our gang leader. I get really scared when Rachel is angry, but she's nothing compared to Stacey. Stacey is a lunatic. I don't think she's scared of anyone. So when Rachel has a go, it's only to save face because Stacey has tried to make a fool of her. Rachel always ends up with a black eye or a split lip. I've yet to see Stacey come off worse in any fight. That's why she is, and always will be, the leader of the gang.

We're members of the Mitchell Mob, Rach and me. We terrorise the estate - well, we fool around a lot mostly. We might do the odd bit of vandalism but it's only fun. And it isn't as if we're hurting anyone, is it? It's only objects. Mind you, if I ever have a car, I hope no one scratches it like we scratched that car last night. Well, posh buggers should watch where they're parking, shouldn't they? They have no right to bring flashy cars on the estate and expect them not to get trashed - losers.

I can be as moody as Rach, and as annoying at times, but sometimes she scares me when she goes into one of her dark moods. Sometimes I just want to throw my arms around her, give her a big hug and take all her pain away, but I know she wouldn't want that. She's a right tomboy too – which means that I have to be one. We have to dress a certain way to be in the Mitchell Mob anyway. We all wear dark hoodies and baggy trousers, and baseball caps. It's something we use every now and then when we know there are cameras around. We try and fool the police. If they can't pick out which of us is causing a nuisance, then they don't have any proof.

I reckon if the cops come to our house again any time soon, we'll both be in for it with the olds. And if it isn't us they're after, it's Danny. He'll be locked up for something soon, I bet. He's into thieving. We don't do that yet, but it seems like everyone is fighting for survival in their own way, so who knows.

I keep hoping we won't get hooked on drugs. We're already smoking and drinking heavily, but there's nothing else to do around here except get wasted. I don't want to end up like some of the people on this estate though. That Cheryl Morton, who stays with Cath Mason in Christopher Avenue, now she is a mental cow. I don't know how Jess Myatt puts up with her. I suppose it's similar to what I do with Rach. I'm so scared of what she might do to me that I join in, even when I'm not comfortable doing whatever we're up to. It's better to join in than back down, especially when I'm with the rest of the girls. And I'm used to fighting now, what with Rach and Danny, I've had to defend myself for years. Some of the girls in the gang don't scare me at all, but Rach and Stacey do. Still, it's better now that Stacey has been sent down. At least we can get some peace until she comes out again.

STACEY HUNTER, Juvenile Detention Centre.

I can't believe they sent me to juvie. I couldn't help what I did to that woman, it wasn't me really. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time and I was tanked up enough to take it out on her. Yeah, I was drugged up so what do *they* do? Lock me up for it. I am sorry for what I did but I don't deserve to be in here.

I hate it. It's girls screaming and fighting like cats most of the time. It's okay for me though as I'm not scared of anyone. There's a girl here, Debbie Rossiter, and she was top bitch until I came. She thought she'd have a go at me, put me in my place. But after I'd floored her and made her beg as I twisted her arm up her back, she soon walked away and left me to it. Not that I wanted to take her place as top bitch – it's still her place now, I don't want it. But I like it that she knows not to mess with me, not to talk to me, even look at me if I'm in a mood.

It's not so bad in here once you get used to it. I'm pissed off that I don't have my knife, my trusted friend, but as no one else has one either, I can rest assured that my fists are my best form of defence. Oh, and my feet, don't forget those. But the one thing that's really getting my back up is thinking about Rachel Bradley. I know that she'll be trying to gather my girls together and

become the new leader of The Mitchell Mob. But my girls are looking out for me on the outside, keeping an eye on what she and that stupid sister of hers get up to, and reporting everything back to me. When I get out, then I can get even if she does anything I don't like. And woe betide any of the weak bitches that stray. I'll get them back, you'll see.

I can't wait to get out of here and go home again. But until then I'll bide my time, behave as well as I can, and then I can be out to cause havoc as soon as possible.

SNIPPETS FROM JOSIE MELLOR

**While you were out:
Mr Miller's been on the phone –
complaining about his back passage again.**

Mr Miller lives in a private house that backs onto a row of garages owned by Mitchell Housing Association. The garage plot has one entrance, but an unofficial one has been made from a strip of land that no one maintained, running along the side of his property. It's hardly used because of its narrow access anyway and isn't owned by us but has been used as a shortcut by some of the people who use the garages.

For a number of years now, there's been a dispute as to why it's been left unattended to. Mr Miller wants us to resurface it. It is bad: I've turned my ankle quite a few times on it myself during my monthly street checks. So when Mr Miller yet again sent a letter of complaint to his local councillor, I was sent to explain the situation.

Mr Miller's property is a two-up, two-down terraced house. He'd only been there for a few years after coming back from Australia. He'd bought the property at a knockdown price – mainly because the property itself

was falling down. There was no bathroom and even though Mr Miller had received a grant, he'd spent this on central heating.

As often happens, the nature of the call isn't the reason why someone wants a visit from a housing officer. If they don't just want a good old moan or cussing match, then they want several things sorted out at the same time. So even though Mr Miller needs 'his back passage clearing once and for all', what he really wants is a new bathroom fitted, by us.

Mr Miller is in his early seventies, round and red-faced, smartly dressed. I explained my position again but still he ranted, insisting on showing me every one of the twenty-seven letters he had written. Then, after forty minutes of being talked over, he told me the real reason he wanted to see me was that he wanted to take me upstairs to show me his ceremonial sword.

'Sure', I said, trying to keep my wits about me. 'You lead the way.' As soon as he was halfway up the stairs, I was out of his front door and running for my car before he could say 'come back.' Ceremonial sword? What was that code for? Well, I sure as hell wasn't finding out.

Suffice it to say, I got back to the office to peels of laughter from Ray, the other housing officer and Doug, the maintenance officer. Even though I'd spoken to him quite a few times, I didn't realize that Mr Miller collects replica military swords. He literally was going to show me his ceremonial sword. Even so, it could have been a dangerous position to be in, if he had intended using it...

Secrets from the author - Music that influences me

When I begin to draft out a new book, I have to be in complete silence, although I do manage to block out some background noise. But it's hard for me because listening to music is where I get lots of ideas and inspiration. I picture Adele at the Albert Hall singing *Someone Like You* and my skin breaks out in goose bumps. Emotion to me is everything. There's nothing in my novels that can move you to tears as much as a love song is prone to do but I do hope to leave you with a feeling of relief that a victim is okay or a sense of compassion for someone you didn't think you'd feel compassion for.

Artists within their song lyrics have many a story to tell. I grew up listening to Elvis Presley, talking of love and Heartbreak Hotels and life In the Ghetto. I listen to Pink and I love Plan B. I find artists like Eminem, in his time, and more recently, Professor Green with Emile Sande, incorporating what I like to write in my books. The lyrics are about gritty, down to earth topics that are often shoved under the carpet. But there are also purposely written, soft, soulful chorus's breaking up the angst yet still giving out a powerful message – sometimes we have to take the rough to get to the smooth.

Writing for me is a pleasure, even though I write

violent scenes too. I don't find them hard to write, nor to read back (watching them on a screen is a different matter entirely – I can't do it, and have many an argument with my husband about it) but for every murder I write about, for every scene of domestic violence that I create, I try to also add a sense of sympathy for some of my suspects as well as my victims. A crime writer needs to show kindness too. Just like with music.

My favourite group of all time? The Jam. How gritty is their music – *A Town Called Malice*, *Going Underground* and *The Bitterest Pill* to name a few of my favourites. Their lyrics are simple but tell of many tales from redundancy to fights to one-upmanship and yes, I'm back to love again.

I enjoy nothing better than finishing a writing session that has left me drained (emotion wise) and then cranking up the volume when a bit of Jessie J or Paloma Faith comes on the radio as I go to make a cup of coffee. Yes, as soon I go into the kitchen, the music is back on. I suppose if the writing doesn't take off, I could always be a rap artist – because I sure as hell can't sing!

CAREN WILLIAMS, Stanley Avenue.

Everything we've worked towards over the past few years has all been for nothing. There doesn't seem to be much we can do about it now either. Yesterday was a nightmare, and humiliating too, after John and I went into the bank to see if anything could be done to stop the house being repossessed. We tried our best to persuade them to reconsider. They said they'd ring back today. I've been dreading the call since then.

I hardly slept a wink last night. We live at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac of eight homes. God knows where we'll end up if we have to move out. And the next place isn't going to be anywhere near as homely as I've made this over the years. It's just so unfair. I know in the back of my mind that the bank won't show any leniency. I can hardly blame them due to the current climate of the economy, but this is still our home we're talking about. And the not knowing is killing me.

Every time I think of the mess that we're in, I could throw up. John and I both worked hard to get to where we are today. We came from The Mitchell Estate, you see. We've been together since we were teenagers. John didn't want to move away when we left school but I insisted that we buy our own property, get on the ladder.

And I was right. John went to college, learned plumbing and heating as a trade and set up his own business. I worked with him, doing all the admin and running the office and the business side of things. But we lost a lot of our big clients when they went under, companies we were relying on. When they couldn't pay their bills, we couldn't pay ours. Our business folded. So not only will we lose our home but we've lost our income too. This could destroy us.

It's half past nine - why haven't they rung yet? The least they can do is put us out of our misery. Shit, we worked hard to get off that estate. I hope there is somewhere we can move to rather than have to go back. I don't ever want to go back if we can help it. I'd rather live in a tent on a field beside the motorway than move back there.

I'll give the bank another hour and if I haven't heard anything by then, I'm going to ring them. Let's hope they'll give us a bit more time. We're not in that much debt, just a few thousand pounds behind on mortgage payments. The house is worth a good amount. I'm sure they can sort something out - reduce our payments for a bit until we're stable again. No bank would throw us out when we've been good payers for years, only now having got into trouble.

They'll be lenient with us, won't they?

RUTH MILLINGTON, Stanley Avenue.

It isn't easy for me bringing up kids, especially when I suffer black moods. I don't have a lot of money either, and any spare has to go on alcohol to get me through the days. I can't cope, you see. I know it sounds pathetic. I'm only thirty-five, but when my husband died and left me alone to bring up Mason and Jamie, well, that's when everything started going wrong. He was killed in a car crash one icy night when he was on call-out for work. Such a tragic waste, I don't think I'll ever get over it.

Pretty soon after was when the self-harming began. The odd cut here and there, the sense of pain washing over me. The satisfaction of being in control of one thing in my life was overwhelming. I knew I needed help, that what I did was wrong, but no one saw my cuts. I hid them all away.

Glenn and me were a good team. The years I spent with him were the happiest in my life. Ever feel like you'd lose an arm if you lost your partner? Well, that's how I felt when he was taken from me. He was my rock, my soul mate, my savior. I miss him so much.

It's also one of the reasons why I got myself into such a mess with Martin. He took advantage of me at my lowest point. I know now that he was only after a

woman in his bed and someone to look after the house, rather than *actually* wanting me as a person to love. I was a fool. I fell for his charm. He came along at my lowest point; persuaded me to move in with him, said he would help me with the boys. But once I was there, it was clear that all he was after was a mug. I was on strong anti-depressants when I met him, didn't really know what I was doing except trying to survive one day at a time.

The house he lives in is rented by Mitchell Housing Association. One minute he says we can stay there as long as we want; the next he's threatening to throw the boys and me out on the street. I'm not sure I care either way anymore. I think I went past caring a long time ago.

It's hard to manage young boys, you know? Mason is nine now and Jamie is seven. They're good boys really, but when I can't cope and I drink to block everything out, well, that's when they take advantage. That's when they can wrap me around their little finger and get me to agree to anything. That's when they become noisy little bastards and that's when I start shouting at them. I don't mean to be so angry all the time, but they just wind me up. Especially when all I want to do is sleep.

I need to stay calm though. As long as to the outside world, I'm coping, then I'm sure I can survive. I will get through this black period. I've done it before, I can do it again. As long as I don't drink too much.

A deleted scene with Josie Mellor
and Ruth Millington
FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

‘Settling in all right?’ Josie asked Ruth as she held out the door for her to walk through.

‘It’s okay, I suppose.’ Ruth closed it quietly behind her. They went through to the living room.

‘How are the boys?’

‘Fine.’ Ruth picked up a stray car left on the floor. ‘At least they have their own bedrooms here.’

Josie glanced around before speaking again. There was little furniture in the room: a settee and two armchairs, a coffee table and a small portable television. Over in the far corner was a cardboard box full of toys, lots more scattered around the outside of it.

‘And you?’ Josie went on.

‘Me, what?’

‘How are you?’

‘I’m fine too.’

An uncomfortable silence followed. Josie got out the relevant paperwork and sat down on the settee.

‘Have you sorted out your benefits yet?’

‘Yes.’ Ruth walked over to the front window and stared out on the street.

'And you're okay for furniture? Because if you want anything else, I can arrange –'

'No, I'm good!'

Josie stayed quiet, knowing that Ruth would probably want to fill the silence if she didn't continue.

'I feel like I don't belong here, yet,' Ruth admitted, 'and it's strange looking after the boys by myself, but, really, I'll manage. I always do.'

Josie gave her an encouraging smile. 'I'm sure you'll be okay. A couple of weeks and you'll think that you've always lived here. Have you met any of the neighbours yet?'

'Not really. I've only been out so far to take the boys to school. I've had a few smiles from people in their front gardens.'

'That's good.'

'I've had some nasty stares too.'

'You'll see that anywhere until people get to know you. Either that or they'll leave you be.'

'Well, I'll keep myself to myself anyway.' Ruth sat down. 'I don't want everyone knowing my business.'

Josie nodded. It was the right attitude for Stanley Avenue. Keep your head down, keep the peace and you'd keep your sanity.

'Right,' she smiled. 'If there isn't anything else for now, I'll be off.'

Ruth showed her out. Before she left, Josie tried one more time.

'Why don't you call in at The Workshop, see if there is a course you can do while the boys are at school?'

'I have a lot to do here.'

'Oh, I know that. I meant when you're all settled and the days start rolling into one. We do some great things there, and there's an after school club so if you want to bring along –'

'I said I have a lot to do here.'

Ruth's tone of finality stopped Josie in her tracks. She smiled a final time before heading for her car. That was going to be one tough cookie to crack.

FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL - PROLOGUE

Gina Bradley swallowed two tablets with the help of a mouthful of water, knocking back the rest afterwards. It spilt over the rim and down her chin in her haste to get rid of the pounding inside her head. Bang, bang, bang.

It took her a moment to realise that the noise was actually from someone knocking at the front door. She shuffled through the living room, careful not to trip over Pete's boots splayed in the middle of the floor, and squeezed around the boxes of knock-off paraphernalia piled up along the narrow hallway.

'What the fuck do you want?' she snapped, looking down at Josie Mellor from her vantage point of three steps up.

'Good morning to you too,' said Josie. 'Don't say that you weren't expecting me. Are the twins at home? I need to talk to them about -'

'All right, all right, keep your voice down.' Gina opened the door and moved to one side. 'You'd better come in. I don't want the whole of Stanley Avenue to know my bleeding business.'

Josie moved past her. Before shutting the door, Gina looked up and down the road to see who was nosing at her. She watched for curtains twitching: it was bound to

be one of the neighbours who had complained, although for once, it didn't seem to have anything to do with her and Pete making a racket after a late night argument.

She followed Josie into the living room and dropped onto the settee, not bothering to move the pile of magazines and a pair of men's jeans. Josie sat down on the armchair next to the gas fire.

'What do you want to know?' Gina asked as she reached for a packet of cigarettes from the coffee table.

'Where were your girls last night?'

'That depends.' She lit a cigarette, snapped the lighter shut and took a deep drag.

'In that case, you can't be certain that they weren't involved in the altercation across on Vincent Square.'

Gina leaned back and placed her feet on the dusty coffee table. 'In that case,' she mimicked Josie, 'they were here with me all night.'

Josie sighed. 'Mrs Bradley, have you any idea of the serious nature of the attack?'

'Nope.' In truth, Gina hadn't a clue what Josie was referring to. She'd fallen asleep on the sofa, long before the twins had come home. They might have mentioned some sort of a fight when they'd nudged her awake and she'd gone up to bed but she couldn't recall anything now.

'There were two incidents, in fact,' said Josie. 'At half past seven, Rachel and Claire were seen riding like the clappers along Davy Road after a woman was knocked to the floor and her handbag was stolen.'

'Not my girls,' said Gina with a slow shake of the head. 'Besides, they know better than to get caught on CCTV.'

Josie frowned. 'The woman suffered a broken nose and a dislocated shoulder.'

'And you think my girls are capable of that?'

'They're not girls anymore, they're sixteen. And the

mess they made of Melissa Riley last year, I dare say they are more than capable.'

'That was a teenage misunderstanding. You know how catfights can start when boys are involved.'

'Actually, I don't recall any when I was their age.'

'No, you would have been Miss Fucking Perfect at school, wouldn't you? I see you haven't changed now, apart from becoming a jobsworth.'

'At least I have a job,' muttered Josie.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

Gina watched as Josie lowered her eyes. Josie hardly ever retaliated, no matter what she spat out at her. Who had rattled her cage?

'You mentioned two episodes?' she said.

'Yes, there was another mugging half an hour later. A young lad was pushed down the steps on Frazer Terrace. He says he fell but –'

'He must have fallen if he said he did! Bleeding hell, Josie, can't you take anything at face value?'

'Not when I know he's lying.'

'And exactly how do you know that?'

'I just do, that's all.'

'Give me a break,' Gina pleaded. 'You ought to try living my life for a week. I have a lazy bastard for a husband who's never done an honest day's work in his life. My eldest son is heading the same way – either that or he'll end up inside again. I have daughters who happen to be the bane of everyone's life. Wherever they go, they cause mayhem. It's not exactly a barrel of laughs for me.'

'My life is in no way perfect,' said Josie, 'but I do try my best to get things right.'

Gina yawned. 'I'm bored with this conversation. Have you finished?'

'No, I haven't. Your girls are heading for a big come

down. You know they think they rule the roost with this stupid gang they're part of.'

Gina giggled. 'Yeah. The Mitchell Mob, they call themselves. So funny.'

'It isn't funny at all!' Josie's voice rose slightly. 'Do you want them both to be locked up like Danny was last year? Then you'll be on your own and...'

'And?' Gina taunted when Josie had been silent for a few seconds.

'You know what I mean. They're heading for meltdown.'

Gina stood up quickly. 'I think you'd better sling your hook. I'm sick of you poking your nose into my family's business all the time. Who do you think you are?'

'I have a file on your family this thick,' Josie indicated an inch between her thumb and index finger, 'so you need to be careful. I can't keep shielding you and your girls from eviction.'

'Eviction?'

Josie said nothing.

'You can't be serious?' Gina continued. 'I've been a tenant here for seventeen years. You can't just turf us out.'

'I – I can,' said Josie, 'and I will, if I have to.'

Gina grabbed Josie's arm and pulled her up roughly. 'Get out of my house. And don't come back accusing my family of all sorts until you have the proof that they were involved.'

Josie tried to shrug Gina off but she held on tight. 'Could you at least try and talk to them?' she asked. 'They might listen to you.'

Gina sneered. 'What makes you think they'll listen to me? Like you said, they're sixteen now.'

'Which means we have more rights to lock them up if they're caught.'

Gina pushed Josie across the living room and along

the hallway. She yanked open the front door and shoved her through it. Josie just about kept her balance as she flew down the steps.

'I'm warning you, Josie Mellor, stay away from here. Stay away from me and stay away from my family. Because if you don't, I'll come after you. Just you remember that.'

'Gina, you're making a big mistake! I can help you if –'

'Just keep your nose out of my fucking business!' Gina slammed the door so hard that paint chips fell to the floor. She stomped back through to the kitchen, grabbed the whisky bottle from where she'd left it the night before and took a huge swig. Then another. And another.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and took in a huge gulp of air. How dare Josie come round here and accuse her girls! Oh, she knew deep down that they must have had something to do with the drama last night. If not two incidents, they would more than likely be involved in one of them – probably the boy falling down the steps.

Damn that Josie Mellor. And damn that stupid housing association and its rules. No one would turf her family out.

SECRETS FROM
WRITTEN IN THE
SCARS

Scars.

Sometimes they are visible. Sometimes they are burdens that we carry around with us.

You can't see Donna's scars left over from her marriage.
You can't see Lewis's scars from his time in the army.
You can see Megan's scars but she won't let you.
And Mary can't remember how she got hers.

If making a better future could erase the past, we'd all be for it, wouldn't we? No matter how dangerous the consequences...

You can't ignore the past when it's been... WRITTEN
IN THE SCARS.

DONNA

There's such a fine line between love and hate, isn't there? I mean, I love my family but sometimes they are the bane of my life too. I have two sons and a daughter. Mike is the eldest at twenty-five and Sam, my other son, is twenty-three. They're always up to no good. It's been much better for me since Mike's girlfriend left him and Sam moved in with him though. I don't have to lie awake waiting for one of them to come home, wondering what they're getting up to. I don't have the police knocking on my door asking their whereabouts all the time. My Keera is nineteen and luckily doesn't take after either of the boys. She's her own woman and I'm so proud of her. She's just come back from working abroad. It didn't pan out because some bloke attacked her friend and they decided that even living on the Mitchell Estate made them feel safer than the apartment block they were in.

My mum, Mary, is sixty-eight and suffering from dementia. It's not been too bad until these past few months. Now she's started to wander around, she's constantly forgetting who I am, and who my daughter, Keera, is when she takes time to visit. It would be easier if she'd move in here with me but she likes her independence. I suppose one day she might have to, but for now, I have to be content with watching from the

sidelines as she deteriorates. It's so sad. She was such an able woman. She and my dad were married for nearly forty-three years. They were one of the first couples to move on to the estate.

I used to love my ex-husband but now I bloody well hate him. We were married for nineteen years, although he didn't live here for all of them. Often he'd have an affair, I'd find out and he'd leave. But then once he was bored of the woman, he'd be back, wanting to get his feet under the table here again. And me, the stupid cow that I was at the time, used to always take him back. Used to believe him when he said he would change. It isn't as easy as people think to let go of someone they've been with for so long. There's always the fear that you won't find anyone else; that you won't be able to cope on your own, that you are as useless and as worthless as he made you think you were.

So in between popping in to see if Mum is all right, and seeing that the kids are okay, and working as many hours as I can get at Shop&Save to pay the bills, my life is hectic. Sometimes I wish there was just a little more time in the day for me, you know? It's not too much to ask, after all the years I've looked after everyone else, is it? You see, I'm lonely. I know Jo was a selfish bastard, but at least he was someone. That's why I signed up with this dating agency. It was Jacky, my supervisor at Shop&Save, who suggested joining one, so I did for a laugh. Knowing my luck, though, I'll never find my prince charming. I'll just be stuck with the frog.

It's not too much to ask for, is it – a bit of love and bit of romance? I know I'm forty-two and have been round the block a bit but I still take care of myself. I look good, even for my years, and take pride in my appearance, not like a lot of women on the estate.

Oh, I've just had a message from a guy name Owen...

LEWIS

It's going to be weird going home after twelve years away. And back to The Mitchell Estate - Lord knows what I've done to deserve that. But I've got nowhere else to go. I've been in the Army since I left school and even though I've seen a bit of the world, I don't have anywhere to call home. I don't have anyone to call my own either. I wish I had a wife and a couple of kids to return to, like some of the blokes I work with. All I have are memories, of things going wrong, of guns and bullets and fighting and shooting and blood...

I was going to sign up for a few more years until Steve was killed. Now, even though I'm going back to my parents next month, and back to that shit estate, I can't wait to get out of the Army. Back to civilisation, back to normal people and normal weather. I hope the nightmares don't come home with me.

It's been a few months since I've seen my mum and dad. Since... since, I can't talk about what happened out there. Not to anyone. People keep asking me if I'm okay, and I keep saying that I am. I feel weird but I don't want to talk about it.

You see, I don't really know what's wrong. I just feel so angry all the time. I'm drinking too much, I know. And it's stressing me out the thought of going home and

living with my parents, back in the bedroom I slept in until I was sixteen. But a huge part of me wants to finish here and go back, curl up in the safety of that bedroom, and never come out again. It's so hard to try and be normal after what I saw happen...

KEERA

I never expected to be working in The Candy Club. Only a couple of months ago, I was sunning it up in Ibiza. Well, I was living it up in Ibiza should I say. My skin hates the sun with a passion and I go the colour of a lobster if I stay in it more than an hour. Honestly, it was a ridiculous idea to go when it was so hot but it was better than staying on the estate. At least we could have a laugh while we worked. That was until my friend, Marley, was attacked and it changed everything. Now, even living back at home with my mum on the estate is better than living in fear that we might get attacked, or raped one night. It was terrible what he did to Marley. I'm glad she said she wanted to come home. I didn't feel safe after that. And I know there were a lot of English lads there too, and they looked after us but, you never know if he might come at us again and next time Marley, or me, might not be so lucky. It shook us both up so much that we only stayed for three more days.

But coming back to the estate was a bit of a downer. And Marley had to go home to her parents in Manchester. I really miss Marley. She's a great friend to have and such a laugh. We text and ring each other and Skype a couple of times a week, but it isn't the same. It's a shame there isn't enough room for us both to stay with

her mum and dad but I know they'll find it hard having Marley home after they thought they'd have some peace and quiet, never mind me coming in and adding to the noise. I mean, when me and Marley get together we laugh so much we are really loud! We can't help it.

I'm counting the days until we have enough money to put down a deposit on a flat. Marley has a job in a bar again - she has her old job back. I might be able to get work there too, once I move down, but for now we need good money and I make good money at The Candy Club. And it's not as if I'd be doing extras all the time.

Yep, you guessed right. The Candy Club is a massage parlour and yes, we do extras. But this isn't a sleazy place. The woman who's in charge, Ramona, is really caring and looks after us girls. We can do what we want to a certain extent, but hey, I'm only nineteen and got a lot of love to give some lucky fella so I don't want to be doing anything I might get a name for. Obviously some of the girls in here do everything, make some real good money, and they do escort work too. But I'm not into all that. I want a man to respect me but I do want to earn enough for our flat. When I started there Ramona said it was up to me what I did as long as I gave the club their cut. She trusts us to tell her what we have been up to and she gets her fair share. I wasn't sure she'd believe me when I said I wasn't in to full sex. I didn't fancy getting my mouth around anything either, no sirree. So I do hand jobs, that's my limit. I get a good price for each one and I do a great massage. I've managed to get myself a good reputation in a short time. So even the men who don't want extras (yes, there are lots of them, contrary to what you might think) get looked after at The Candy Club.

But for God's sake, please don't tell my mum or either of my brothers that I work here. They would seriously do their nut. They think I work in a club in the city centre

and I want it to stay that way. So for now, keep it secret, yeah. Don't tell a soul.

DEREK

I love my job. There I said it. I know it's a bit unusual living on this estate to want to go to work in the first place but I really do enjoy it. I'm a taxi driver, and yes, I'm one of those annoying ones who talks to you the minute you get in the car at the beginning of your journey until the minute you get out at the other end. But do you know what? I can always guarantee to raise a smile from a passenger, no matter how miserable they are. I've made it part of my job, you see. My chosen mission, if you want to talk *really* deep about it.

Maybe it's to make up for the lack of true friends I have in my life. I've lived on the Mitchell estate for years now, born and bred here, but I can honestly say that I don't have a real friend. I have acquaintances that I meet when I go for a drink at The White Lion or in to town on a night out occasionally. I have lots of neighbours that I get on with, surprisingly seeing as I live on the hell. We often have impromptu barbecues in summer if the weather is good and the odd Christmas knees up when we all pile into someone's house, but other than that, I keep myself to myself. You could say I shelter myself after what happened with my ex-wife but I'm not sure that's really true.

My wife fucked off to Australia, taking my kids with

her. They were five and nine then - they're all grown up now. I've been across to see them twice. It costs a fortune, and I'm not really welcome when I get there, so I keep in touch online. Technology is brilliant nowadays - after half an hour on Skype, I almost feel like I've been in the same room as them.

All this chitter-chatter is a facade I hide behind. It keeps me sane, because men aren't supposed to admit to being lonely, are they? There aren't a lot of opportunities around here to meet decent women. Sure there are the ones who don't go to work, and aren't interested in going to work either, but I don't want a scrounger. I want a woman who'll take care of herself, take pride in earning her keep and, well, love me for what I am. That's not too much to ask, is it?

I'm not ashamed to say that I miss sex either. There's only so much I want to do for myself, if you catch my drift. So I started going to this massage parlour in town. I know what you're thinking - extras, prostitutes, good time women. But, stop right there. The Candy Club *is* a massage parlour. I go to get my back massaged. Sitting down in a car seat all day and night isn't the best of postures and the bottom of my back can be in knots at times. I go to get it massaged once a week. I've found one particular girl that works her magic on me with her hands. She's name Keera and she's nineteen, the same age as my daughter over in Australia. I like that she's younger than me as there's no way I'd want to take things further. And besides, I'm not in to young women. I'm in my forties so want to find someone my own age, really.

Still, I might pluck up the courage to ask for extras soon though...

SAM

Everyone hates me. I know I'm a shit but I don't give a shit either, ha. You see, there's a fine line between being a bastard to get your own way all the time or just being a downright bully. I like to think of myself as both.

I won't let anyone walk over me. I get by doing what I can without getting caught. I've just moved in with my brother, Mike, after his woman left him. He's a piss head but we get on okay and it beats living at home with Mum and Keera. They do my head in. Mum's always having a go at me because I'm constantly in trouble and Keera is my baby sister and has stuff everywhere. It was great when she was in Ibiza but when she came back, the house was like a tip again with clothes and make-up and shoes. She sleeps in the box room but had to store a lot of her things in my room so would come barging in whenever she pleased. I might have been up to God knows what but she never knocked. And when I had a go at her, Mum would always tell me to behave, never her. She's the golden girl.

Mum's not too bad as mums go, though. She works at Shop&Save so when I'm short of fags or booze I can often get a sub. I lift bottles from the shelves or out the back when she isn't looking either, or when her supervisor isn't there.

So, what do I do for a living? Oh, you know a bit of this, a bit of that; a bit of something, lot of nothing. I get paid dole money – or whatever it's called now, it changes every week – and then I earn a bit on the side. I'll do this as long as it is worth my while. Who knows what the future might bring? That's the only thing we can't guarantee in this life.

Who know what's written in the stars for any of us?

MEGAN

People think it's easy to hide behind the make-up, but sometimes I don't want to wear it. I want to be accepted for what I am rather than have everyone staring at me. It's a constant reminder that it's there. Whether the make-up is there or not, I see it every time I look into the mirror. When I get up in the morning, it's there making me feel like a freak. Once I have my make-up on, it's there making me looking like a girl who can't put it on properly. It looks like I have literally layered foundation on with a trowel. I can see people staring more then. I just can't win.

It's affected me all my life. Being born with something that sets you out from the crowd is horrible. People say it defines me and I should accept it, but they don't have to live with it. When I was younger and couldn't cover it up, children at school were cruel. I had a few friends but I tended to keep myself to myself. I always wished I hadn't been an only child. I wish I'd had a brother or a sister. Oh, I know they would have taken the piss too, when we argued, I suppose. But I bet they would have stuck up for me, maybe even made me realise that what I have isn't so bad. Mum used to do that all the time. She used to say that I was special when I was younger, but I'm nineteen now, not that little child she can fool. I'm in the grown-

up world, where looks are far more important, and first impressions really do count.

Which is why I love my job. After leaving school, I knew I didn't want to go to college. I didn't want to be with the same people day after day. So I got a job working at the local hospital. I'm a cleaner there. My mum doesn't like that I wasted my education – really, does she think I got an education going to a school on The Mitchell Estate? I might be clever enough but I don't have the model looks that are needed to get on around here. I don't mean that women use their bodies just to get by. I mean that in certain professions, it's looks that count. Working on reception, behind a bar, waiting on tables. No one wants to see my ugly mug. They want to see a beautiful face. I'll never have that. I'd have to be hidden away, washing pots and pans out the back. No one wants to see the ugly girl.

I remember reading the Ugly Duckling story when I was younger. Mum convinced me that I would grow up into a beautiful swan one day. She lied to me. My scars are so deep that there's nothing that can be done to remove them. If I had treatment, it would come back. And lately, it's started to affect my eyes too.

Secretly, I envy the girls who can let their skin be on show. Wear their scar as a badge of honour, so to speak. Me, some mornings, I would gladly cut off my skin. When I was younger I used to try and scratch it off, but all that did was make it bleed, or make it redder than it is.

Boyfriends are an issue too. I was going out with Steve for six months before I let him see my scars. We were sixteen and had only had sex a few times, but we were coming up to the time when we started to get serious. I could feel it. Maybe it was my first time in love – how would I know? I don't have anything else to compare it to. But he saw a photo of me when I was younger and

asked to see my face without make-up. I said no, but he seemed to have a fascination with it. He kept on and on and on until I eventually gave in and showed it to him.

I will never forget the look of horror on his face. I am going out with a freak: I could see it in his eyes. We lasted a week tops after that. He became cold, distant, letting me think it was something else. But it was obvious to me that he couldn't accept me for what I am. It hurt so much. After that I shut myself away.

You know how much courage it takes for me to show myself to anyone - I mean, *anyone*? I am ugly and there's nothing I can do about it now. Except wait to see if medicine in years to come gives me a cure. I do hope so. I'd like to have laser surgery when I have enough money for it. My doctor won't put me forward for it. He says even if I had it, it wouldn't improve that much. It's very painful, so I'm told. I'm always watching people talking about it on Youtube. I'd never be brave enough to put up a video of my face, for everyone to see. I'd rather die - no, really, I would. I hate it. I hate it. I hate it.

So don't talk to me about definition. I *don't* let it define me - it just does define me. It defines me as a freak, someone to stare at.

I just want to be normal. Is that too much to ask?

MARY

When people get to my age - IF people get to my age - most of them can look back on their lives. Some will have fond memories: others won't have so many. But they'll still be able to reminisce. Me, I can remember years ago too, but I get confused about yesterday. Sometimes I can't even recall what I did an hour ago. Did I take my tablets? Did I eat a meal? Did I see my daughter or my granddaughter. Did they visit today at all?

Since Frank died, it's got worse. Frank did so much for me. He cared for me so that no one would know there was anything wrong. He'd noticed for years that I was losing my memory, that I was becoming scatty and forgetful. He used to laugh and joke about it but in the end, it got to a point where we both had to admit defeat and go and see the doctor.

Dementia. What a horrible thing to have. You see, some days I am as lucid as the next person, happy, smiley, having a laugh. But then I just turn and I get confused and become angry. I lash out and hit people. I can't cope with the frustration. Why don't they know what I want? Why can't I remember who they are? Do they have to do everything for me now? Where is Frank?

Frank died about five years ago, I think. I can't remember him much from his older years. I can see

photographs of him and it doesn't register with me anymore. But show me a photo of our wedding day and I can remember it as if it were yesterday. I pray to God that I don't ever lose that memory too.

Living on the Mitchell Estate has changed over the years. When we first moved in here, everyone kept their houses immaculate. Back then, we were all grateful for what we had. We didn't expect handouts from the government. We got off our backsides and we went to work. But after a few years, and a few governments, the estate started to change. People didn't take pride anymore. Families went out of work, unemployment was rife and so started the downward spiral. Living in rented accommodation on an estate as big as the Mitchell was seen as scornful to some, but we made it the best we could.

Having a carer come in to me is okay but so degrading. I know Donna does as much as she can, but I don't want to move in with her and be a burden.

It's a very bizarre thing, this thing called life, isn't it? You're young, you grow up, you start a family, you look after them, watch them grow up, start a family and then you get too frail, too ill to enjoy watching them grow up. In some ways, it's so cruel. But it's just life, I suppose. We lived in Christopher Avenue until Frank died. Frank worked down the mines for years until he retired. That's what took him away from me - emphysema, from all that coal dust, I reckon. But he didn't complain about it. Frank wasn't a complainer. I was moved into this bungalow. And that's when I began to die inside.

Well, where did that memory come from? I haven't thought of that in years. I'll most probably forget it again in a day or two. Just like I can't remember why I have all these bruises over my arms...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ever since I can remember, I've been a meddler of words. Born and raised in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, I used the city as a backdrop for my first novel, **TAUNTING THE DEAD**, and it went on to be a Kindle #1 bestseller. I couldn't believe my eyes when it became one of the top 10 kindle KDP UK bestselling books of 2012 and has now sold in excess of 100,000 copies. Because of this, I am now making it into a series with two books due out next year.

My writing has come under a few different headings - grit-lit, sexy crime, erotic crime thriller, whydunnit, police procedural, emotional thriller to name a few. I like writing about fear and emotion – the cause and effect of crime. I also like to add a mixture of topics to each book. Working as a housing officer for eight years gave me the background to create a fictional estate with good and bad characters, and they are all perfect for murder and mayhem.

You can find out more at www.melsherratt.co.uk on twitter as @writermels and on Facebook.

