

# The Courgette House

Stephen Puleston

'I've never begged for mercy and never will.'

Frankie Long tipped a water bottle to his lips and swallowed hard. He brushed away the perspiration gathering on his forehead as three pairs of eyes stared at him, waiting. He shifted his position on a small wooden box, trying to make himself comfortable

By his side Mickey French stifled a yawn tugging at his jaw; he'd heard it all before. Terry Welsh and Stan Haddock exchanged nervous glances and in the few days since starting in the courgette house had learned never to interrupt Frankie.

'The trouble with the criminal justice system is that the true criminals never get their just deserts,' Frankie continued.

'Yes, of course, Boss,' Mickey said.

Welsh and Haddock sipped on their water bottles.

They sat listening to Frankie's justification for the assault that led to his conviction, agreeing when appropriate and occasionally nodding encouragement. Behind them boxes full of courgettes were piled on trolleys along the concrete path that dissected the two acre greenhouse filled with flowering green plants. Some were young with flowers still clinging to the fruit, others over-ripe, the size of marrows.

Then Frankie told them about Locatelli.

'I hate Italians.'

More nodding.

'You're not Italian are you?'

Headshaking.

'He thought he was the Mafia. Moving in on my patch.'

Mickey's voice broke in, 'But you'll show him won't you, Boss?'

'Only a matter of time. And when he begs for mercy. Well...'

Mickey snorted, Welsh and Haddock grunted an encouraging response.

Then they heard footsteps approaching and two prison officers appeared in the doorway.

'Busy I see lads,' the taller said.

The shorter officer, with no neck and hands like shovels, looked at Frankie. 'Probation wants to see you.'

Frankie nodded and retrieving his prison-issue striped shirt headed towards the main administration block. He was pleased to be leaving the stifling heat of the courgette house and for a break from the monotony of the prison regime. The screws strode out in front until they reached the administration wing and left Frankie pushing open the double-doors.

A prisoner mopping the floors nodded an acknowledgment of respect to Frankie as he made his way through the corridors. He reached a door that had a narrow metal sign with the name of the duty officer in plastic letters. There was a muffled response when he knocked and he pushed open the door. The atmosphere was stifling and the air second-hand – he wondered how anyone could work in there. The probation officer was a short woman with a severe haircut and a silver nose ring. A small fan that sat alongside the telephone on her desk turned intermittently sending a weak blast of air that moved a couple of hairs hanging over her ears.

'Prisoner Long, sit down.'

She was formal, no first names, no eye contact. A green coloured folder was open on her desk, a pile of buff and red folders piled untidily in a

corner. Frankie had sat in the same seat a dozen times when she'd been preparing her report for the parole board and he'd barely given a second thought to the platitudes that had fallen from his lips.

'I've got the parole board's decision.'

Frankie wasn't expecting the decision for another week. He clasped the fingers of both hands into a fist and felt his lips drying.

'Good news,' she lifted her eyes.

Slowly, he unclasped his fists and smiled at her.

Outside he stood in the summer sunshine. The sky was cloudless and a brilliant blue colour. He could smell the cut grass and the flowers in the borders. He was going to be free of this place. He was going to be able to walk into his home and kiss his wife and hug his grand children.

The news travelled quickly. Screws nodded at him and their eyes told him they knew. Frankie tried a smile when one told him not to come back. He walked round the open prison with more confidence, more of a jaunt. After lock-up he lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling.

Thinking.

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Within an hour of Frankie Long opening his fists and smiling at the probation officer a fax landed on the desk of Detective Inspector Jamie McPherson. He

read it twice, made three telephone calls, sat back in his chair before deciding that he had to have a cigarette.

He walked through the musty corridors of the police station turning over in his mind the snippets from informants. The cash and carry robbery was still unsolved and establishing Locatelli's guilt had been impossible, but the whispers told him Frankie had been double crossed. McPherson stood outside a rear door and took a cigarette from the crumpled packet in his jacket. He dragged long and hard, letting the smoke fill his lungs. It had been three years ago since he had sat in court and watched Frankie's face as the judge sentenced him – not a flicker of remorse, no emotion, just that look of a professional facing the consequences.

McPherson couldn't shake off the feeling gnawing at his mind that Frankie's reputation meant a score had to be settled.

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On the morning of his release Frankie ignored the apprehension that crept into his mind. Mickey French gave him a man hug as he left the billet that had been his home and Frankie promised to keep in touch.

The formalities of checking belongings, signing declarations and counting the discharge grant dragged. He got up and walked round the room to curb his irritation at the banter from the young prisoners, excited at the prospect of release. Once the processing was over Frankie stepped out into the summer sunshine, the warmth massaging his face. He closed his eyes

and tilted his head skywards. Fresh air and sunshine tasted different for a free man.

‘Frankieeee...’ the voice got louder and he saw Madge her arms in the air running towards him.

Peter stood behind her, a narrow smile of embarrassment on his face.

‘Dad,’ he nodded.

Frankie curled his hand round Madge’s waist and squeezed. The flesh was soft but more expansive than he remembered. He squeezed her hand as they walked to the car. On the journey home the traffic seemed heavier and faster than he remembered. They stopped at a services and Frankie stared at the choice of food available until a girl behind the counter with a sullen stare said, ‘Well do you want anything?’

He tried to hide the easiness in his mind – it had been three years since he’d been a free man. He looked her in the eye and ordered. She spooned the food into a plate and he sat down. Watching people walking through the services he noticed women with prams, an elderly couple with grandchildren tugging at their arms and a line of foreign tourists buying gifts at a checkout. Unlike the last three years nobody paid him any attention.

He smiled to himself – he was free once more.

Three hours after his release Frankie put a can of lager down on the cabinet by the side of the bed and gazed over at Madge.

‘Frankie, it’s been so long,’ there was a nervous tone to her voice.

He looked over at her as she unfastened her trousers and wiggling her hips let the material fall to the floor. Had he been twenty years younger he would have torn her clothes off before they'd closed the front door.

'I know I've put on weight,' she said.

He stepped towards her and undid her bra.

'Madge, you're still my babe.'

Afterwards, he lay in the warmth of the bed and pulled Madge close drawing his hand through her hair. Her skin felt smooth and warm against his body and her breath tickled the hairs on his chest.

'Frankie, we need to get ready,' Madge said eventually slipping out of bed. After a shower, he unwrapped a new shirt and pulled on a pair of grey trousers. He rummaged through a drawer, finding a gold necklace, a gift from Peter's wife Sophie, and hung it round his neck; on his wrist sat a gold band, a gift from Madge and on each hand he had gold rings – gifts from the grandchildren. He looked at himself in the mirror. Three years in various prisons and he'd lost two stone in weight, three inches around the waist and, whenever he looked in the mirror, there were too many grey hairs for comfort.

'I look like a Christmas turkey.'

'What's wrong Frankie?' Madge said sitting by her dressing table, carefully plucking her eyebrows and turning her face to either side as if convincing herself the double chin wasn't showing. 'You always liked the gifts from the family.'

He let his hands fall to his side and dismissed his worries as the embers of post-release blues.

The Crippled Bear had a selection of eight cask conditioned ales, ten lagers, including a cloudy wheat variety from Belgium, and so many soft drinks Frankie's mind fizzed from the choices. He had known Arfon forever. It felt like a hundred years. Arfon had a thin narrow frame with legs like a butcher's dog but a stomach that hung out over the waistband of his trousers held up by a belt tightened at a rakish angle round his body. He smiled at Frankie exposing a row of teeth tarnished yellow by years of nicotine. He coughed and a deep crackling sound, like dry wood on a roaring fire, burst out of his mouth.

'Good to see you, Frankie.'

He grasped Frankie's hand.

'And you.'

'You all right?' he stepped backward and looked at Frankie. 'There's nothing fucking left of you. All skin and bones.'

Frankie thumped him on the arm.

'Get me a drink.'

Frankie sipped from his favourite ale and let the warm bitter sensation grip his throat. Arfon stood by his side and grabbed his shoulder.

'So what are your plans?'

Frankie raised an eyebrow.

'Retire that's what you should do. Dig up the drug money and retire. You should keep out of trouble.'

Frankie didn't respond and from the door he heard a scream and turning saw two of his three grandchildren. Becky and Rachel ran up, clutched his legs, and then inspected his jewellery, carefully turning them in their small



fingers. Peter and Sophie followed their daughters. Sophie leaned over, her kisses brushed his cheeks.

‘Nice to see you again. How are you?’

‘Great, Love.’

Danny was hiding behind his father’s legs staring at the floor.

‘Danny,’ Frankie began ruffling his grandson’s hair.

The steak was medium rare and as the flavour of the meat assaulted Frankie’s taste buds, accustomed to prison food, unseasoned and cooked to death, he became uncharacteristically silent. He looked up and caught the glances of his family as he finished the food before the others had barely started. He piled more chips onto his plate and beamed at Madge.

In the taxi home Frankie grabbed Madge as though he were a teenager again only to find her pushing him away.

‘Behave,’ she said.

Later, at home Madge lay in his arms beneath the sheets, the bedroom air cool against their faces.

‘It’s good to have you back,’ Madge said.

She reached an arm across his shoulder.

‘It’s good to be home. Enjoyed tonight.’

‘You were enjoying that food.’

Frankie thought about the thin red streak of blood on his plate.

‘Nothing like a good steak.’

‘I do love you, Frankie,’ she pressed her arms tight around his body.

‘Love you too.’

'You won't get it any more trouble will you?'

'What at my age? Don't want to die in prison.'

Two of the letters on the neon sign were broken and faded red patches on the door and the evidence of touch-up painting completed the tired appearance of the snooker club.

Frankie pulled open the door and took the stairs two at a time, reminding himself he had to maintain the training regime he adopted in prison. Florescent tubes covered the room in a pale glow, the smell of spilled beer and stale clothes filled the air. A dozen snooker tables all covered with black plastic sheets lined the room. He heard the tinkling of stacking glasses and bottles crashing against each other and turned towards the bar. A face appeared and two clear blue eyes looked over at Frankie, unmoved by his presence, as though he were expected.

'He's in the office,' the man said.

Frankie nodded and walked over to the far end of the room, noticing the man's unwavering stare.

Peter got up from the leather bound chair behind the mahogany reproduction desk.

'Alright, Dad.'

'What's wrong with the guy cleaning the bar?'

'Simple. He understands fuck all.'

'Good.'

Frankie curled his lips into a smile that said it's-good-to-be-back. He sat in the chair folding his arms behind his head, lifting his feet and rested them on the edge of the desk as he leaned back in the chair. Against one wall was a display cupboard with a selection of spirits. A small window cast a dull shadow across a leather Chesterfield whose arms needed attention.

'Locatelli,' Frankie let the name hang in the air like an aged aunt's fart at a birthday party.

Peter cleared his throat.

'Don't you think it's time to forget about him?'

'You must be joking.'

'But you want to move on. For Mum's sake.'

'He's moved to Altrincham,' Peter said, a resigned tone to his voice. 'One of those gated communities.'

Frankie jerked his feet off the desk. Peter continued.

'I heard he got shit-scared when you got parole. Hasn't been out. Takeaway pizzas left by the gate. CCTV cameras installed.'

'What a shame,' Frankie snorted. 'We need to make plans.'

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Frankie's Mercedes passed the Bell and Anchor that stood on the corner of Mack Street and then swept down over the cobbles and occasional tarmac until it stopped by the lock-up underneath the railway arch. The noise of a commuter train rattling over the points above, filled the street. He powered

down the window and sat back enjoying freedom, the smell of decaying rubbish and feline urine, being able to drive around Manchester, see his grandchildren, drinking with Arfon, and feeling the warmth of Madge by his side in the morning.

And, see to Locatelli.

It had been two long, hot summers in the courgette house since the deal with Paolo Locatelli had gone sour. Not a single day had passed without Frankie waking to the contemplation of Locatelli's fate. A warm damp smell hit his nostrils and he remembered the launderette on the next street. As he glanced at his watch he saw his son's car turning into the street. Frankie was already outside the Mercedes when Peter drew up, stepped out and bleeped his car.

'You sure about this?' Peter said.

'Course.'

'If the cops find out...'

'They won't.'

Frankie heaved open the door of the lock-up, making enough space for them both to enter. The light from the torch in his left hand darted over the empty walls until it found the light switch.

'Wonderful,' Frankie said as the bulb flickered into life

There was a table with boxes of car parts and some electronic switches. In a corner, at the far end, was a Belfast sink under a tap on a pipe jutting out of the wall.

'Just like I remember.'

'What did you do...?' Peter's question trailed.

'When I started out I made a few bob from this place.'

Frankie dragged a single wooden chair into the middle and placed it underneath the light.

'Perfect.'

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Frankie never liked Altrincham, too new-money for him, not enough bling and too many beauty parlours and hair stylists promising miraculous transformations. He drove past the entrance to The Beeches and slowed as he watched the gates open and a Porsche 911 slip out. He saw the first house behind the closing gate with its flickering alarm and manicured garden.

He imagined Locatelli enjoying fresh pasta and sipping a fine Chianti, all paid for with his money. He drew the car into the curb and watched the gate closing. He wrapped his fingers over the steering wheel, a light rain fell and the blades swished automatically, clearing the windscreen. The mobile rang and he saw Peter's number on the screen.

'Dad, where are you?'

'Altrincham.'

'You're not...'

'Yeah. Lovely isn't it?'

Their conversation was stilted, Peter tried persuasion and then an appeal to common sense. Frankie stared out of the windscreen as he listened to his son before interrupting him.

'I've had a fucking brainwave.'

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MacPherson was having a bad day, indeed a bad week and it was shaping up to be a bad month. There were deep bags under his eyes that had turned a dirty grey colour that his latest girlfriend kept complaining about and Frankie was proving to be a distraction from all the other urgent cases he had on his desk. Last night it had been after midnight when he finished reading the latest surveillance reports and when he finally reached his bed, sleep had eluded him until the early hours. Now, he was wondering how much overtime the superintendent would allow without any results. Glancing at his watch he guessed that he would know soon enough, with a meeting scheduled for later that afternoon. Once he'd read the transcripts of the telephone calls Frankie had made from inside HMP Bleadon, MacPherson knew that things were going to get messy once he was released. Frankie wasn't the forgiving type. Frankie took revenge, quickly. It was only a matter of time.

He knew that the resources of the police service didn't extend to continuous surveillance of a recently released prisoner. He tried re-reading the reports, but he had read them so often the words were dissolving into each other, a meaningless litany of driving and domestic arrangements. Frustration filled his mind, as he realised how little he knew of Frankie's activities since his release.

He dragged on his jacket and walked through to the conference room. He felt the crumpled remains of the cigarettes in his pocket and glancing at his watch realised he didn't have time for a smoke before the meeting.

Superintendent Baker was sitting by the table turning a silver fountain pen in his hand. He waved for MacPherson to sit down.

‘Not much here.’

‘I know, Sir, but...’

‘Don’t tell me. It’s a gut feeling.’

‘Sir. He’s going to go after Locatelli.’

‘I’m not having police resources protecting Locatelli on the basis of your gut feeling. Locatelli’s a known criminal.’

‘But, Sir.’

After twenty minutes of persuasion that MacPherson considered to be the fundamentals of sound policing, they’d agreed on a strategy. Back in his office MacPherson actioned the plan and flicked through the reports about Frankie, trying to guess where and how.

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The fumes from the transit filled the lock-up until Peter killed the engine and jumped out. Frankie was already standing by the back door of the van. He yanked open the doors and stared inside. Bungee cords, odd pieces of rope and lengths of twine hung from the wooden struts along the inside. In one corner, huddled into the foetal position was Paolo Locatelli, his wrists tightly bound, duct tape covering his mouth.

Frankie clicked on the torch, held spear-like, in his right hand and lit up Locatelli’s face – eyes wide, pupils small.

‘Paolo, my old mate,’ Frankie said.

Peter jumped into the van and dragged Locatelli until he fell out of the rear into a heap, a faint cloud of dust rising as he hit the floor.

‘Welcome to my humble abode,’ Frankie said.

Locatelli fumbled on the ground.

Frankie drew back his right foot and landed the first kick to Locatelli’s rib cage. The pain flashed across his face, the duct tape stretched across his mouth muffling the groans of pain. Locatelli’s writhing body wriggled on the floor unable to judge when the next blow would come.

And it came soon enough.

Frankie aimed the point of his brogues at Locatelli’s right thigh and swung the blow. Tears drizzled down Locatelli’s cheeks cascading over the duct tape and onto his chin. Peter winced as he heard the cracks of breaking ribs as Frankie landed two more blows.

Frankie dragged Locatelli across the floor before pulling Locatelli upright and pushing him onto the hard wooden chair. Frankie undid Locatelli’s hands and rebound them behind the chair. Frankie undid Locatelli’s hands and rebound them behind the chair.

‘Paolo,’ Frankie began. ‘Look what you’ve done to my brogues.’ He pointed at the scuff marks.

Frankie took a step back.

‘We’ve got some unfinished business,’ Frankie said, his tone halfway between let’s-be-friends and I’m-going-to-kick-the-shit-out-of-you. He turned his back and walked over to the bench, returning with a small wooden tray.

‘Do you know what these are?’

Locatelli nodded.



'Of course you do,' Frankie snorted. 'You're Italian. That's all you eat. Fucking courgettes.'

Locatelli moved his right buttock but Frankie clenched his fist and gave him a glancing blow over one eye. Frankie lowered his head until he could smell Locatelli's expensive aftershave.

'Do you know how many different sorts of courgettes there are?'

Locatelli whimpered.

'Of course you fucking do. You're Italian.'

Locatelli rolled his eyes.

Frankie lent down and rummaged through the box until he found a small courgette with a large yellow flower perched on one end. With one quick movement he pulled off the duct tape. Locatelli squealed and grabbed lungfuls of breath. Frankie forced his mouth open and stuffed the courgette inside, the flower dangling limply. He bent down to Locatelli's ear.

'If you bite that courgette, you're a dead man.'

Locatelli swallowed hard but his eyes told Frankie he understood.

'See these,' Frankie said, holding up both hands. 'They've picked more courgettes than you eat in a year. For two summers I've picked courgettes and all the time I was thinking of you.'

Locatelli gave out a laugh that came out like a grunt.

'Everyday my hands would be covered in this rash from the leaves that drove me mad. Off. My. Fucking. Head.'

The courgette wobbled slightly.

‘And then, when I’d finished my toil in the courgette house, we’d have courgettes for tea. Courgette salad, courgettes in the curry, in the stews, courgettes every fucking meal.’

Frankie grabbed one of the larger courgettes from the box by his feet and began tapping Locatelli on the head.

‘And I thought of you.’

The flower on the courgette in Locatelli’s mouth fell off and Frankie raised an eyebrow. Locatelli blinked furiously. Frankie circled him holding the large courgette in his right hand.

‘Do you know where this would fit?’ he turned to face Locatelli and held the courgette to his face.

‘Right up your jacksie.’

Frankie laughed but Locatelli didn’t see the joke.

‘But then I thought it would be a waste of a decent courgette.’

Frankie raised it high above his shoulder and brought it down in one smooth blow onto Locatelli’s head. The courgette split apart and bits careered over the dirt as Locatelli fell to the floor, dragging the chair with him. He bit into the courgette and spat out the portion in his mouth.

‘Frankie. No. I can explain.’

‘You’re not going to beg for mercy are you?’

‘Frankie , please listen...’

Within seconds blood was streaming from Locatelli’s nose and cuts above his eyes. When Frankie stopped, the swelling was beginning to close both of Locatelli’s eyes. He stopped kicking Locatelli and pulled the chair vertical.

‘Paolo, stay awake. I still need you to tell me where my money is,’  
Frankie was breathless.

Locatelli mumbled a reply.

‘Once you tell me where the money is we’re going to part as friends,  
aren’t we?’

Locatelli was panting for breath between desperate attempts to get  
Frankie to stop. Blood filled his mouth, streaking his gums and teeth. Frankie  
pushed him to the floor and emptying the box of courgettes began kicking  
them towards him.

‘I hate fucking courgettes so much...’

‘I can explain Frankie please.’

‘Time for explanations is over.’

‘I haven’t...’

‘What was that?’

‘Just give me time.’

‘You’ve had three years, twenty one days.’

Frankie stepped into the shadows and picked up a baseball bat. He  
turned it slowly in his hand.

‘Time’s up Paolo,’ he began tapping the bat into the palm of his other  
hand.

He took three strides towards Locatelli, swinging the bat in his hand. As  
he neared Locatelli he saw a movement to his left and turned his head as the  
double doors crashed open and a dozen armed police officers streamed in,  
shouting instructions. He released the bat and it ping-ponged on the floor and  
rolled out of sight.

MacPherson followed the armed response team, his stab jacket a size too small forcing his shirt up around his neck. He stood as two of the officers freed Locatelli, another two cuffed Frankie.

'Frankie Long, you know the drill,' MacPherson said, glancing around the lock-up. 'Kept this place a secret.'

Frankie straightened himself defiantly.

'I'm arresting you on suspicion of the attempted murder of Paolo Locatelli.'

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'They'll never prove attempted murder.'

Frankie stared at the barrister willing him to disagree. The interview room had a small table with a scratched surface and four uncomfortable plastic chairs. A prison officer walked up and down outside peering occasionally through the glass partition. The barrister was clean-shaven, chin smooth, head glistening. The chalk pinstripe was sharp enough to cut cheese and he pulled on the double cuffs of his shirt until exactly the same length protruded from each of the sleeves of his suit.

'Let's look at the evidence,' he said, ignoring Frankie. 'We've got the statement from Mickey French who worked with you in prison. He says you were obsessed with revenge. All you ever talked about.'

'He's a scum-bag.'

'Then we've got Dave Hopkins, from the snooker club. Says the first thing you did on release was to plan your revenge in detail.'

'No jury would believe him. He's simple.'

'But what about the tapes of your conversations from prison. Didn't you realise the conversations were recorded?'

'I never said much.'

The barrister raised an eyebrow. 'I've counted seventy-five references to Locatelli in the last six months of your imprisonment. A few might have been understandable. But seventy-five -- what do you think a jury will make of that Mr Long?'

The barrister clasped one hand over another on top of the papers on the table and dared Frankie to defy him.

'He was a business colleague ...'

'That you beat to a pulp... allegedly...'

Frankie could sense he was losing the barristers' sympathy.

'And do you know how serious a conviction will be. For you and your son. Although I have to say that the prosecution will have grave difficulty succeeding against you and Peter.'

'What does his brief say?'

'We've only had a preliminary discussion so far. However...'

He opened the foolscap notebook on the desk.

'The prosecutor has made a suggestion as to how we might carve up the case.'

Frankie thought about carving up Locatelli and for a moment he was back in the lock up, enjoying every minute, watching the Italian toe-rag with a courgette in his mouth, begging for mercy. The barrister continued.

‘It’s really quite simple. They want a plea from you to the attempted murder and they’ll drop similar charges against Peter.’

Frankie blinked. Then he blinked again and thought about Madge. It meant he was going to die in prison. Years in a Cat A jail, transferred from one prison to another, miles from home and then a Cat B and maybe, if he was lucky a Cat C jail. He’d be an old man before he reached an open jail. He wouldn’t feel her breasts touching his chest, the touch of her hand or the smell of her perfume.

But Peter would be free.

‘What sort of carve up is that?’

‘They’ve got your card marked Mr Long. That’s all I can say. If you don’t accept you run the risk that Peter will go down for life with you.’

‘He had nothing ...’

‘Look,’ the barrister cut across him. ‘If you take a plea you’re entitled to a credit from the judge. It should bring down the minimum tariff.’

‘How much?’

The barrister rolled his eyes and let out a long slow breath.

‘It might make the difference between a tariff of eight years and twelve years.’

‘So I’d be out in eight years.’

‘Subject to parole, of course.’

‘I’ll be drawing my pension.’

Frankie stood up, pushed the chair until it fell on the floor behind him and walked over to the glass partition. He curled his fingers into a fist and

pounded the glass slowly. A prison officer stopped and gave him a quizzical look.

‘We don’t have much time,’ the barrister said.

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Frankie picked at his meal with the plastic fork. The shepherds’ pie was a smearing of black acrid tasting substance covered by something that passed for mashed potatoes, accompanied by boiled potatoes and bread. Back in his cell he laid on his bunk contemplating.

That bastard Mickey French had stitched him up.

And Dave Hopkins was a grass.

Fuck them all.

He heard his name shouted and dragging himself off the bunk stepped into the corridor.

‘Visitor, Frankie.’

Madge was sitting at the far end of the visitor’s hall holding a plastic beaker of water. She stared at the tabletop turning her drink slowly through her fingers. Frankie slipped into the bench across from her and he leant over to kiss her but she turned her head to one side and his lips brushed her cheek.

‘You promised me, Frankie.’

‘Madge. I’ve been stitched up...’

‘ I don’t want to die in prison. That’s what you said...’

‘I know but...’

Madge got up and walked over to the exit without looking back. Frankie took the cup and turned it in his hand. A prison officer appeared by his shoulder.

‘Visit over, Frankie.’

Frankie sat in the cells underneath the Crown Court looking at the graffiti on the walls. Every few minutes the toilet let out an odd gurgle. The ragged woollen blanket heaped in one corner was polka-dotted with stains and by its side was the remains of a microwaved lasagne. The flap on the cell door slid open, a face appeared, and then a loud click as the door opened. A security guard nodded at Frankie. It was a short walk to the narrow staircase leading to the dock. The barrister and solicitor sitting in front of him nodded an acknowledgement. He scanned the courtroom and caught the warm smile of achievement on the face of MacPherson. He squinted at Madge, noticing the puffiness of her eyes, the make-up failing to disguise sleepless nights. Sophie sat by her side.

An electrifying expectation pulsed through the courtroom as the judge entered.

‘Stand-up,’ the judge said. ‘I have heard the eloquent plea on your behalf by learned counsel asking me to exercise as much leniency as possible. I have carefully considered all the guidelines and especially your guilty plea which, I should say, is entirely appropriate.’

‘However, given the aggravating features of your case, namely the cold blooded revenge-style attempt to take the life of an innocent man, I am



convinced that had it not been for the work of the police you would have murdered Mr Locatelli.'

Frankie's left leg began to twitch nervously; he looked over and saw the narrow smile on Locatelli's face.

'In these circumstances the only sentence I can pass is life imprisonment. I set a tariff of a minimum of twelve years.'

Frankie heard Madge gasp.

He felt the guards grip his wrists and looking down saw the handcuffs.

'Take him down.'