

## Foreword

“I first met Steve Wraith when I was on home leave and attended Ronnie Kray’s funeral in 1995. We chatted briefly and I was impressed at the way he conducted himself on the day as Charlie Kray’s minder. We met again on my release and with my Godson Christian Simpson, Steve became a regular face at the Monday Club in London with the likes of me, Joey Pyle Snr and Johnny Nash in the nineties. What I like about Steve is that he has never pretended to be a gangster. He's never wanted to be a gangster, well maybe in the movies. I have watched him work his way through life working in his Post Office, running doors in Newcastle, and finally working his way up the ladder as a Promoter and writer and rediscovering acting like my son Jamie. He’s a grafter and a family man and has been a good friend to me since we met twenty years ago. He's a good man, a family man and I'm always here for him if he needs me.”

Fred Foreman  
July, 2015

## Introduction

I first remember seeing Ron and Reg Kray on the news one day in 1982. I sat watching with my parents Celia and John as the twins were bundled in and out of a prison van for their mother’s funeral. It was one of those things that stick in your mind. For me it has almost the same importance as knowing where you were when JFK was shot.

It was my first sighting of them; I’d never heard of these men before, but my parents certainly had. They were talking about the crowds of people who were there... I mean, if not for the police and handcuffs, you would never know these two men were serving life sentences for murder. I was awestruck. Cuffed to huge officers... *why?* Crowds of well-wishers... *why?* Serving that amount of time? There were so many questions. The

gist of what I was told was that they were gangsters from London, and were locked away when my parents were in their teens. That was enough for me: I needed to find out more.

Not long after this I came across their official biography, *Profession of Violence* by John Pearson – the book was, and still is, awesome. I wrote a school essay about the Kray twins and was given a B+ for it: without having what I'd call a true academic interest in a lot of subjects, this was a minor miracle; another encounter with the twins and this time it went towards passing an exam!

For me the 'real' part of the Krays' story began as a teenager in 1990. This was when I went to see a film described by the *Mail on Sunday* as 'Life at the cutting edge of the sixties'. The film was a biopic called *The Krays*. I went with my best mate at the time Matthew Gregory, paid one pound fifty, and armed with a family pack of Salt 'n' Vinegar crisps and a large bottle of Coke began to reacquaint myself with the brothers grim.

The film seemed to be over in an instant, and as the credits rolled and the music began to fade we found ourselves paying to watch it again. I needed to see it again to believe it. To see Ron and Reg being played on the big screen was something special in itself. How often are biopics made about people who are still alive? Not too often, and it was great to see them up there. The Kemp brothers from Spandau Ballet played the twins convincingly – I don't think there was anyone around who could have done it so well – but although a good film with high production values, certain events had been fabricated, and fact and fiction blended into one. As the credits rolled for the second time I noticed an update: Ronald Kray currently in Broadmoor Hospital; Reginald Kray H.M.P Gartree.

I was hooked right there in that cinema. There had always been a mythology surrounding not just the twins, but all three Kray brothers. The release of this film gave it its second wind, turning it almost into a mania. No one can really pinpoint the fascination. Are they heroes? Are they villains? Anti-heroes? The truth is they are all of that and a whole lot more. They had style, charisma, and had charm. Every lad who watched that film would come out with his different perspective. Somehow their story strikes a chord: it certainly struck a chord with me and I knew I had to do something about it. I'm not saying I came out of the cinema and wanted to *be* a gangster; I just think that for me, like for most lads my age, the whole thing had appeal. I say it was knowing they were still alive that was the key to the whole thing, and then being told where they were at the end was the clincher.

I made my mind up to write to them. That was my perspective on it. The film reignited my interest and I just knew I had at least to try. Of course it sounded crazy, I knew that, but it was a decision I was going to stick by. Then came the questions in my mind – would they write back? Would they have time? Durrrr, Steve! Maybe in just a decade or so! What would my mam and dad think? Who cared! I was going to do it... I was going to write to the Kray twins.

So how do you start writing a letter to someone who (a) does not know who you are? (b) is a convicted murderer and (c) is unlikely to be interested in you and will probably not even bother replying? Well, by writing about yourself of course, and by trying to make yourself sound as interesting as possible. It was kind of like writing a resume – a selling document. In a way I was selling an idea, and I suppose it was my first step into self-publicity. I'd set the ball rolling that day and little did I know the scale of what I'd started. That initial letter propelled me into a completely different world. A world like the film I had just watched, a world which all those other teenage lads could only dream about.

Over the years that followed I became close friends with the three Kray brothers, and was invited by them to join a select circle. During those years I did a lot of growing up and learnt a hell of a lot in such a short space of time. I went from a Kray fan to being a Kray friend and Kray associate. I became one of the few people to visit all three brothers in prison, to be called a close friend, to oversee countless business ventures ranging from the outlandish to the absolutely mental. Imagine being given the chance to walk round inside the pages of your favourite book – to meet the main characters, meet their friends, become part of that book; to have a physical effect on it and change it in some way. By replying to my initial letter that's what Reggie did for me. He handed me the opportunity to become a part of a mythological world that once seemed light years away.

In introducing myself I'd like to start by saying I'm not a gangster. I don't try or pretend to be, never have been and never will be. There are certainly a lot of people I know as friends that you might say are gangsters. I've also met a hundred and one people who you could call 'plastic' gangsters, cartoon gangsters, wannabees, and hangers on... you name it. It's the types who are acting the part that you learn to be wary of. They can damage you and others around you by sheer stupidity. How? Because they in their own eyes they *really are* playing the part in a gangster film. They start to believe the hype, to actually believe that they are untouchable. In the real world they are not De Niro, and in the real world Elliot Ness has been known to turn up and spoil one or two parties, I can tell you!

I'd also like to say that this is not another 'hard man' book. I used to work as a doorman and can handle myself when the situation calls for it, but to talk like that isn't my style, so to act like it would be just as alien.

To write a book has always been an ambition of mine. They say that in all of us there is a book waiting to be written: well, this is mine. There have been dozens of books written about the Krays: re-hashed, repackaged and redesigned; updated, third edition, repriced and... repetitive. All written for the same reason – to cash in on the name Kray, and this book is no different.

*Kray!* You know there's something about the name, but you just can't put your finger on it. Much the same could be said about the three brothers. Ron, Reg or Charlie whenever I met them were always immaculately dressed, like any high flying businessmen from any city, yet you knew something was unusual; they were different to me or you, and they knew it.

I have talked about a hypothetical 'journey' already. I'd say that this book is all about journeys, mine and theirs: different paths that crossed and then parted; paths that ran the same course for a bit, though I had the power to change the direction of mine.

This book gives you an insight into my life within the inner circle of the Krays' friends and family. It gives you an insight into how they still made things tick from behind prison walls. In fact, it's true to say that their business only began to thrive once they were locked up. I know because I was a part of it. I can tell you what they were really like, as a firm as well as individuals. This is all about how I became their Geordie Connection.

I'd like to think Ron, Reg and Charlie would look at this book and say I did them proud, but I know that deep down all they would want is their cut, and maybe that says it all. To me it's not about hero worship, it's about the truth.

# Chapter One

## East End Development

The Krays are notorious, and most people will know that the twins were locked up in prison in the sixties for murdering two people. They have been studied in the past, and will no doubt be the subject of studies in the future, but before covering my involvement with them it is worth considering their background and upbringing. They were born in a time when this country was beginning to go through a huge transition, socially and economically. Changes were taking place while they were growing up, and many of the changes that took place were due to the Krays.

The East End of London conjures up many different images. It has changed a great deal even since the Krays' era, and to go back just over a hundred years would be to find a very different place altogether – the dark and dingy city of the early nineteenth century. East London became industrialised at around this time and a working class population was soon established as more and more people came to live there and start families. The area saw a huge growth in size and population. Conditions were poor and soon became overcrowded. The narrow streets were filthy, neglected and barely even lit at night. Prostitutes, brothels, drunkenness, robbery and assault – it's hard to imagine what the place would have been like unless you were there. There were slaughterhouses, rendering plants, glue factories, engineering works, loads of breweries – the lot. With all this being in the East of London the westerly winds would carry the smell away from the affluent West End. And I mean smell! Leather was another growth industry, so there were many tanning yards in the area. To darken the leather hide 'pure' was used. The 'charvers' (wasters, scallies, losers, etc.) of their day would procure the 'pure' of a night, which basically means they would supply the leather workers with dog shit found on the street. Now you're starting to get the picture: dog shit on the streets and pollution in the air.

East London was also the stomping (or stabbing) ground of the first world-famous serial killer Jack the Ripper. In 1888 between Friday 31st August and Friday 9th November he murdered and mutilated five women so savagely as to cause terror throughout the city. All the victims were prostitutes in or near Whitechapel, and the crimes became known as the Whitechapel Murders. Once the newspapers picked up on the second and third victims Jack the Ripper was born, but he was no average serial killer. So called because of the way he would rip out the organs of his victims, he was never caught and has been the subject of much speculation and countless film adaptations, most recently *From Hell* by the Hughes Brothers.

North of Whitechapel is Hoxton, or Shoreditch as it is now known. This is where another famous East End name would emerge. That name is Kray. Charles James Kray, the twins' older brother, was born in 1927 at the first family home in Gorusch Street, Hackney. Ronald and Reginald Kray were born on the 24th October 1933 in Stene Street. They were identical twins, born within an hour of each other – Reginald first, then Ronald – at around eight that night. Already with one special boy, proud parents Violet and Charles Kray had unknowingly given birth to three sons who would soon add the name 'Kray' to the British crime Hall of Fame. They went on to become Britain's most notorious gangsters, establishing the East End's infamous reputation for crime and violence.

It's hard to pinpoint when the term 'gangster' as we know it came into being. The whole gangster 'image', as in the look, was borrowed from old American films and from infamous characters such as Al Capone. In London gangsters ran protection rackets down at horseracing tracks as far back as the 1930s, covered brilliantly in Graham Greene's novel *Brighton Rock*. It was in the racing game that a lot of the names you now hear about stuck out – this was where the 'retired' gangsters cut their teeth. These people were not fictional; they were real life characters who had started their careers by working for the racketeers in one way or another. Bookmakers were offered services they had no need for, but would be persuaded that they did need the service after all. It was usually something like having someone come around and clean the chalkboards, but those who would not comply with demands would be made an example of, and the youngsters saw from an early age that crime could pay. Most would enter into this long before their teens and grow up into a world of crime. Other than protection rackets, there were safe crackers and smash 'n' grabbers, pickpockets, jump uppers, (robbers who would target delivery wagons), conmen, and burglars. Most of this amounted to not much more than petty thievery. A good thief could make a good living; a bad thief could go to prison for further education and training.

In those days there wasn't really any security. Why should there have been? Society was not prepared for dishonesty, but for those who knew all about dishonesty it was open season. You hear people saying 'the good old days' were safe, but they weren't really that safe at all. It's been regularly said that 'you could go out and leave your door open' – yes, that's true, but it's only because there was never anything worth stealing. Go out and leave your front door open these days and anyone can make off with three televisions, video recorders, DVD players, computer, music centre and jewellery: in 'the good old days' you could clear an entire house out for a few pence. The criminal is not a new phenomenon.

Pre-war underworld activities were not a patch on what was going on in America, but just as in the Americanisation of many other cultures, the British criminal was soon to catch on. Instead of 'cracking' a safe with tools, thieves were now learning to (assume Michael Caine accent here) blow the bloody doors off. That's when the big money started to come in. Other changes taking place were in the police approach to solving these crimes, and now the media was playing a big part with TV and newspaper coverage. Still at this time guns were unheard of: they were available, but there were still certain rules to adhere to; the police didn't carry guns, so criminals didn't either – something that would change in the not too distant future. Though there weren't that many professional criminals, they stuck together in the same drinking dens and were close-knit, just like all the other communities of the East End.

Mentally, Ronnie and Reg were inseparable: they had a bond where if one was happy the other one would feel it; suffering corresponded too. They even shared the same name. If one was around, it was assumed that the other would not be too far away, so they took on the name 'twins', becoming a single entity. They would share *everything* – even illness. They both caught diphtheria and measles at an early stage in their lives, and in these pre-vaccine times children were of course in the highest risk group. This meant that they had to be separated for the first time and in different hospitals. Reg recovered quickly, but Ronnie almost died of the infection. Ronnie was kept in hospital long after Reg was discharged, but Violet brought him home against the wishes of the doctors saying he needed only her and Reg to put him back on track.

The Kray family moved to Vallance Road in Bethnal Green just before the outbreak of World War Two. They lived at number 178, which had the Liverpool Street Line running over the top of the backyard – perfect for a sleepless night. Violet wanted to be

closer to her own parents; when she'd married at seventeen, she was more or less ostracised by her family. The birth of Charlie eased the tension a bit and put them back on speaking terms, but the birth of the twins was the clincher. Vallance Road was quite typical of its time – an overcrowded slum. The houses had no bathrooms and toilets were always outside in the back yard. There were gambling dens, seedy pubs, billiard halls and brothels dotted all over the area, which was known for drinking and a love of boxing, as well as for poor housing conditions and unemployment.

After the twins had fully recovered Ronnie seemed slower and more socially reserved than Reggie, finding it harder to get on with other people. He would spend time on his own or with the family's pet Alsatian, roaming around the bomb sites of Bethnal Green. For Violet their illness was to play an important part in their early years because she began to notice differences between them for the first time. In the family home Ronnie increasingly competed for his mother's attention. He felt disadvantaged in comparison to Reg, seeming physically bigger and clumsier. They would often fight each other, but would never allow a third party to come between them – squabbling but always sticking together. In Bethnal Green being identical twins gave them the edge over the other little tough kids. It unnerved them and it was something that Ronnie and Reg used to their advantage. They became known as the *Terrible Twins* and were always fighting with their cousin Billy against others, against gangs, but nearly always against older boys, and they were fast learning how to handle themselves. When the war broke out, school was closed until they were eight years old, so this war-torn and increasingly derelict world provided the backdrop to their countless fights and vendettas with other kids. It was the perfect setting. Always after a fight they would appear at home cleaned up as if nothing had happened and so as far as their mother knew, nothing had. They were experts at keeping this side of their lives from Violet, but it was the side of them their father was all too familiar with – he was streetwise and knew exactly what they were getting up to. The war and no school meant they could fight in their own wars. That was their education.

Without meaning to sound too much like Uncle Albert in *Only Fools and Horses*, during the war was when crime really took off. The Blitz created many opportunities for crime, making way for the Black Market. There were plenty of deserters to take advantage of the chronic shortages and do the dirty work for organised criminals. The introduction of rationing saw a big turnaround in people's attitudes. There was so much temptation for mothers wanting to provide that bit extra, people wanting cigarettes, clothes, and coupons for this and that, and the criminal was the one who could cash in on it all. They would supply anything and everything and were seen as heroes for being able to do so. This is where we can see similarities with America again. American gangsters had been propelled into the big time through Prohibition, cashing in on a huge opportunity at a time when many people were tempted to break the law. Never before the war would the housewives of Britain have dreamed of breaking the law, but now they had to provide for their families by any means available. It was all about supply and demand, and because of the call-up to war there were far fewer policemen around, giving criminals much greater freedom to operate.

There were men like Eric Mason, who essentially invented ram raiding, and Eddie Chapman the safe breaker from the North East (another Geordie Connection), once named as the most wanted man in Britain, and now criminals were starting to work in teams instead of as individuals. Two men robbing a safe could get away with twice as much money; three or four men dressed as guards casually stealing the contents from a shop window and loading up a smart (stolen) car looked more credible than one man in a mad panic. In some cases the public even helped them load up the cars because they

were *that* convincing. In effect, the 1940's saw the birth of professional crime, and most importantly there was more and more organisation behind it. At the same time, the South East of Britain was the centre of the war, with the flood of incoming service personnel creating a dramatic rise in population and an increase in prostitution and excessive drinking.

Bethnal Green was bombed quite badly, and for a while, the brothers were evacuated to the country but missed Vallance Road too much and were soon reunited with the rest of the family, only to become even closer. They were an old-fashioned East End family, soaked in tradition, and very devoted and self-sufficient as those families were. They had to stick together and they had to be tough to survive. The Kray boys' dad would either be on the run from the law, having refused to join up, or out earning a living. After going on the run from military service, or lack of, he changed his name to carry on working. It wasn't that he was a coward: he was a product of the East End. It just happened that he wanted to do what he was doing instead of going to war, which he had no interest in it at all. He was known as a 'pesterer' – a travelling trader – who would roam the country buying and selling silver, gold and clothing. He earned quite good money so the family was able to live slightly above the standard of most others in Bethnal Green, though he himself was never cut out to be a 'family man'. He knew a lot of the East End villains, and was well-known himself for a few choice activities, with drinking and gambling number one and two on his list. With this lifestyle he was seldom at home and the brothers went a great deal of their lives without a proper father, so the twins' early lives were hidden behind their mother or 'under her feet'. They were brought up in an environment without any real male role model and were strongly influenced by their mother Violet, her two sisters, and their grandmother.

This early nurturing moulded their way of thinking and on the occasions when he *was* at home their dad would often comment on their lack of respect towards him. He didn't agree with the way Violet had let them do as they wanted, and his solution to this would be to discipline them. This was the way for most families everywhere, but not for Violet's; she knew from her own strict upbringing what the result would be. She and Charles would have arguments about it with the twins close by not missing a word, and Charles later blamed himself for the twins' behaviour. He said he should have been more authoritative and taken them out of the area, but who knows what would have happened? We can only look back now at the situation and speculate. Certainly their experiences with their part-time father increased their resentment of authority, and we can sympathise with their love for their mother, and then the effect of their dad arriving on a weekend to make his mark.

It was through him that they got their first taste of the underworld. Once he'd gone on the run, he would hide out with criminals and the twins would sometimes be sent with messages from their mother. It was Violet who held the family together in the war years. She was a warm and generous woman and looked after the three things that mattered to her the most: her sons. In her own way she taught them respect from an early age and instilled her strong sense of family values, but Violet's love for her twins was to practically smother them. When, as the prodigal daughter, she first returned to Vallance Road with them she'd had an enormous sense of pride. She dressed them the same, just like little dolls in a pram, and people weren't used to identical twins, so *everyone* was interested in them. All this, combined with their mother's obsessive love, gave the twins the idea that they were invincible. Violet would accept everything they did, thus destroying their ability to judge right from wrong.

Every area of London had a reputation with the police for the different crimes it was associated with. Villains were known to acquire money by any means and have a total

disregard for it once they had it. Money was simply the means to an end – a night out and a chance to gamble and drink. They were known to live fast, die young and leave a not so good-looking corpse. They had a complete disregard for the family way of life and were categorically selfish. Crime-wise, it was the bank messengers, (men who carried money from bank to bank) who were the prime target, and violence was fast becoming a way of life for the robber. To blow a safe took skill and patience; messengers were seen as easy pickings as there was little protection and little resistance. They would always surrender without a struggle, but would be given a few punches for authenticity. In time protection increased and so robbing them was more of a risk. Bank robbery was the next step. ‘Jump-uppers’ were also enjoying seeing a logical progression. At first they used to follow the cigarette wagons and make off with a few hundred cartons; the next step was to hijack the entire wagon and make off with hundreds of thousands of cartons. In those days conviction for violence and robbery was followed up by corporal punishment and a short prison term, usually twelve months maximum, and considered to be worse than the usual four-year stretch. Prison was a tough regime – a lot different to what it is nowadays. Through their dad the twins met robbers, hijackers, fighters and racketeers, and it was also through him they had their first encounters with the law. On more than one occasion, they were woken up at night by coppers searching for Charles Senior. Scared at first, they soon learned how to deal with them but also picked up a fear and loathing of the police. Vallance Road was known as *Deserter’s Corner*, so with all these people coming and going the twins were constantly on the lookout for the law. It became second nature and also acted in conditioning them further to a hatred of authority.

Crime in its infancy was mainly a family concern. Within close communities, there would always be the local families who had a reputation and stuck out from all the others. You could have people you knew as friends on your side, but if you came from a family with a few brothers, you immediately had a tight, unbreakable trust. That’s how the Sabini brothers became the first real organised crime family in Britain, making a name for themselves on the racetracks in the forties. Then there were the Nashes from North London, who paved the way for two other feared and powerful gangs – the Richardsons from South London, and of course the Krays. They all had firms made up of family and would stand by each other no matter what. Family firms would build up their reputation through fear to gain power; that power would lead to influence, and so on. Brothers would start gangs or enter into one as a member of the next generation, and the Krays were already beginning to drift towards this way of life, though they probably didn’t realise it. As children they had loved fighting and had a reputation amongst their peers: it was a reputation that would undoubtedly grow, and it seems natural for this to have happened now. The Krays were open to highly unconventional influences in their early years, which was a major contribution to the business they entered into. Apart from their dad, older Kray family members were also well known local characters in Bethnal Green. One of these was *Mad Jimmy Kray*, their paternal grandfather. A stallholder in Petticoat Lane, he was famed for his drinking abilities nearly as much as his bar brawling. Their maternal grandfather, *Jimmy the Southpaw Cannonball Lee*, was another character. In his younger days he’d been a bare-knuckle boxer and then a music hall entertainer. He was a one-off in more ways than one – a non-drinker – and loved to tell the twins stories of his fighting days.

It was family influence as well that led the Kray brothers towards the boxing world. The twins got their first real taste of it in the boxing booth at the Victoria Park Fair, where men could win money by going the distance with the ‘in-house’ boxers. Not that many of them were successful, though; most would be half cut to begin with and would

run out of steam or be sick within a few seconds. In the interval the organisers allowed pairs of fighters to slug it out to keep the crowd hungry for more. Ronnie was quick to volunteer himself as a contender, but there was no one else of his weight division in the crowd for him to fight. The MC was about to refuse him a fight when Reg stepped forward. They climbed into the ring and gave a no holds barred boxing exhibition in front of the bloodthirsty crowd. Neither would back down: they fought each other toe to toe as though they were sworn enemies. In the end it was declared a draw, but the most important result for the twins was that ‘the men’ – the fighters of the East End – were now properly aware of who they were.

From then on, boxing took over their lives. It was all there was for them. Young Charlie had been the first to put the gloves on, and the twins had watched as he sparred round after round in the back yard under the guidance of their grandfather. Although he was known as the more gentle of the brothers, the training paid off for Charlie and he went on to win a few boxing titles as a welterweight during his National Service stint in the Royal Navy. He was discharged from service because of severe migraine attacks, and the twins begged him to teach them the noble art. Charlie was becoming more involved in boxing and didn’t need much persuading. Once they had talked Violet into giving them some space in the house, Grandad Lee set up a punch bag, (an old Navy kit bag filled with rags). As word spread, Violet found herself with a house full of young boxing hopefuls and more gym equipment than she’d imagined, but she loved it!

The twins must have been around ten years old when they fought that first time, and then they met again in the Hackney Schoolboys’ Boxing Championship, 1948, with Reg winning on points. This was only a year or so later and they had come such a long way in so little time. Their dad had encouraged them to take up boxing, thinking it would discipline them and steer them away from the only other career option in the area – hopefully! – and they went on to destroy everyone in their way. Ronnie was good but was only considered to be a brawler; he would just steam in using brute force. He fought with heart and would never give up, but Reg was the better of the two and was an accomplished boxer with skill and a game plan. He studied it, and saw it more as an art than an all-out punching competition. Local papers reported on the twins and they received rave reviews after each fight. A boxing career beckoned, though it looked like Reg would be the only one to make it.

They soon turned professional, but with the opposite effect on them from the kind one might imagine. Reg was Schoolboy Champion of London and he told me in later years that it was one of the proudest moments of his life, but it was the violence outside the ring that led to their downfall as boxers. They just could not help themselves, and managers wouldn’t touch a boxer with a reputation for street violence, though evidently the twins didn’t see things the same way. They were destroying everything they had worked so hard to build up, getting into trouble with the police on several occasions for Grievous Bodily Harm and other violent attacks. The stories about their fighting on the streets had become just as familiar as seeing them in the sports pages of the *East End Advertiser*. One attack even involved a police officer. Up until now, they had earned respect from people following their up and coming boxing careers, but now they were earning themselves a reputation as a couple of tearaways. The older generation considered the act of hitting a policeman as crossing the line. The post-war years were still very uncertain times, and other than in the hard-core criminal community this was a law-abiding area. Police were there to keep the peace and to protect: such behaviour was considered beyond the pale, and the young Krays were no longer known as clean-living boxing hopefuls – they had drifted into a world of violence. They narrowly escaped prison sentences each time they were on a charge, but they were lucky. For this

to happen in their mid-teens made them think they could get away with anything. Why should they believe any different? Even with witnesses involved evidence didn't stick, and their mother was always there to believe anything they told her.

Violet could rely on her family for support too. Her sisters May and Rose lived on each side of her in Vallance Road; her brother Jimmy shared her home and slept on the settee, while Grandad Lee, his wife and son John lived across the road above the café. Not only Violet, but also her parents and sisters doted on the twins; they all wanted to be seen with the boys because of their uniqueness in the community. Everyone has a favourite auntie and Auntie Rose was the twins'. Famously, Aunt Rose told Ronnie his eyebrows were too close together and that this was an omen: she said it was because he was 'born to be hanged'. She loved her nephews, but apparently had a bit of a temper herself, and would often fight with other women, (or anyone really) in the street. Her death years later is often said to be the catalyst that finally tipped Ronnie over the edge into the world of madness. Maybe this is true; it would certainly appear to be a contributing factor. The sudden loss of a loved one can affect people in different ways, and there may well have been other elements playing their part in his state of mind.

Charlie married his childhood sweetheart, Dorothy Moore, in 1948 and they moved into Number 178, which meant converting the gym back into a bedroom. The twins didn't get on very well with their sister-in-law, and as Charlie spent more time with her the brothers began to drift apart. Boxing would always be a bond between them though, and in December 1951 all three Krays appeared on the same fight card at a middleweight boxing championship held at the Royal Albert Hall. This was massive and attracted more attention to the brothers, but the results were not as they would have hoped. Charlie lost his fight, Ronnie was disqualified and only Reg won.

On 2nd March 1952 the twins were called up for National Service. Everyone had to do it. All fit men over eighteen were called up for two years; 'fit' being a loose term. How do you think Mr Fraser became 'mad' Frank? Because he was 'unfit', of course. The twins were now Royal Fusiliers – for a day. They went AWOL to see their mam, only to be brought back the following day. Their service to their country was to mean (a) doing a runner whenever they could, or (b) being locked up for doing a runner. Military Service was just another authority figure that they had no respect for. Part of their stint included a nine-month stretch in Shepton Mallet Military Prison, where they were able to meet up with like-minded individuals. For all they hated the army though, it did teach them something. Without their 'service' they would not have been able to organise other people and plan strategically for their own battles on Civvy Street. It also led to them meeting and working with various criminals while plotting their escapes and hanging around with them afterwards: this was the best networking they could have done. It had been their dad who gave them their first introduction, and it all took off from there. On the run they would go to a club called The Royal, where the local gangs would turn up in strength to show who was number one. Fights were almost compulsory. Again, this gave the twins the means to pave the way for themselves once their time was up; they were proving themselves as a force to be reckoned with, as well as having the balls to do so while on the run.

They were finally (dis)honourably discharged from the Army, and could now go about their business. Fighting had become a way of life; they enjoyed inflicting pain on their victims and would always take the fight to the extreme. They would use weapons without a second thought and now owned their first gun. They leased a billiard hall called The Regal in Eric Street, off the Mile End Road in Bethnal Green. It was open all hours and became the meeting place for criminals the twins had built friendships with.

The lease was taken out for three years at five quid a week and came about as a result of ridding the place of some unsavoury characters who'd been hassling the previous owners. This may have been good fortune or good planning: either way, it was their first step into their new world; it meant they could now start to write their own set of rules, and it seemed quite fitting that they had a place called The Regal. They now had their feet firmly on the first rungs of the criminal ladder and Ronnie had finally developed the image he'd been dreaming of and reading about for years. He started to dress *gangster-style* in the big chunky jewellery and wide-shouldered suits, crisp white shirts and tightly knotted ties. He was adapting to a lifestyle that went with the job too, sitting in his own special chair at the club, soaking up the atmosphere, and it was obvious to everyone that the twins had big plans for themselves. They would fight anyone at any time and never lost... always on the move... and never seemed to rest or sleep.

Ronnie was now at the forefront as the dominant twin. He had a network of young boys who were his information service, keeping their ears to the ground on his behalf. This was how he got the name 'the Colonel' – because of his ability to organise and lead people while building up his own arsenal of weaponry, which was kept hidden at Vallance Road. Ronnie would show no apparent weakness: the only weakness he had was for young boys. He never showed an interest in women, but with boys he was gentle, a different person altogether. One thing he could not be in this environment was a homosexual, not openly anyway. In such a world as the one they had entered it was unheard of. Ronnie didn't really want for much and had what was basically a simple life; living at home meant all the cooking and ironing was done for him by Violet. He had manicures, massages – you name it! – as this kind of thing typified his perception of the gangster. He even started getting his hair cut at home, tailors brought in, and even started doing yoga. Why? Because that's how gangsters lived their lives, wasn't it? He didn't really have any need for material possessions; after all Reg was the one who could drive and owned an American car. Ronnie could live out some of his childhood dreams. It was like a reinvention: he had a new identity, a new persona; he was the Colonel and now he could act like it.

Reg began to follow suit (no pun intended!) and took on the gangster-chic dress code. This had considerable significance for the twins as a partnership. Where once it seemed Reg was the dominant force, it was Ronnie who now emerged as the dominant twin. He was no longer reserved and awkward. Getting such a nickname as the Colonel was down to his new-found drive, and now it seemed that Reg was in the back seat and was doing as Ronnie said. Reg strove for what he'd call the 'good life', meaning that he didn't see this lifestyle as a true retirement package. He wanted the respect, a showpiece wife, a nice car, comfort – the same goals the working man strives for. He did not consider his 'job' as a long-term profession at all. In this respect the brothers were very different. Maybe Reg was just in denial; maybe all this was because of his need to be different to his twin, to have his own identity and to prove that he was not being dominated.

Different desires would be something else that set them apart from each other but then, as if in contradiction, Reg started dressing the same, so on the outside they appeared to be as identical as they were in the pram all those years ago. Those close to them knew they had many personal differences, but visually it was important for them to look the same and to an extent to act in a similar manner. It was all about image and presentation. To see twins dressing differently could hint towards conflict, and any suspicion of conflict between the Krays would be seen as a weakness. They now had a small team working for them, knock-off gear was stored in the club for money, little

blags going on here and there – it was a small operation and was very literally a constant fight for recognition amongst the established underworld. By the time they were twenty-two, they were making good money through all kinds of activities, but it was always small time. They wanted bigger goals, and it was to happen possibly sooner than they anticipated.

The two major gangsters of the time were Billy Hill and Jack Spot Comer. They had formed an alliance to control the whole of the city and even called themselves *the Kings of the Underworld*. They had been ruling London for ten years as friends but then, sure enough, they fell out and Spot had his face carved up in a vicious attack in what became known as ‘the Battle of Frith Street’. The odds were stacked against Jack and he needed someone to turn to: he turned to the Krays. He offered them a pitch at what would be an historical gangland event – the 1955 Epsom race meeting. The twins could barely tolerate Spot, but took him up on his offer anyway. The idea was that it would be a show of strength by Spot and would warn Hill off from trying anything further. They may have been there as his ‘allies’, but showed contempt toward the gangs of both Hill and Spot. They were bored by the horseracing and showed no interest in the day, but at the same time showed no fear of anyone from either rival gang. These were the top gangsters in the country and the twins’ behaviour was deliberately insulting, implying that they were has-beens. It was the proverbial two-fingered salute to all of them. The Italian gang was also there to observe what was going on; if there was to be a war, they would certainly be interested in the outcome. Anyway, Ronnie and Reg took their cut for the day’s outing and returned home. It was obvious to everyone that they had treated the occasion as a chance to show everyone who they were and that they feared no one.

Frankie Fraser was part of Hill’s gang and was eager to fight it out with the Krays. If the twins wanted a war, then Hill’s gang would be ready for them. A date was set and the Colonel prepared his army and gathered weapons in anticipation. This was the confrontation he had been looking forward to for some time and now it looked as though he was going to get his chance, but both Hill and Spot heard about the battle and called it off. They had always exercised control without the use of violence, and had an understanding with the police that if violence was kept off the streets, then they were okay to go about their business. It had been a good working relationship. Spot kept the twins at arm’s length after that incident. He was put off by their ruthlessness and wanted nothing more to do with them, but remained ‘friends’ with them rather reluctantly. They wanted to learn from him and to take over the West End, wiping out Hill and his gang along the way. Spot, however, was not about to give his secrets away to anyone.

The feud between Spot and Hill carried on and around a year or so later Spot was ambushed again, care of Frankie Fraser and Alf Warren. He called it a day soon after that, refusing the twins’ help to rid the world of Hill’s gang once and for all. Billy Hill also went into retirement and the coast was now clear for someone else to move in. The Italians stepped up and the rumours were that they were not happy with the twins after they had favoured Spot in the power struggle. If they weren’t happy with that, they would have been even less happy when Ronnie strolled into a club one night with the Firm in tow, took out a Mauser pistol and fired at them. No one was shot, but a few Italian suits would be at the dry cleaners the next day. They had challenged the Italians on their own patch and they’d backed down immediately. It was a wise move. This had been the break the twins needed and everything seemed to be falling into place nicely. Along with their firm, the twins were convinced they could fill the gap that Jack Spot and Billy Hill had left empty: now was their chance to reign as kings. On the inside now, as well as the outside, Ronnie was a fully-fledged gangster. If the Italians had

been the main competition, he and Reg would now be unstoppable. It was their graduation ceremony.

'Real villains' were now part of the gang, and that gang became known as the Firm. Reason and calculated strategies would need to come into play now; they couldn't just fight for the hell of it any more. In 1956, Ronnie shot someone for the first time. Knowing that he collected guns and had shot at people, it was pretty certain that one day he would shoot someone for real. He was identified by his victim and charged with Grievous Bodily Harm. The eleventh commandment 'thou shalt not grass' had been broken, but friends in high places and the powers of persuasion meant that Ronnie walked. He could have been wearing Teflon suits at that time because no matter what was thrown at him, it wouldn't stick. Ronnie loved it... it was another victory in the battle against authority. If you keep getting away with 'wrong doing', do you ever think about stopping? Not a chance! Neither did Ronnie, but he also never gave a second thought to the consequences. They soon earned themselves the tag of 'the most dangerous mob in London'; they were getting money from all over the place in protection rackets, with thieves and villains in the area offering them a cut of their action. Ronnie felt he was above the law, and in some ways he probably was, though not for long. In the same year he led a revenge attack on a man and ended up doing time for it. He got three years for GBH and found out first hand that you can't get away with everything – certainly not all the time, anyway. The commandment had been broken again, and it wouldn't be the last time as far as Ronnie's liberty was concerned.

Inside, Ronnie lived a comfortable prison life and Reg took care of business on the outside. This was the longest time to date they had been apart which meant Reg could now be his own man and run the Firm in his own way. He had seen the dangers in Ronnie's battles but up till now had gone along with them. Fighting and shooting were certain to lead only to one thing and Reg wanted something different out of life. He took on a shop in Bow Road, Bethnal Green, which was turned into a club and became their new base – a new drinking club, the Double R, standing for Ronnie and Reggie. So, he hadn't forgotten about Ronnie altogether, but while his twin was in prison Reg could live his life as he wanted and go to work as a businessman. Helped out by brother Charlie, the club was becoming a huge success. Charlie had a good head for business but preferred to remain in the background, as opposed to running with the gang. This way he could get on with taking care of the family business interests and not worry about the criminal side.

Ronnie's prison life soon took a turn for the worse; in fact he was heading for meltdown. His constant mood swings and disruptive behaviour were doing him no favours, but it all pointed to a medical condition that was much deeper than originally thought. This was the point at which it is believed that the death of Auntie Rose led to a breakdown, and he was sent to the psychiatric wing of Winchester Prison where doctors declared him insane. Diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic and with his health deteriorating, Ronnie was moved to Long Grove Mental Institution in Surrey. At this point he began to panic; he had seen his friend Frank Mitchell in a similar position, to be held indefinitely because of his mental condition. Ronnie had begun to react well to his medication, but was still considered to be too unstable for release and so a plan was successfully hatched to get him out.

The law back then stated that if someone escaped and was at large for more than six weeks, they would have to be re-examined upon capture and dealt with accordingly. This was what the Firm had in mind for Ronnie. They needed him out long enough to be re-examined, declared mentally stable and to serve the rest of his time in prison, knowing he would actually be released. The twins concocted a ploy to beat the system,

which was simple but effective. When Reg visited Ronnie one day they simply exchanged coats. Both were wearing the same suits, which meant Ronnie could just walk out whilst Reg sat quietly at the table. Minutes later Ronnie was on his way to freedom, and as the minutes ticked by Reg sat in the visiting room waiting to reveal his identity. When he was asked where Reg had gone, the people at the institution were baffled when they heard the reply. One of their patients had just walked out to freedom so easily! It was their own stupid fault and had nothing to do with Reg he told them as he too walked out. The plan didn't run as smoothly as expected, though. Ronnie's mental illness worsened after being holed up in a caravan in the country after the escape. Reg moved him back to Vallance Road to be with Violet but his mood swings and eventual suicide attempt gave the family no other choice but to surrender him back to the authorities. They didn't like doing it, but it was the only solution and for his own good. Fate decreed that he should be returned to Long Grove and after a thorough examination he was no longer certified insane. Bizarrely, the twins' plan had worked and Ronnie went back to Wandsworth Prison to serve out the rest of his sentence.

He was finally released in 1959. The mood swings were still there, the paranoia; he'd pace the floor like a caged lion, ready to snap at any second. He was put on medication to calm him down but there were side effects. His speech and walking slowed and he put on weight. This 'calm' was really just the calm before the storm. Following that, just to top it all off, Reg got an eighteen-month stretch in prison for his involvement in a protection racket, leaving Ronnie with the reins of the Kray Empire. Up till now he'd been unpredictable but Reg was always there to smooth problems over and look after him when it was needed. Now Ronnie was dangerous, unpredictable, powerful – and in sole charge of the Firm.

## Chapter Two

### Cockney Rebels

Nineteen-thirties Britain suffered the Depression, and then in the forties we had the war and rationing went on well into the fifties. The East End had proved to be easy prey for the twins and with London still very vulnerable, they could move on to other enterprises. Reggie and Charlie had made some shrewd deals while Ronnie was away, and things were picking up. They were making a name for themselves with their clubs and illicit gambling joints, and the rich and famous flocked to have their photo taken with them. There was a longing for glitz and glamour at the end of the decade and the Krays filled the void with their clubs. Whilst Charlie and Reggie were building things up and striving to operate on a more legitimate level, their brother had different ideas. Ronnie's philosophy was that of 'live by the sword'; he was a loose cannon and at times was uncontrollable. Everything he saw he wanted, and his way of getting what he wanted was by force. Ronnie relentlessly bulldozed his way through relationships that had been built up with firms like the Italians. He'd claim that 'people', i.e. Reggie, had been getting soft in his absence, and his way of establishing that he was back was to declare war. He was now even more aggressive and spiteful than usual – there was a definite change.

By the end of the fifties a new lease of life had rejuvenated London and there was a party atmosphere that brought about new ideas. 'The Chelsea Set' met and socialised regularly to form the basis of a trendy new 'in-crowd' made up of clothes designers, writers, fashion icons and photographers. Lord John opened in Carnaby Street: a boutique that catered for men, and set the scene for the growth of fashion central. David Bailey and Terence Donovan brought the models Twiggy and Jean the Shrimp Shrimpton to the fore, their faces defining an era.

Sixties London was the centre of the world for music, fashion and art, enjoying a whole new freedom that wasn't around in the war years. All eyes were on the capital, as it was now one of the trendiest places in the world – *Swinging London*. In reality there were only a few 'happening' places; the whole 'swinging' mania was, as usual, a media creation and it took off from there. Despite the media hype though, there was still creative energy in the air. Go back just a few years and the mood was totally different. The youth of the country was realising they could have an identity and lifestyle different from their parents, and the traditions and rules of generations past were thrown out the window. This was the first time the working classes had any money in their pockets and they were spending it as quickly as they were making it, with this spending power giving people a complete liberation from Victorian and post-war taboos. Even *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by DH Lawrence was allowed on general release. It seemed a great time to be young: as Paul Weller wrote, *life is a drink and you get drunk when you're young*. The devastation of the war had also made way for new building development. If recent decades had been bomb times, then the sixties was boom time – in the form of a property and gambling boom.

The Krays' quest to conquer the West End led to the acquisition of clubs such as the Kentucky and Esmeralda's Barn and an empire began to flourish. Esmeralda's Barn in Wilton Place was taken as part of a payoff. Reggie was on bail after nine months awaiting a review of his case at the time the deal was struck. He was proving himself as a businessman – handling things with the help of Charlie meant money was being

made, whereas Ronnie on his own would act on impulse and never quite made the right decisions. He was good at winning arguments though, even if it meant arguing his way into a bad deal and loss of money. At this point in time there were not that many people who knew the gaming business, or knew about clubs and how to keep them 'safe' – The Krays were learning all the time and could see there was a market for this knowledge. There was a whole new nightlife culture centred on clubs and casinos, and gambling was all the rage. London was the centre for gambling with a huge illicit economy; controlling clubs placed the Krays in line for rich pickings. It was not all about gangland violence – they were savvy enough to know that it was a business.

Prior to the Betting and Gaming Act of 1960 there were no casinos or bingo clubs in the country and the law prohibited all commercial gaming of any significance. The idea behind the 1960 Act was to allow games of equal chance between friends and in clubs, but to prohibit the commercial exploitation of gaming. There were so many loopholes to the act, all of which were exploited in one way or another by such people as the Krays. Gaming, as it was known then, has always been associated with criminal activities but prosecution was difficult because the legislation was unclear. It was perfect for the criminally minded of the time. By the late sixties there were over a thousand casinos in Britain, offering instant membership and live entertainment by highly paid stars as a means of attracting people and inducing them to game. In 1968 the Government chose a system whereby commercial gaming could be properly regulated and controlled: the Gaming Act introduced a new test whereby prospective and existing casino operators needed obtain the Gaming Board's approval and a gaming licence. Many candidates failed on one or both criteria, and so were no longer able to hold casino gaming on their premises. There were plenty of ways around this though; there would *always* be a front man.

Reggie had been enjoying his freedom in recent months, but it soon came to an end when the appeal against his conviction failed. He was sent to Wandsworth Prison for six months, but this was only a minor setback. Six months at that time of life didn't mean a great deal. Prison is always going to be a consequence for a career criminal, but the crimes they were being locked up for were crimes they shouldn't have been foolish enough to commit in the first place. It was generally a result of Ronnie's hot-headed behaviour, or some petty crime they just hadn't thought through. Reggie away for six months meant Ronnie would be in charge again, and that would certainly give Reggie cause for concern.

Running operations by himself Ronnie was *Gangster No. 1*, organising his troops into battle from *Fort Vallance*: he was the Colonel after all and he had a name to live up to. He'd be forever planning his strategies, determined to prove he was back with a vengeance and no Reggie meant he was hassle free; Charlie, while Reggie was away, kept a low profile. Ronnie had a man called Leslie Payne working as an adviser for him in Reggie's absence and helping as he muscled in on various properties – gaming clubs were acquired with such ease it was frightening. He was also going through a phase when he would put his name to just about any venture; he would throw money into ludicrous schemes and then wonder why there was no pay-off.

At the beginning of the sixties the twins were reunited once again. Ronnie had enjoyed his time at the helm with Reggie away, but with his brother back it was business as (un)usual. Deals were going on all over London and they were beginning to branch out. One deal was putting money into a seaside development in Nigeria. Leslie Payne and Ernest Shinwell, (son of Manny Shinwell, Labour MP) helped set this up. An introduction took place between Ronnie, Leslie Holt and Lord Boothby, Peer of the Realm. The whole venture fell through and the money disappeared, and then by sheer

coincidence Holt died under strange circumstances. Ronnie had met Robert Boothby at a gay party they'd both attended: their friendship was even exposed by *The Sunday Mirror* under the headline 'The Gangster and the Peer'. The paper also alleged that the two were homosexuals. It wasn't that Ronnie had previously gone out of his way to hide the fact; it was more to do with the freedom of expression brought on by the sixties that word got around. This of course was common knowledge to the underworld already, but now the rest of the world was beginning to find out too.

Considering the twins' status – the lifestyle, the clubs, the fame – they might as well have had huge neon signs above their heads taunting the police to investigate their empire. They were now mixing with some very influential people and some thought that they were getting too powerful. The authorities were watching them constantly, and one of the main reasons for this was their love of publicity. They weren't just courting publicity; they were engaged to it with big plans for marriage. Ronnie was the worst culprit: he loved being photographed with the celebrities and sports stars that came to the clubs; he longed to be famous and to have the lifestyle that went with it. He would present himself as the stereotypical American gangster just like he'd seen in George Raft films, but while real life American gangsters would delegate their dirty work, making sure they couldn't be connected to the crime, the Krays just couldn't seem to grasp the concept of keeping a low profile. Maybe it was all down to trust and the only ones they could truly trust were themselves. They were not unique in this, the Nash brothers were another firm who couldn't resist doing their own dirty work. Leader Jimmy Nash made news early in 1960 for receiving a Grievous Bodily Harm charge when he was blatantly guilty of murder: jury and prosecution witnesses were terrified for their lives and Nash escaped the death penalty. Soon after that they retired from gangland activities, leaving only one main name other than the Krays' – the Richardsons, brothers Charlie and Eddie, scrap metal businessmen from South London.

The Richardsons ruled the South and were known to those who got on their wrong side as sadistic practitioners of torture. Frankie Fraser joined the Richardsons in 1963 as their number one enforcer after he was released from his prison sentence for the attack on Jack Spot, and along with George Cornell they were a formidable force in the underworld. With Fraser on board the violence escalated at a dramatic pace and their business interests, like the Krays', were now beginning to prosper. Suppliers to most of the West End clubs with One-armed bandits, they also had friends in high places and found that certain crimes could be swept under the carpet. Another lucrative business venture at this time was known as 'Long Firm Fraud', a market that the Richardsons also cornered. This is where legitimate 'fake' companies were set up, and goods such as electrical appliances, household items and leather goods – anything in fashion at the time – would be bought in from other companies. There would be businessmen brought in to front the operation, so to anyone on the outside it all appeared to be run by a respectable wholesaler. They would pay for the goods up-front, sell them on just as any other business would do and earn themselves the trust of the places they were dealing with. After paying these companies immediately, they would be given credit on their next purchase. That's when the Long Firm would get as much as they could on credit and then disappear. It was such an easy scam to get away with. The goods would be sold on to market traders and huge profits made.

The Kray firm was also into Long Firm Fraud, though they didn't enjoy the same level of success as the Richardsons. They were still heavily into protection rackets and were subsequently arrested for demanding money with menaces in 1965, by Detective Inspector Leonard Nipper Read. They were demanding money from a club called the Hideaway and were remanded in custody to Brixton prison. At this point in time their

level of influence was all too clear: questions asked in the House of Lords by Lord Boothby as to how long they were going to be kept locked up caused outrage, but Boothby was not their only highly placed contact. When the case went to court they were cleared of all charges and walked out as free men. They had used the threat of violence to scare witnesses into retracting their statements, and Nipper Read had to watch them slip through his fingers. A few weeks after leaving the courtroom they took over the Hideaway club and changed its name to El Morocco. The more they got away with only encouraged them further, just as it had in their childhood.

In the same year Reggie married the love of his life, twenty-one year old Frances Shea, the sister of one of his friends. The marriage ended in complete disaster, lasting less than a year, and Reggie was hit hard by it. Frances just couldn't handle such a lifestyle; it seemed to her she was in direct competition with Ronnie all the time, and to Ronnie it *was* a competition. Reggie would still visit her, but Ronnie could now get his claws back into him and get his own way. He'd do his best to help Reggie forget all about her, making him immerse himself in their business and keeping him out at night as long as possible. Ronnie claimed he was doing all this for Reggie's good, but all the time he was putting a wedge between him and Frances.

The twins were now forming links with the American Mafia in New York. They knew the Americans were setting up gaming clubs in London and wanted to offer protection, which would be lucrative. Contact was made, but after an unsuccessful trip to forge further relations Ronnie returned to the East End. Mafia talks were still ongoing though, and they were optimistic that something could be salvaged. Ronnie had been introduced to all the wrong people, courtesy of a friend he'd travelled over with. It was said that one reason he had not been introduced to the right people on his trip was that the Mafia thought the Krays' power was slipping; they needed to prove otherwise. They went on to provide protection for American celebrities visiting or performing in England on behalf of the Mafia. Frank Sinatra's son had been kidnapped while performing in London recently; another firm was supposed to have been protecting him and this was the perfect opportunity to jump in. Favours would let them know who was running things in England, and all this suited them down to the ground, as they could combine business with pleasure. Performances were always in clubs: clubs had gaming facilities; gaming facilities had the Krays – perfect! They came up with more elaborate plans to prove themselves further, one of which involved murdering someone who had crossed the Mafia to put them in the Krays' debt. This never happened though; it was another idea that fell at the first hurdle.

Complications between the Krays and the Richardsons were about to set in. Members of the Richardsons' gang got into a fight with Eric Mason, a good friend of the Krays who was out with two friends at the Astor Club. Insults were exchanged and one of Eric's friends knocked out one of the Richardsons. The police were called and the gangs legged it round the back of the club, where Eric was overpowered by the Richardson gang and taken to a lock-up to be tortured. Eric was savagely beaten with bats, knives and an axe – they couldn't have touched him if it had been a fistfight. Eric raised his hand as Fraser went for his head with an axe, leaving the axe embedded in his hand: he was lucky to survive. They also tried to cut his hands off in the torture session, saying he would never fight again. It was a sickening and cowardly attack, but to this day Fraser dismisses it as lies. According to Fraser, he beat Mason in a one-on-one fight before kidnapping him. Other people gave a different version of events.

There was no real reason for conflict, as both firms could quite easily co-exist and run profitable businesses, but both were already preparing to go into battle against each other before this incident. What happened to Eric was a result of the pent up anger that

had built up between the Firms. It was through greed that they had fallen out in the first place. Ronnie and Reggie wanted a cut of the Richardsons' Long Firm Fraud success, but were told in no uncertain terms that they didn't fit into their plans. Charlie and Eddie Richardson were powerful in their own right and had no interest in sharing their fortunes. It was a case of winner takes all and no room for losers. Ronnie was livid: this was a tremendous insult to him personally, and in true Ronnie Kray style he wanted revenge. It looked like there would be another war, but in the event it was settled in a very different way altogether.

There was a successful drinking and gambling club run by a local thief called Billy Heywood in Lewisham, which was attracting a lot of attention. It was on the Richardsons' patch and they wanted a piece of the action – simple as that. It was making a lot of money and they believed they were entitled to some of it. It was taken for granted that the gamblers, who were mainly thieves, (a club run by thieves *for* thieves), would not be as tough as a firm of gangsters, but the Richardsons greatly underestimated the resistance they faced. Eddie Richardson and Frankie Fraser paid the club a visit and were not given the answer they were looking for: Billy Gardner and Heywood stood their ground that night, and as a result they got a call informing them that the Richardson gang wanted to see them in a club called Mr Smith's.

On 8th March 1966, a gang from the speiler were rounded up and went to *Mr Smith's* to settle the score once and for all. They were heavily outnumbered as the two gangs squared up to each other, but then the guns were drawn and all hell broke loose. Dickie Hart was part of Gardner and Heywood's gang and was shot dead; Eddie Richardson and Frankie Fraser ended up in hospital with gunshot wounds. This was the end of the line for the Richardson firm – the police instantly had enough evidence to put their top henchmen, including Eddie and Fraser, away for five years apiece for affray. Fraser was originally charged with the murder of Dickie Hart but was found not guilty. It has been said that it was George Cornell who actually killed Dickie Hart, managing to escape before the police arrived, though no one can confirm this. Hart had been the only member of the Kray gang involved at Mr Smith's and murdering him was a liberty that would be avenged at any cost.

He may have evaded the police, but there was one person Cornell couldn't hide from. Ronnie Kray, armed with his Mauser pistol, walked into the Blind Beggar public house the following night with Ian Barrie. Cornell was sitting on a stool at the far end of the room with his mate Alby Woods, and as Ronnie walked calmly over to him he had only one thing on his mind. Cornell sneered for the last time as Ronnie levelled the gun at his head and pulled the trigger as *the Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore* by the Walker Brothers was playing on the jukebox. To Ronnie Kray this was poetic justice. But did he kill for revenge, or was it for the fact that he'd (famously) called Ronnie 'that fat poof'? Ronnie told me himself that he'd killed Cornell because he had murdered someone close to him, but never would say who it was, though it always sounded plausible that it was Dickie Hart. Cornell was on Kray territory at the time, but it's not as though he was out to cause trouble. He was from the East End originally, so he wasn't invading Ronnie's turf. Another statement Ronnie later gave me was that if Cornell had been anywhere other than the Blind Beggar, he would have lived. Ronnie couldn't stand the Beggar, so he had no qualms about soiling it with Cornell's blood. Ronnie would say so many different things about the killing when I knew him. He loved to discuss it – just as he'd done in the sixties. Everyone knew he'd done it, and he made no attempt to hide the fact; he even went so far to brag about it. It was his first kill and he revelled in the notoriety. This one-upmanship was something that he used in arguments with

Reggie all the time, and he went on to dominate further; to taunt him, sneering and saying he didn't have the guts to go as far as he, Ronnie had done.

Within a year from being sentenced for affray the Richardsons found themselves in the dock again. The evidence had been mounting up for some time – the first-hand accounts of hideous tortures and revenge beatings had caught up with them at last. At first they were being investigated for their Long Firm Frauds, but it was the extent of the violence they'd used in trying to silence people that led to their ultimate downfall. Charlie Richardson continued to go about family business in Eddie's absence; he had new people and the Firm was as strong as ever. The torture they inflicted on their victims made the fraud look like a high street shoplifting outing and the police were hell-bent on making them pay. They would beat up people who worked for them and who fronted fraudulent companies and torture people for information. More and more people were traced... a contract killing investigated... more tortures... the evidence read like a horror novel. People were scared to come forward because the Richardsons knew so many in the police force it was likely to get back to them. One bloke in particular was Jimmy Taggart. He'd been subject to one of the worst torture sessions anyone is ever likely to go through and live. He was prepared to make a statement only when Charlie was in custody. Charlie was remanded and the prosecution evidence gathered before he was given a twenty-five year prison sentence, but it wasn't over there. Evidence was pouring in all the time still; he was linked to a contract killing in South Africa when a man had mugged him for a few grand and ended up paying with his life. Two hired killers were used. One of them disappeared but the other, Johnny Bradbury, was given ten years for his trouble. He also ended up telling everything he knew about the Richardson organisation and subsequently Eddie Richardson and Frankie Fraser were given a further fifteen years each. The Krays now found themselves in pole position. The Richardsons had effectively self-destructed. They were no more, and now London was rich pickings for the Kray firm; all they had to do was stay out of real trouble. Just as in the era of Spot and Hill, the police were quite willing to let incidents go unseen provided they were not serious and did not upset the equilibrium of the community. By putting the Richardsons away the police force sent signals that gangsters were no longer above the law. They couldn't get away with murder.

The twins were still trying to portray themselves as the local boys who'd made good, but by now they were known for what they were – violent criminals. They used the East End ideals and values to their advantage; giving to charity and being seen with stars was a route to papering over their bad boy image, but the underworld were not so easily swayed as they knew Ronnie had murdered Cornell. They had immense power now, but the attacks kept happening, as did the use of sheer terror to extort money. Big Albert Donoghue had even become a member of the Firm as the result of a Kray attack. He'd been shot in the leg and because he didn't tell the police who had shot him, they put him on a 'pension' until he was fit enough to work for them. It was utter madness: they trusted him for not grassing them up, and he decided he could trust them after they had just shot him. The perfect working relationship! They had now become the victims of their own reputation; they could never let it slip, so the violence would escalate all the time, and even members of the Firm were beginning to worry if they would be next. I've heard from different sources that the Firm had plans to kill the twins because they were so unpredictable. No one felt safe, and with Ronnie being trigger-happy anything was possible.

At the end of 1966, the twins hatched a plot to free Frank Mitchell, the Mad Axeman, from Dartmoor Prison. Mitchell would be very useful to the Firm if they could get him out, but the main idea behind it was to enhance their reputation by helping him

campaign for a release date. Teddy Smith, an 'author' and Kray friend, had put the idea to them and they went for it. It sounded like some of the bizarre schemes that were put to them twenty-five years later when they themselves were locked up. Teddy was also known as a madman, not uncommon in their circle of friends, and the plan sounded mad too. All they had to do was get him out of prison, keep him out long enough for the newspapers to run the story of his plight and have the authorities forced to investigate his case – then he'd give himself up and return to prison.

Mitchell was a huge, strong, fit and good-looking man, who had been certified insane. He was such a difficult customer that he was more or less left alone in the high security unit he'd been placed in, provided that he did not cause disruption. He had never been given a release date: he was there indefinitely. Albert Donoghue and Teddy Smith drove to the only phone box on Dartmoor to wait for Mitchell. All he had needed to do was walk over the moors to his freedom and into a car. It was that easy. They were in London before news of 'Britain's most violent criminal' escaping prison had broken.

The media interest was massive. They had greatly underestimated the impact the escape would have, and as a consequence were left with a very big problem. They had a huge, uncontrollable madman holed up in a flat in London with an extreme dose of cabin fever. He wanted out. They arranged to have a club hostess called Lisa Prescott to be taken to the flat to entertain Mitchell and to keep his mind off his plight. This kept him occupied for a while, but he quickly became besotted with her, which then became an additional problem. He wrote a letter to *belonging*

highlighting his prison conditions and he paced the room like a caged lion, threatening to leave and take his woman with him and threatening anyone present at the same time. Everyone in the underworld knew the twins had sprung Mitchell, and if he walked out of the flat the rest of the world would find out too. They could not let that happen.

Frank Mitchell was subsequently killed just before Christmas, 1966. He was taken out to a van and told they were going to move him abroad to start a new life. In the back of the van, two hit men opened fire on him, finally ending his life by a shot to the head. That was it: another problem sorted out the gangland way. His body was never found and no one was convicted of his murder.

The downward spiral had begun with the first killing. Ronnie would have said it was the complete opposite, but once the killings started the inevitable outcome was not too difficult to predict. Then in 1967 Reggie was hit hard by the suicide of Frances. At one point things had seemed promising and reconciliation between them looked certain. Frances was unwell though, and her mental stability crumbled. She had a breakdown, was hospitalised and soon after her release she committed suicide by taking a lethal dose of pills. Reggie went into depression. He tore himself apart over her death and was drinking heavily to try to ease the pain. The drinking only made matters worse. It was too much for Reggie to take; he was a sad case, a pitiful drunk, and was easy prey for Ronnie. At the same time they were faced with another problem: this one was called Jack the Hat McVitie.

McVitie, a drug user and woman beater, had been making a mug of the two Krays for some time. A loose cannon, he had no fear of the twins and had already taken certain liberties. He was disrespectful to them in public and was said to have taken a shotgun to a club drunk out of his mind and looking to kill them. McVitie had been given money by the Krays to murder their one time associate Lesley Payne, who was a business manager for the Krays and instrumental in arranging the Long Firm Frauds, which were when a business would set up a supply basis with a company. At the start they would pay invoices for goods early or on time to build up a credit limit. Once this credit limit was high enough and goods were being paid on long invoices, e.g. 90 days, they would

sell all the goods cheaply and then disappear, leaving the supplier out of pocket. The Krays were right not to trust Lesley Payne, as years later he would be turning Queen's Evidence against them in court and at the time was also supplying information to the police officer Nipper Read. After a failed attempt he just kept the money: he'd had plenty of warnings but had refused to listen; it was decided that he was becoming a liability and had to be disposed of.

Ronnie was the worst person in the world to be anywhere near Reggie at this point in time. Reg was a drunk, vulnerable and in need of 'belonging'. This was the perfect chance for Ron; he could literally play the part of the devil. Reggie was putty in Ron's hands and Ron was quick to take advantage, goading his brother further. "You can't kill anyone, you! You're useless!" He wouldn't let the opportunity pass; it was the twins versus the world now, and Reggie Kray had to prove himself against some petty thief who was making a mockery of everything that they had built.

McVitie was lured to a party in Evering Road, Stoke Newington, and this was where Reggie Kray stabbed him to death in a frenzied attack. The Lambrianou brothers, Tony and Chris, had lured him away from a club where they had already plied him with drink. They had wanted to become a part of the Firm for so long, and now was their chance to prove their worth. It was really calculated murder, though I doubt those present at the time had thought it would evolve into being so. As they entered the room Reggie had tried to shoot him, but the gun failed and his motive was now clear to a panicking McVitie, so Reg couldn't just let him off with a warning. McVitie begged for his life. He was desperate and pleading for mercy. Most watching the scene just thought they were observing a bit of a joke, and Ron was close at hand to wind Reg up further. One way or another, though, McVitie was going to die that night – it had all gone too far. More taunting from Ron and soon Reg went over the edge. He grabbed a kitchen knife and stabbed McVitie through the face before finishing him off. That night Reggie Kray finally achieved the same status as his twin; the entertainment over, and now they were both murderers. It hadn't been necessary for them to kill McVitie. In the scheme of things, he was a no one: it was just bad timing – McVitie was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He did more damage to them dead than he ever could alive. The body was disposed of and the flat cleaned up immediately; more mystery, more cover-ups and more people to be silenced. The police were not aware of the murder until several months later, and it took a year to nail the twins. Nearly thirty people in total were arrested when Nipper Read and his men moved in on the twins and the rest of the Firm on the 8th May 1968.

The reason for the delay was that by now the Krays had made themselves as good as 'untouchable' – really difficult for the police to deal with. They had been called in for demanding money with menaces at the Hideaway club in Soho, but the charge had subsequently been thrown out of court. There had also been the expose in *The Sunday Mirror* of Ronnie's liaison with Lord Boothby. The Krays had friends in high places and this had put the police on the back foot, which meant that they had to move very carefully in their activities to close the twins down. Both brothers were defiant and confident, believing that their name alone was enough to stop anyone coming forward and talking. The Richardson case had been a good learning exercise for the police though, and they too were confident this time. With the Firm locked up, the fear they'd generated was no longer instilled in the community and the East End code of silence was ready to be broken. They didn't want the Krays anymore.

Amongst other charges, they were tried for the murders of George Cornell and Jack McVitie. The twins had lost their grip: members of the Firm were willing to turn Queen's Evidence now in order to save their own skin. They had been ordered to take

the rap for the twins but refused, making them instant enemies. All of those arrested pleaded not guilty, with the exception of Albert Donoghue who was tried separately and imprisoned for two years. Ronnie had ordered him to take the blame for the murder of Frank Mitchell but he refused. His only way out was to become a grass.

The downward spiral continued. January 1969 saw the beginning of the Kray trial, which turned out to be one of the most expensive in British history. Of the ten men who stood in front of the jury, only Tony Barry was acquitted as an accessory to the murder of McVitie. The remaining nine members of the Kray Firm were charged, convicted and sentenced by Mr. Justice Melford Stevenson at the Old Bailey on 8th March that year.

“I am not going to waste words on you,” he told them. “In my view society has earned a rest from your activities. I sentence you to life imprisonment, which I recommend should not be less than thirty years.”

The Firm was sentenced as follows.

Ronnie Kray, aged thirty-five, was found guilty of the murders of George Cornell and Jack McVitie. He was sentenced to life imprisonment with a recommendation to serve at least thirty years.

Reggie Kray, aged thirty-five, was found guilty of murdering Jack McVitie and of being an accessory to the murder of George Cornell. Like Ron, he was sentenced to life imprisonment with a recommendation to serve at least thirty years.

Charlie Kray, aged forty-one, was sentenced for being an accessory to the murder of Jack McVitie. He was sentenced to ten years in prison.

John ‘Ian’ Barrie, aged thirty-one, was found guilty of the murder of George Cornell and sentenced to life imprisonment with a recommendation to serve at least twenty years.

Tony Lambrianou, aged twenty-six, and Christopher Lambrianou, aged twenty-nine, were found guilty of the murder of Jack McVitie. They were sentenced to life imprisonment with a recommendation that they serve at least fifteen years.

Ronnie Bender, aged thirty, was sentenced to life imprisonment with a recommendation to serve at least twenty years for the murder of Jack McVitie.

Freddie Foreman aged thirty-six, received ten years for being an accessory to the murder of Jack McVitie.

Cornelius ‘Connie’ Whitehead, aged thirty, was charged with carrying a gun and complicity in the murder of McVitie. He received two years for the gun and seven years for the complicity charge.

There was more to come: Ronnie Kray was charged with the murder of Frank Mitchell and was found not guilty; Freddie Foreman was also charged and found not guilty. The charge of murder against Charlie Kray was dropped, but Reggie Kray was given five years for freeing Frank Mitchell from Dartmoor and another nine months for harbouring him. This was to run concurrently with his other sentences.

The twins never showed any trace of remorse: they were selfish and defiant to the end. It was partly the fact that they thought they were untouchable that led to their downfall. Instead of playing it cool and making a good living, they began to believe the hype; they thought they could get away with murder – simple as that!