



KAREN MASON

**THE
EXCITING LIFE**

.....THE NEVER FORGET SAGA BOOK 2

The Exciting Life

Published by Karen Mason at OBOOKO

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Chapter One

New Years Eve 1958

Annie Holland put down the bottle of Chanel No.5 and looked at her watch. It was nearly nine o'clock. Three hours to go until it became 1959 and three days until she reached twenty-five. She turned back to the mirror on her dressing table and leaned closer. Had any lines appeared? Could she still be considered a youthful beauty? It was hard to tell. She'd applied so much of her signature smoky make-up around her eyes, it was impossible to see if any wrinkles had started to form. Her pout had been accentuated with its usual rose coloured lipstick, and the powder around her mouth stopped it seeping into any spider lines that may have formed. Annie was wise enough to know that a girl's face was her fortune; and if she started to lose her looks, she was up shit creek without a paddle.

There was a call from the hall, which jolted her back to her senses.

'Are you ever coming out of there!' Mandy, her best friend shouted impatiently. 'That poor taxi driver's been waiting for half an hour.'

'It's alright for you,' Annie said, standing up and smoothing down her black shift dress. She then creased it again by bending over and checking her chignon was still in place. Enough people had told her she looked like Audrey Hepburn, she felt she had to keep up the illusion. 'You're gorgeous without the aid of a ton of make-up.'

She found Mandy at the tatty little mirror that had come with the furnishings of the flat, and decided her glamorous friend, with her long, wavy blonde hair and curvaceous, Marilyn-type figure looked out of place in such dingy surroundings.

'How do I look?' Annie asked, reaching for her swing coat, which was hanging from the rusty brass hook on the wall. She really needed to spend what little money she had on improving the décor of this place.

'Like Audrey Hepburn on the game,' Mandy quipped, taking one more glance in the mirror and standing on tip toes so she could ensure her tight-fitting midnight blue dress showed enough cleavage. 'Come on, let's go.'

They left the house and walked down the front steps to the pavement. Annie still couldn't get used to living in this grotty little Fulham street. Not after all those years of living in Knightsbridge with Mario. Harrods used to be her nearest shop. Now it was old Mrs Hawley's off licence on the corner of Filmer Road. She couldn't wait to get into the taxi and be on her way to Bruno's. At least for a few hours she could pretend to be wealthy again.

It was a freezing night, and Annie snuggled close to Mandy as the cab drove through the London streets, and the dinginess of Fulham turned into the more upmarket Chelsea – reminding Annie of what she'd left behind.

'You two got fellas waiting for you at this nightclub?' the taxi driver said.

'Yes,' Mandy giggled. 'My boyfriend Clint. He's a wrestler.'

Annie stifled her laughter. Mandy always said this when she wanted to shut a bloke up. Her boyfriend was actually called Jeremy, and he was an investment banker who was currently spending the holiday season with his very posh parents in Suffolk. Indeed where Mandy had been over Christmas.

'What about you?' the taxi driver asked Annie, and she noticed him wink at her in the rear view mirror.

'It's my nightclub,' she said confidently. 'So I'd better make an appearance.'

‘Your nightclub!’ the taxi driver exclaimed. ‘How did a pretty little thing like you get to own a nightclub?’

‘From my husband committing suicide,’ Annie replied matter-of-factly. That shut the cab driver up. Well, for a few moments anyway.

‘I’m sorry to hear that love,’ he said, his tone turning serious. ‘What’s he do that for when he had a beautiful girl like you waiting for him at home?’

‘Oh he just thought it was easier to die and leave me his debts,’ Annie sighed, looking out of the window and feeling a stab of pain as they drove past Harvey Nichols. Mario - the bastard - had promised to buy her a mink coat from there for her twenty-fifth birthday. Instead, all her furs, diamonds and other treasures had been sold to pay off his gambling debts. But for all that, she missed him. He’d been her first love and she couldn’t imagine falling head over heels for someone in such a powerful way ever again.

‘She’s just being a misery guts,’ Mandy laughed, trying to lighten the mood. ‘Everyone knows that Bruno’s is one of the top clubs in town. She makes a fortune. Don’t you worry about her.’

Mandy and the taxi driver then started talking about the famous faces who’d frequented Bruno’s, and the things they got up to. Annie was glad they were leaving her out of it, because it gave her a chance to sit back and think about her situation. Bruno’s was the only asset she had in the world. All her friends thought she was mad – her adopted Aunt Alice was better known as Alicia Bloom - one of the world’s greatest actresses. She could go and stay with her in her New York penthouse apartment any time she liked or even stay in the house in Belgravia that Alice owned. She could even go to Hollywood and stay with her ‘cousin’ Alana - Alice’s daughter; her husband Dirk dealt in finding homes for people, and would happily find her a little beach-side condo. But Annie didn’t want their charity. Whilst she’d had a wonderful childhood, at just five, becoming the legal ward of Sir Michael and Lady Nesta Holland; growing up in Elliott House in Oxford, and enjoying a private education and having ponies and all the things a girl who was born in the slums of Battersea, should never have. At the end of the day, none of it was her birthright, and she couldn’t keep taking off her family.

Marrying Mario at eighteen had seemed like the answer to all her prayers. What young girl straight from boarding school wouldn’t have their head turned by a handsome Italian racing driver? And even though she’d lived on his money, at least she gave him something in return. She slept with him each night, and always looked good so he’d have a trophy on his arm. What she didn’t know was that behind her back he kept a string of mistresses and thousands of pounds of gambling debts run up in every country he’d ever raced in. And when it had all got too much, he’d driven into a brick wall to escape his responsibility.

Now the only asset she had was Bruno’s, the nightclub Mario had won in a card game against some gangster. It brought in enough money each week for Annie to pay the rent on the Fulham flat and to keep herself looking nice. But even Mandy didn’t know that the shoes she was wearing were a pair she’d paid ten bob for from a stall on North End Road market. She’d tarted them up with a red silk bow she’d got in Barbers the department store and they now looked like something from an exclusive boutique in the South of France. Annie couldn’t afford the real thing any more.

Bruno’s was situated beneath a French restaurant at the Oxford Street end of Wardour Street. It was just far enough away from Soho to be semi-respectable, but Annie knew darn well that most of her clientele were dodgy - villains who wanted to be photographed with some minor

celebrity, or MPs who enjoyed ogling the young hostesses. But they were her bread and butter, so she had no choice but to paint on her cheeriest smile and help them see in the New Year.

As she and Mandy entered the club, their coats were taken by Sylvio, Mario's cousin who worked as a meeter and greeter.

‘How are things?’ Annie asked, peering into the club.

‘Not bad, but there are a couple of dodgy-looking sorts I don't recognise.’

‘Who am I looking out for?’

‘Fat, greasy-looking sod who looks like a vampire and a good-looking bloke who's with a blonde with big tits. Not sure who they are - probably nobody, but you know me Annie, I have a sense about these things.’

‘Thanks for the warning,’ Annie said. ‘I don't need any trouble tonight. I'm not in the mood.’

They walked into the club, and Annie was pleased to see it was packed. She recognised all the usual faces – a few models and starlets, a couple of Maltese gangsters and their floozies. The rest were people who'd taken their chance and come in, hoping to have a good time. The house band - led by Ray Scott, were playing some light jazz on the stage, and the air was filled with smoke and the smell of alcohol. A few people came up to greet Annie and she gave them the cursory ‘hello’ and ‘how are you?’ before moving on to the next person - all the while looking out for the interlopers. She'd had a gut feeling for ages that Bruno's would be the next thing on Mario's debtor's list and that someone would come along to take it off her. Maybe these strangers were henchmen, come to start trouble.

‘Hello Annie darling,’ a voice suddenly said, awakening her from her thoughts. She looked round and saw it was Moira Brand, a young up and coming actress who used to go out with Kristien Lax, an old team mate of Mario's. Even though they'd split up, she still came to Bruno's. Mandy couldn't stand her for some reason and predictably walked away as soon as Moira joined them.

‘Hello Moira,’ Annie said, kissing her on both cheeks. ‘How are you?’

‘Rather excited,’ Moira fizzed in her deep, plummy voice. Annie always wondered if Mandy's dislike for her came from the fact that Moira was a genuinely classy blonde. Her mother was a Lady and her father a banker. Whereas Mandy did her best to hide the fact that she grew up in Enfield and her dad was a station manager for London Underground. ‘I found out just before Christmas that I'm making a film with James Robertson Justice and Sylvia Sims.’

‘That's fantastic,’ Annie smiled. ‘What's it about?’

‘Oh it's some comic caper. I play a secretary who discovers a secret plan to bomb the Russians. I don't really care. It's my first proper supporting role and that's all that matters.’

‘The first of many,’ Annie said. ‘Can I get you a glass of champagne to celebrate?’

‘I'll pass thanks darling, I'm just off to Cliff Richard's party.’

‘Well lucky you,’ laughed Annie. ‘Have fun.’

‘I intend to.’ Moira glanced down and gasped. ‘I love your shoes! Where did you get them?’

‘I'll let you into a little secret,’ Annie said as quietly as she could. ‘I made them.’

‘They're gorgeous. I've got a dress that's black velvet with a red bow on the front. They'd look so good with it.’ She tapped Annie on the arm. ‘You'll have to make me a pair.’

She kissed Annie once more on the cheek.

‘Ciao darling. I'll see you in the New Year.’

She rushed off, and Annie found herself alone again. She thought about what Moira had just said about her making a pair of shoes for her. She loved the idea of making shoes for people. Had things turned out differently, she would have gone to art college to become a shoe designer; but she'd got caught up with being Mario's girlfriend and he would have never supported her doing something with her brain. It was her job to look good for him.

Mandy was at the bar being chatted up by a man who looked old enough to be her father and Annie wondered if she should intervene. Despite her brassy image, Mandy was faithful to Jeremy and might not have appreciated this older man trying his luck. Annie went to move, but was stopped by someone placing a hand upon her arm.

'Does this place belong to you?'

Annie looked round and for a moment, took a sharp intake of breath. Hanging around with Mario and his racing driver friends, she was used to talking to good-looking men, but this one was something else. His black, velvet suit was a little too much, but he was tall and very handsome, with swept back auburn hair and the most beautiful light green eyes Annie had ever seen. She certainly didn't recognise him, and Sylivo's words of warning about the good looking stranger came to mind.

'Yes it does,' she replied. 'I don't believe we've met before.'

'Patrick Collins,' he said, offering his hand.

'Annie Holland. What brings you here?'

'A business interest,' he said, looking around. 'It's a nice club.'

He certainly didn't look like a villain and he was quite well-spoken for someone who'd been raised in the East End – as most of the local gangsters had. Maybe he was a respectable businessman, and this got Annie thinking. If she could get a viable offer for Bruno's, she'd take it. It had never been her ambition to run a nightclub anyway. But the money would have to make it worth her while.

'Well now isn't the time to discuss business,' she replied, playing it cool. 'Can I get you a drink Mr Collins?'

'Patrick, please,' he grinned. His smile was wolfish and there was a cheeky glint in his eyes that made Annie's stomach quiver a little. There was an air of danger about him, but she didn't know why - on the surface he seemed so respectable. 'I'd love a drink, thank you. Why don't you join me and my friends? We're in the booth over there.'

He pointed to the booth in the corner, where there sat a young man who was far too fat for his years; his dark hair was slicked back from his brow, and as he smiled at the fat blonde next to him - who was squeezed into a shiny silver dress; his white pointed teeth reminded Annie of Dracula.

'Okay,' Annie replied. 'I'll get you your drinks first. What would you like?'

'Champagne,' he smiled. 'I think this is the right occasion, don't you?'

As Annie walked to the bar, she realised he hadn't given her any money for the drinks, and she laughed at his cheek.

'Who's that?' purred Mandy, as Annie stood beside her.

'He's called Patrick Collins,' Annie replied. 'He wants me to join him and his friends.'

Eric, the barman came over to them, a fraught expression on his face.

'You know who that is don't you?' he said.

'Should I?'

'Bernie Collins' boy.'

'Bernie Collins?'

‘He was the geezer Mario won this place off of.’

Annie’s blood ran cold. This Patrick had come to settle a score. Offering money for the place wasn’t going to be an option. He was probably going to threaten her instead.

‘Well he isn’t getting it back,’ Annie said bravely.

‘If Bernie Collins wants something, he’ll take it,’ Eric warned. ‘Only a fool would say no to him.’

Annie got a bottle of Moet in an ice bucket and some glasses, and tried to still her shaking hands as she took it over to the booth. Patrick was sitting with his arm around the fat blonde’s shoulder, and she looked like the cat who’d got the cream - no doubt proud that she’d managed to collar such a handsome man. Annie sat beside the other man, who looked at her and smiled lasciviously – his sweaty face making her feel quite queasy.

‘This is Annie, the owner of the place,’ Patrick said. ‘Annie, this is my friend Dave, and this is my girlfriend Trixie.’

Annie dared to make eye contact with Patrick and had to look away quickly. Those piercing eyes seemed to bore right through her, as if they could see into her very soul. She couldn’t risk that - he’d see how scared she was of what he was going to do to her or her club.

‘Nice place,’ Dave said in a rather high-pitched, stupid sounding voice. ‘You had it long?’

‘Don’t be so rude Dave,’ Patrick said. ‘You know darn well that Annie only got this place because her husband died.’ He looked at Annie and gave a little nod. ‘Please excuse my friend,’ he said. ‘And accept my condolences at the death of Mario. He was a great racer.’

‘It’s been six months now,’ Annie said. ‘I’m starting to come to terms with it all.’

‘You’re very brave. I bet it gets hard though. Trying to run the place by yourself.’

‘I manage,’ she replied. ‘I have very good staff. Are you going to pour that champagne?’

‘Yes of course.’

As he poured the drinks, Annie looked at Trixie, whose smile wasn’t reaching her cold, blue eyes.

‘So what do you do Trixie?’ Annie asked.

‘I’m an actress,’ she replied in a brash Cockney voice. ‘Pat’s going to get me into films.’

‘Is he now?’ Annie said. ‘Are you in the film business Patrick?’

‘I have my fingers in many pies,’ he replied, glancing up at her with that sly smile and making her blush.

He passed Trixie her glass of champagne and kissed her on the cheek.

‘Do you know darling, I think I spotted Diana Dors over there by the door?’ he said. ‘Why don’t you go and see if you can talk to her? You need to meet people if you’re gonna get on.’

‘You think she’d talk to me?’ Trixie gasped, clutching her chest.

‘Course she would. Go on, try your luck.’

Trixie wriggled past Patrick and wandered off into the club. Dave saw this as his cue to leave, and banged his hands on his knees and stood up.

‘Where’s the little boy’s room love?’ he asked Annie.

‘At the end of that corridor over there.’

‘Thanks love.’

He too left, and Patrick slid over to Annie so he was sitting close to her. He smelt of cigarettes and aftershave and soap, and Annie knew that smell would remain in her nose for the rest of the night.

‘Diana Dors isn’t here,’ she quipped. ‘She wouldn’t be seen dead in a place like this.’

‘Yeah but I wanted to get rid of Trixie didn’t I? I wanted to talk business with you.’

‘I know who you are,’ she said. ‘My barman told me. This place used to belong to your father, before Mario won it off him in a card game.’

‘Smart as well as beautiful,’ he nodded. ‘I didn’t realise you’d cotton on to me so quickly.’

‘This is my livelihood Patrick. I have to know everything that’s going on. I take it you want to take it back off me?’

He smiled and sipped his champagne.

‘It’s always pissed Dad off that he lost this club. It was a good little earner for him.’

‘So why has he sent you to do his bidding?’

‘Because he didn’t want to use his normal tactics on you. You are a lady after all.’

‘So if I was a man I’d be on the receiving end of his violence then?’

‘Probably.’

‘But you’re not violent?’

‘No, I try to remain professional.’

He looked up and frowned. Annie followed his gaze and noticed Trixie heading back towards them, her face like thunder.

‘Have dinner with me,’ Patrick quickly said to Annie.

‘No,’ she replied.

‘I need to talk to you about the business.’

‘It’s not for sale. That’s all there is to it.’

She got up just as Trixie reached the table.

‘You alright darling?’ Patrick asked.

‘That weren’t fucking Diana Dors!’ she cried. ‘It was some old tart who was about forty.’

‘I must need glasses,’ he laughed nervously. Annie made a quick escape, and headed over to Mandy, who was still at the bar, chatting to the older man.

‘I’m going home,’ she announced to her friend

‘But you’ve got to be here to see the New Year in,’ Mandy frowned.

‘I’ve lost the desire to party,’ Annie said. ‘You be my stand-in for the night.’

Annie grabbed her coat from the cloakroom and left the club, running up the steps to the street. When she reached the top, she found herself gasping for air. What had just happened had frightened her. If she lost Bruno’s, she would lose everything. And if Patrick didn’t succeed in getting her club off her, then what sort of violence would his father resort to to ensure he did? Since Mario’s death, everything had gone so wrong for her, and she couldn’t look forward to the coming New Year. She just wanted to go home, shut the door and think about her next move. She was determined not to hand over the club to a thug, and face a life of poverty or be forced to scrounge off her adopted family. Mario had left her very little, but she was determined to hang onto what she had.

Chapter Two

It was hard for Annie not to think back to her twenty-fourth birthday. Mario had whisked her away from the misery of wintery London, to Nice, where they'd holidayed on his friend's yacht – drinking champagne and eating the finest food. How different her twenty-fifth birthday was. She was at the club, wearing one of Mario's old shirts and a pair of Capri pants, her sleeves rolled up, supervising a drinks delivery. Annie hated seeing the club in daylight; it just highlighted the un-even floor, the scuffed wood on the bar and tables and the peeling wallpaper. It was a dump, and she wondered if Patrick Collins offered her enough money she should take it. Right now, it seemed like a welcome escape.

She was standing over the cellar door as Eric took the boxes of vodka down the precarious steps, when a call came from behind her.

'Is there anyone in?'

Annie turned around and gasped in shock when she saw her Aunt Alice standing there. Despite being nearly seventy; and her once lustrous dark hair now grey and cut into a short bob, she still exuded the sort of glamour which came from being one of the world's most famous actresses.

'Aunt Alice,' Annie said, running over to her and grasping her hands. 'What are you doing here?'

'Well, I'm doing a short run in Blythe Spirit at the Garrick. So I thought I'd pop in and see what my gorgeous niece is going for her birthday.'

'Not a lot, as you can see,' Annie sighed. 'Life has to go on.'

'Well I'm sure things can get done without you here for a couple of hours. How about I take you to lunch? I've a little present for you.'

'Look at me,' Annie wined, looking down at herself. 'I'm hardly dressed appropriately.'

Alice reached up and undid Annie's pony-tail. Her hair cascaded around her ears, and Alice then reached into her handbag and pulled out a comb, passing it to Annie.

'Brush your hair, put on some lippy and you'll look lovely. Come on, I'm taking you to Channings.'

As they walked into Channings – the upmarket brassiere on Piccadilly, several heads turned. Older patrons would no doubt recognise Alicia Bloom, the beautiful movie star from the 1920s and 30s; and those too young to recall her film career were probably just staring because two stunning women had entered. Over the years people had often mistaken Alice and Annie for mother and daughter - they were both tall, willowy and dark haired. They even had the same big, dark eyes and generous mouth. But apart from originating from Battersea, they were not blood relatives. Alice had been married to Nesta's brother James. But Annie had always looked on her as her aunt, and they got on so well.

They were given the best table in the house, near to the open fire at the back, and the maitre d' fawned all over Alice, clearly recognising her. She ordered a couple of gin and tonics and told him to go away until she and Annie had decided what to eat.

'So, have you heard from your brother?' Alice asked.

'No. He's still in Newcastle as far as I'm aware. I think Tanner Beresford are building a housing estate somewhere or the other. I'm not really interested.'

'It's such a shame about you two. You were so close when you were little.'

‘I just wish Kenneth would stop taking life so seriously all the time,’ Annie sighed. ‘I know he wants to run Tanner Beresford as best as he can, but he continually makes me feel stupid because I want to live the good life. Is that so bad?’

‘No, not at all. Life’s for living, but I suppose with Nesta in Switzerland, Kenneth feels he has no one else to lean on.’

‘But it was his idea to put her in that convalescent home in Geneva. I was quite happy for her to be looked after at Elliott House, with a nurse living in. I’ll never forgive him for putting her in Clinique de Valmont, then knocking down Elliot House so they could build a housing estate. That house had been in Uncle Michael’s family for centuries.’

‘Honestly,’ Alice sighed. ‘The pair of you need your heads knocking together. Anyway, talking of legacies. I have a little something for you for your birthday.’

‘You didn’t have to Aunt Alice, I wasn’t expecting anything.’

Alice ignored her, and from her handbag pulled out a set of keys with a paper tag attached to them. She then passed them to Annie.

‘Happy Birthday Annie,’ she said.

‘What’s this?’

‘It’s the keys to The Fortune Hotel on Regent Street.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Annie frowned. ‘Why are you giving me a hotel?’

‘Villiers Hotels has become a millstone around my neck since your Uncle James died,’ Alice replied. ‘Max has no interest in running it. Bloomberg Foods takes up all his time. Dirk’s bought up some of the American hotels, but I’m stuck with the others. I’m an actress Annie, I’m not interested in running hotels. So I’ve decided to offload as much of it as I possibly can. I’m leaving Kenneth The Randolph in Edgware Road in my will. No doubt he’ll sell it to reinvest in Tanner Beresford. Max is getting the rest of the hotels, to sell off.’

‘So why are you giving this to me now?’

‘Because I know Mario cleaned you out and you’re too proud to come to me for help. I doubt your Uncle Michael’s trust-fund will give you much of a monthly return.’

Annie had completely forgotten that Michael had left her and Kenneth a trust fund each, that started on their twenty-fifth birthdays. But poor Michael had lost so much money in the years after the war, she doubted it amounted to much. Certainly not enough to keep her in the manner Mario had.

‘Do you want me to run it then?’ she asked.

‘Darling it’s been closed since 1957! It’s just standing there vacant. But Regent Street is a prime area and I reckon you could sell it for a decent amount.’

‘Thank you Aunt Alice,’ Annie gasped. ‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘Just use the money wisely,’ Alice smiled. ‘Do something you’ve always wanted to do.’

‘Shall I tell you what I always wanted? I wanted to make shoes. Does that sound strange to you?’

‘Not at all. Perhaps you could use the money to set yourself up somewhere.’ ‘Yes, perhaps I could. I’m so grateful for this Aunt Alice. I’m not even family.’

‘Of course you’re family,’ Alice said firmly, reaching across the table and grasping Annie’s arm. ‘Just because we’re not blood, it doesn’t matter. I’ve known you since you were five years old and watched you grow into the beautiful girl you are. I never kept in touch with my proper brothers and sisters, so you and Kenny are the nearest I’ve got to a niece and nephew, and I want to spoil you.’

Annie made her way back to the club in much higher spirits. Not only did she have a belly filled with gin and delicious food; she was also now the owner of a building in Regent Street. Alice promised to meet again soon with her solicitor so the papers could be signed, and from then on it was Annie's to do whatever she liked. She promised herself that as soon as she'd finished up at Bruno's, she would head over to The Fortune and take a look at it.

As she descended the steps to the club, she looked through the window and immediately recognised the man standing in the middle of the floor, chatting to Eric. It was Patrick Collins, and the sight of him struck a strange mixture of lust and fear into Annie. She couldn't deny that she found him wildly attractive; but everything he stood for terrified her.

'What's going on here?' she asked, as she entered the club. Patrick turned around and looked at her, tipping his trilby hat and giving her a brief glimpse of that shiny auburn hair.

'Annie, hello,' he smiled. 'I thought I'd drop in and invite you for dinner.'

'I've already told you, I'm not interested,' she said, taking off her coat. She looked at Eric, who stood holding on tightly to a crate, his face white as a sheet in terror. 'Eric can you see Mr Collins out please?'

'Er, yeah, alright,' he uttered, putting the crate down.

'That's not necessary,' Patrick said, and in a move that made Annie gasp with horror, he took hold of her arm with one hand, picked up her coat with the other and practically frogmarched her out of the club. Annie's heart raced in fear, wondering where he was going to take her. She'd heard so many stories about the sort of punishments these gangsters meted out to their enemies.

'Let go of me!' she cried as he manoeuvred her up the steps. 'You've no right to be doing this.'

Ignoring her, he pulled her across the road, and into Dino's, the little café that was always frequented at night by prostitutes and their pimps. During the day the clientele were shop girls from Oxford Street, and as Annie and Patrick entered, she noticed a couple of the little dollies look up and smile in appreciation at him - paying no attention at how roughly he was treating her.

He pushed her down onto a chair at an empty table and went to the counter. Annie wondered if she should run, but decided against it. He would no doubt come after her if she tried to escape. It was easier to sit and listen to what he had to say.

He got them two cups of over-brewed tea and sat before her, removing his hat and running his hand through his hair to flatten it down.

'By God you're a hard one to handle aren't you?' he hissed. 'All I want to do is talk to you.'

'No!' she hissed. 'All you want to do is take my club back off me to give to Daddy. Why should I give it to you?'

'Dad doesn't want to take it off you. He wants to take it over.'

'Same difference.'

'No it isn't. You'd still get a cut of the profits. But you'd get no say in what happened.'

'I'm not going into business with a gangster.'

'Dad's methods may be a little unorthodox, but essentially he's a businessman. Being a lady, you'd have no idea about this, but back in the war, people needed men like my dad to supply them with things. Not that you'd understand what it's like to be poor.'

‘Don’t make assumptions about me. Me and my brother lived in poverty until we were five and seven and taken in by Michael and Nesta Holland. I can still remember that smelly slum behind Nine Elms Lane where we used to live.’

‘So you landed on your feet then?’ he smiled, teasing her.

‘Maybe I did. But I’ve never forgotten where I came from.’

‘In that case, you shouldn’t be so against my dad.’

‘What’s so special about my club? Can’t he take over another one?’

‘No.’ Patrick’s face hardened and he sipped his tea, drawing a line under the conversation, but Annie wasn’t willing to be fobbed off so easily.

‘Well, why not?’ she asked.

‘He’s got business interests around here,’ he said curtly. ‘There are rival gangs operating in the area and Dad thinks it would be good to fill the club with his men. To stop any trouble happening.’

‘So would your dad be running it?’

‘No, I would. I’d be your business partner.’

Just briefly, the proposition seemed attractive to Annie. She’d have none of the hassle of running the club, and there was the added bonus of seeing Patrick regularly. But there was no getting away from the fact that his father wanted to use it for criminal activities, and if the police got involved, she’d get dragged into it too.

‘I’m going to have to think about it,’ she said. ‘I can’t make a decision like that in a couple of minutes. Mario cleaned me out completely. I’m renting a shitty flat in Fulham and haven’t any other income. If I lose Bruno’s, I’m destitute.’

‘I thought you were adopted by those rich people.’

‘My Aunt Nesta had a stroke two years ago and is in a nursing home in Geneva. My Uncle Michael died in 1954. My brother runs my Aunt’s housing association, but he ploughs every penny he makes back into the company, and that’s it. My aunt by marriage is Alicia Bloom..’

‘The actress?’

‘Yes. And she’s rich, but I’m not willing to scrounge off her. I want to make my own way.’

‘If you say so love. If it was me, I’d be living it up in Hollywood with her.’

‘She doesn’t live in Hollywood. She lives in New York. My cousins Max and Alana live in Los Angeles.’

‘That must be *the* Alana!’ he gasped, laughing loudly. ‘She’s Alicia Bloom’s daughter. She was my pin-up girl when I was a boy.’

‘Well there you have it, you’ve met her adopted cousin by marriage. Not much, but something.’

‘Oh I don’t know,’ he smiled. ‘It’s pretty good compensation.’

‘Trixie wouldn’t like to hear you talking like that,’ she replied.

‘Trixie and me aren’t serious,’ he said with a wave of the hand. ‘She’s a laugh, nothing else.’

‘How come she thinks you can help her become an actress?’

‘I’ve been running Dad’s clubs since I was twenty-one, and I’ve met a lot of actors. It’s amazing what you can persuade them to do when you know so many secrets about them. I’m hoping I can put it to good use and become a film producer.’

She laughed.

‘So you don’t want to stay a villain all your life?’

‘I’m not a villain,’ he smiled. ‘I’m a businessman. And speaking of which, are we now business partners?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

Annie glanced around and lowered her head, coming closer to him.

‘I’m not being associated with anything criminal. For one, I’ve nothing else other than Bruno’s, and two, my brother hates me enough as it is. If I got embroiled in some sort of scandal, he’d never speak to me again.’

‘Why does your brother hate you?’

‘Oh lots of reasons,’ she sighed. ‘We’re very different people. When Kenneth was about ten, he decided he wanted to be a priest. He even started a theology degree at Oxford when he was eighteen. But my Aunt Nesta was seventy by then and she was finding running Tanner Beresford too much, so she asked Kenneth to help out. It suits him fine. He gets to help the sort of people we were when we were children. I think Kenneth feels guilty for being taken out of the gutter and that he has to give something back.’

‘But you were different?’

‘I was only five when I went to live with Aunt Nesta and Uncle Michael. I never went back to Battersea, and by the time I was seven they’d legally changed our names to Holland. I don’t remember my dad at all. I have very vague memories of my mum, but she was ill most of the time. Aunt Nesta’s been like a mother to me. I went to a good prep school, then St Agnes’s in Kingston. I didn’t see the point of repaying some big debt to society and I enjoyed the good life. Kenneth didn’t approve when I married Mario because he saw our lifestyle as frivolous.’

‘So what was your surname before you were adopted?’

‘Brady.’

‘Irish?’ he smiled.

‘I presume so. But as I said, I’ve no recollection of my father. My mother wasn’t Irish.’

‘We had neighbours called Brady back in Kilburn.’

‘Are you Irish then? I know Kilburn is a very Irish area.’

‘Dad’s from Dublin. He came over when he was a boy though, so he’s got no memories of it.’

‘That’s like me. What matters is the life Kenneth and I had once Nesta and Michael took us in - nothing else. But on saying that I don’t want to upset him any further, so I can’t go into business with you. I’m sorry.’

‘Okay okay. How about I just put a couple of men on the door? Nothing else. There’s trouble coming Annie. The Maltese are after our blood. So are some of the East End boys. If you don’t get protection, they’ll still try and take over Bruno’s. I’d never be violent with you, but I can’t promise that they won’t be. They don’t have much respect for women.’

Annie felt confused and backed into a corner. She couldn’t deny that over the years she’d met starlets who’d dated Maltese gangsters and had been on the receiving end of their beatings. But how did she even know Patrick was telling the truth? It may have just been a ploy to get her to hand power over to him.

‘Okay,’ she sighed. ‘A couple of men on the door. Nothing else. And I don’t want my regulars turned away. This isn’t a take over.’

‘Thanks Annie,’ he said, offering his hand, which she shook. ‘You’ll hardly notice any difference, I promise you.’

‘We’ll see. I hope I’m not jumping into bed with the devil.’

‘You can jump into bed with me any time you like.’

‘You’re terrible,’ she smiled. ‘Anyway, I suppose I’d better be getting back to the club. Not the most glamorous way to spend your birthday, over-seeing a delivery of booze.’

‘It’s your birthday today?’ he smiled.

‘Yes, it is.’

‘Happy Birthday.’

‘Thank you.’

‘So how are you celebrating?’

‘I’m not. My friend Mandy’s out with her boyfriend, and everyone else has made other plans. I had lunch with Aunt Alice, so that was nice.’ Did she tell him about the hotel? She didn’t think she should for now.

‘Well that’s a shame,’ he frowned playfully. ‘We’ll just have to come up with something.’

‘Just you concentrate on not changing my club. When will these men be starting there?’

‘This weekend,’ he replied. ‘When there’s most likely to be trouble.’

‘I wish you’d stop saying that,’ she shivered. ‘I’ve had more than my fair share of trouble – I don’t want anymore.’

She drained her tea cup and left Patrick in the café. She still found herself shaking, even though she was sure he wasn’t actually a physical threat to her. There was just something about his presence that she found so overwhelming.

The Fortune Hotel was tiny. Over the years, Annie had seen many Villiers Hotels and they were usually grand buildings that would take up a whole block. The Fortune blended in with all the other buildings on Regent Street, close to Piccadilly Circus, and was only the width of the average shop. As Annie stood looking up at the eight story building, she wondered what the hell she was going to do with it. She wished she had lots of money so she could open her fashion house. Regent Street was filled with high-class outfitters and fancy couture shops. She dreamt of a shop on the ground floor that would sell shoes and bags, and the upper floors would be where the things were designed and made. She could even convert the top floor into a flat. But to do this would take serious money. Something Annie didn’t have at the moment.

She opened the heavy, wooden, revolving front door, and stepped into the lobby. It was as if all time had stood still. Everything was still in place – the reception desk, the keys hanging up on hooks behind it. Like a child, Annie stepped behind the tatty wooden counter and pretended to be serving someone. She opened one of the drawers in the desk and saw there was a stack of embossed paper with ‘The Fortune Hotel’ in gold lettering at the top. Annie stood and imagined a by-gone age when this place would have been filled with visitors.

Because the electricity wasn’t on, the elevator didn’t work, so Annie had to take the stairs to each floor. The interiors of the corridors were still in quite good condition, but all the rooms had been stripped of their furniture. For a moment, Annie stopped and fantasised about people working in them, making her shoes. She wasn’t sure what it was, but there was something about this building that made her want to hang onto it. Or maybe she could sell part of it and keep the rest for herself. Annie wasn’t sure, but an instinct told her that maybe this dilapidated old building could be her way of proving herself once and for all.

Chapter Three

Late February 1959

Cream always rises to the top Iris Lindholm thought to herself as the taxi made its way along Bedford Hill, past the clapped-out prostitutes plying their wares along the edge of Tooting Bec. Once, a long long time ago, she'd been like them. Trying her luck, not knowing what sort of low-life was going to pull up alongside her and ask for some disgusting act in the back of his smelly car. Then there would be the ones who'd appear from the bushes, as if out of nowhere, and practically drag her back in there before negotiating a price. The thought of it made Iris shudder, but she quickly composed herself. She didn't have to bother herself with men like that any more. She was high-class now. She couldn't even really call herself a tart these days. She saw three men and that was it; and it wasn't all about sex now. It was about being seen out and about and treated like a lady. It was Arthur, the alcoholic writer tonight. He'd been pissed when she asked him if they could go to Bruno's on Saturday night, and he'd agreed. Arthur just liked going to places where there was alcohol served and plenty of pretty girls to look at.

Soon the car was out of South London and heading over Lambeth Bridge towards Westminster. Iris looked at the Houses of Parliament and thought about the MP she used to see who liked her to spank him in his private chambers. He'd get a thrill because he could hear his fellow ministers walking around outside, their feet clack clack clacking on the shiny floor. Iris thought back to the two shilling hookers on Bedford Hill and felt proud of the fact she'd come so far. She put it down to it being in her blood. People from her family always seemed to do well for themselves. Look at that long-lost great aunt of hers. Starting off as a tuppenny 'apenny music hall performer from Battersea, and ending up as one of the greatest actresses of all time. Of course, no one would ever believe her if she told them she was related to Alicia Bloom. They hardly looked alike. In her day Alicia had been a beautiful, willowy brunette; whereas Iris was a buxom, natural blonde. That was why she'd taken the name Lindholm - her mother always reckoned her father was a Swedish sailor. But that steely determination to succeed came from her mother's side; and tonight was Iris's chance to start her quest.

The taxi pulled up outside Bruno's, and Iris found Arthur leaning against the railings, trying to light a cigarette. He was drunk already, which pleased her; she could prop him in a corner somewhere, and get to work on her mission. She got out of the cab, smoothed down her long, silver, figure-hugging dress, and wrapped her fur stole around her shoulders. Arthur was just sober enough to spot her, and stood up; staggering a little.

'Iris,' he gasped, holding out his arms. 'My darling.'

'Let's just get inside shall we?' she said. 'You're embarrassing me.'

Iris wished she had a more chivalrous companion, when Arthur part-walked, part-threw himself down the steps to the club, leaving her to teeter down in her stilettos. By the door stood two men in crombie coats. One of them had a long scar running down the left side of his face and it brought to mind memories of the sort of men she used to mix with, and suddenly Arthur seemed like a good catch.

'Hello,' said the un-scarred one - a rather attractive looking man with dark hair and twinkling blue eyes - to Arthur. 'Who are you then?'

'Arthur Hatfield,' he replied. 'And this is my beautiful companion Miss Iris Lindholm.'

'And what do you do Arthur?' the heavy continued.

‘Arthur’s a famous writer,’ Iris interjected, fluttering her eyelashes, and making her voice sound just a little dumber. ‘He’s written lots of plays and things.’

‘Hold on.’

The heavy went into the club, and the one with the scar stepped across the doorway, blocking their entrance. A little smile came onto Iris’s face. This sort of thing usually only happened in clubs when they’d been threatened by rival gangs. Heavies would be there to filter out any potential enemies, and before long it would have to become members only.

The other heavy re-emerged, accompanied by a beautiful brunette, who was a cross between Audrey Hepburn and Alicia Bloom. Her hair was pinned to one side with a red flower, and she wore a black satin, Chinese style dress. Iris guessed she’d struck gold straight away.

‘Do you recognise this gentleman?’ the heavy asked her.

‘No I don’t,’ she replied in a very posh, plummy voice.

‘Says his name’s Arthur Hatfield.’

‘Arthur Hatfield?’ She furrowed her brow, but her mouth smiled quizzically. ‘What was the name of your third play?’

‘The Winter’s Willow,’ he replied without thinking. Clever, considering how pissed he was.

She looked at the heavy.

‘Let them in, they’re fine.’

The heavies stepped to one side and let Arthur and Iris into the club. It was a dark and dingy affair, but smart enough to have a well-dressed fellow there to collect their coats.

‘I’m so sorry about that,’ the girl said, clasping her hands together. ‘We’ve had a bit of trouble lately, so we have to be extra careful. I’m such a fan of your work Mr Hatfield. We studied *The Constant Pain* at school. It’s my favourite play.’

‘Why thank you,’ Arthur slurred. ‘Always nice to meet a fan.’

‘I’m Annie Holland,’ she said, offering him her hand, confirming to Iris she was who she was looking for. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘And you my dear,’ Arthur said. ‘Can I introduce my girlfriend Iris Lindholm?’

‘Nice to meet you Iris,’ Annie said.

‘And you,’ she smiled sweetly.

‘Let me get you both a bottle of champagne. On the house. As a thank you for all your wonderful work Mr Hatfield.’

‘Arthur, please.’

‘If you insist,’ she giggled.

She led them into the main area of the club, and as Iris watched Annie go, she laughed to herself at how they looked like polar opposites. Annie was so tall and dark and willowy, and Iris was five six in her heels, blonde and curvy. That didn’t stop some of the men sitting in the booths nearby throwing her admiring glances, which she returned with the knowing smile she’d spent ten years perfecting.

Annie stood at the bar and asked the barman for a bottle of Moët and two glasses. She then turned her attention to Iris.

‘So are you Swedish Iris?’ she asked.

‘No, I’m a Londoner,’ she replied, trying to use her best-practiced posh voice, but it just came out as a husky whisper. ‘But my father was Swedish.’

‘Are you a model?’

‘Model and actress,’ Iris smiled.

‘Well, welcome to Bruno’s.’ The barman passed her the champagne in a silver bucket and she handed it to Arthur, who almost dropped it. ‘I hope you enjoy yourselves.’

She walked off into the throng of people and Iris looked for a booth in which to put Arthur. There was one in the far corner, close to the exit for the toilets. She manoeuvred Arthur over to it and sat down. Like a child grabbing for a toy, Arthur took the champagne and poured himself a glass – forgetting his manners and not pouring one for Iris. She got on and did it herself and looked around for Annie. She spotted her chatting to a group of people. Standing next to her was a very good-looking man with auburn hair. Iris wondered if they were a couple - after all, Annie was a free agent. Iris knew she was a widow. She’d followed her life for so many years, she was perfectly aware Annie’s husband had killed himself.

Iris heard a snore and realised Arthur had fallen asleep. She took this as her opportunity to mingle. She had no fear mixing with strangers – she’d been doing this since she was thirteen years old. As soon as she entered the throng, she was approached by a fat, greasy-looking bloke squeezed into an ill-fitting suit. With his slicked back dark hair and toothy smile, he reminded Iris of a vampire.

‘Alright love,’ he said.

‘Hello,’ she replied politely.

‘You here on your own?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Fancy a drink?’

‘I’ve got some champagne, thank you...’

‘Dave,’ he said. ‘And what’s your name beautiful?’

‘Iris. Iris Lindholm.’

‘German?’ he beamed.

‘Swedish. Half.’

‘That accounts for the blonde hair. You are a natural blonde aren’t you?’

‘Oh yes, all of me is blonde,’ she purred.

Dave staggered a little, and Iris looked up and saw the handsome chap with auburn hair heading towards them. Now he was the sort of man Iris liked. Tall, with a cheeky glint in his very pale eyes and an arrogant swagger.

‘I hope you’re not bothering this young lady, Dave,’ he said, winking at Iris.

‘We were just discussing natural blondes,’ Iris said. ‘Dave was trying to guess if I was one.’

The man lifted himself slightly and looked at the top of Iris’s head and laughed.

‘I don’t see any roots, so I’m guessing it’s all real.’

‘Iris is half Swedish,’ Dave said.

‘Are you now?’ smiled the other one. ‘What do you do Iris?’

‘I’m an actress and a model.’

‘Been in anything I would have heard of?’ he asked, and the smirk on his face told Iris that he knew darn well what sort of model she was.

‘Bits of theatre. A couple of commercials. I’m only just starting out.’

‘I’m sure you’ll be a very big star.’ He stuck out his hand. ‘Patrick Collins.’

‘Iris Lindholm. Pleased to meet you.’

He held her hand for a little too long, and she was sure he gave it a little squeeze. Then Annie suddenly appeared beside him, putting her hand on his shoulder and Patrick quickly let Iris’s hand go.

‘Hello Iris,’ she said. ‘Where’s Arthur?’

‘Asleep in a booth,’ Iris quipped.

‘Oh what a shame. I wanted to ask him if he had any plans for a new play.’

‘Who’s Arthur?’ Patrick asked.

‘Arthur Hatfield,’ Annie said. ‘He’s a famous playwright. He’s Iris’s boyfriend.’

‘Boyfriend?’ Patrick said, and as he looked at Iris, she was sure she could see a hint of either irritation or regret in his eyes.

‘Friend, really,’ she replied. ‘I look good on his arm.’

‘You’d look good on anyone’s arm,’ Patrick said.

Someone called his name from the other side of the room, and with a sigh, he picked up Iris’s hand and kissed it.

‘It was a pleasure Miss Lindholm,’ he said, and he walked away. Dave also sloped off somewhere, leaving the two women alone.

‘I saw you in Woman’s Own with your Aunt,’ Iris said. ‘I still love watching Alicia Bloom films on the television of a Sunday afternoon.’

‘She thought she’d do the interview with me to help promote my new venture,’ Annie giggled.

Iris looked down at the black velvet stilettos Annie was wearing.

‘Did you make them?’

‘These?’ She briefly lifted her left foot up. ‘Oh no. Mario bought these for me in New York.’

Did he now? Iris thought. Bitter at the fact that Annie had been all over the world and had done so many things, and yet she was only two years older than her.

‘Well they’re lovely. I wish you could make me a pair of shoes.’

‘I’ve not had any orders yet. I’m still renovating my building. But when I’ve finished, I’ll make you a pair.’

Iris gave a theatrical laugh.

‘I wouldn’t be able to afford them!’

‘Well I’ll need showroom models. Why don’t you drop by in a month or so and we’ll see what’s happening.’

‘Do you mean that?’ Iris gasped, making sure she sounded really grateful.

‘Yes, why not? Maybe you could persuade Arthur to write another play in return.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘Fabulous. Well, I’ve got to mingle. I’ll see you soon Iris.’

‘Thank you Annie.’

Annie smiled and walked off and Iris clenched her fists in victory. Step one of her mission was complete.

She returned to the booth to find Arthur still slumped to one side, asleep. Iris slid into the booth beside him, and shook his shoulder to wake him up.

‘Wake up Arthur,’ she said. ‘Please, wake up.’

He grumbled and looked at her, his eyes wandering.

‘Where am I?’ he asked.

‘In a nightclub. I’ve got a headache, I want to go home.’

‘Okay,’ he said, nodding off again. ‘I’ll stay here, I’m having such a lovely evening.’

Iris left him to it and walked through the club, to the exit. Just as she was about to approach the guy who'd taken her coat, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned around to find Patrick standing there. That cheeky smile on his face.

'Where's the boyfriend?' he asked.

'Asleep in the booth,' she replied.

'And you're leaving him?'

'I've got a headache.'

'You got far to go?'

'South of the river.'

'Whereabouts?'

'Streatham.'

'You got your coat?'

'It's a fur wrap. It's red.'

'Hang on.'

He went into the cloakroom and came back out with her wrap. He passed it to her, then cocked his head, indicating for her to follow him. She did so, up the steps to the pavement. Patrick strode ahead and led her into an alleyway, where a couple of big, black cars were parked. Iris felt adrenaline start to pump through her body. Where was he taking her? What did he have planned? He walked up to one of the cars and the driver wound down the window. Patrick bent down to speak to him.

'You alright guv?' the driver asked in a brash cockney accent.

'Take the lady home will you Denny?' Patrick asked. He stood back up and looked at Iris.

'I hope we'll be seeing you again soon,' he said.

'I'm sure you will,' she replied enigmatically. 'Thank you for this.'

Those piercing green eyes surveyed her as he sucked hard on his cigarette.

'I can't have a lovely lady such as you wandering the streets of Streatham alone can I?' he said.

'I suppose not,' she said. 'Once again, thank you.'

She got into the back of the car and Patrick stood and watched them drive off. Iris gave a demure wave and sat back, feeling a little rocked by what had happened. She had met a hundred and one Patrick Collins in her lifetime. The slightly posh accent and good quality clothes didn't mean a thing. He was a wide boy, and at a guess he was either Annie Holland's bit of rough, or he had some vested interest in the club. But there was something about him that had got to her. He was exciting and gorgeous, and she got the feeling he wasn't put off by the type of girl she was. Men like that didn't come along often.

'You a friend of Patrick's?' the driver asked, glancing at her in the rear view mirror.

'No, we only just met tonight. Does he work for Annie Holland?'

'Works with her more like. She might own it, but Pat calls the shots.'

'Been in business together long?'

'The club used to belong to his old man, Bernie. But Bernie lost it in a card game to Mario Stefani, the racing driver. When old Mario snuffed it, Bernie wanted the club back, but Annie weren't gonna budge. So her and Pat drew up a bargain. He puts a couple of blokes on the door and she gets to play Mein Hostess.'

'Anything going on between them?'

'Nah. No woman can pin Pat down.'

'Glad to hear it,' Iris purred. 'A man like that shouldn't be tamed.'

Chapter Four

March 1959

Annie thought of all the places she'd rather be than sitting across a table from Kenneth, his face like thunder, looking at his watch and fidgeting. After months spent in Newcastle, supervising the construction of the new Tanner Beresford homes, he was back in London and Annie thought they could spend some time together by having a meal and a catch up. She'd even chosen Alexander's in Leicester Square to suit his tastes. It was a rather austere place that hadn't seemed to move on from the war. The décor was basic and the menu consisted of traditional English foods – nothing French or Italian, which was increasingly the fashionable thing to go for. Annie found the rabbit stew she'd ordered quite revolting, and it was made even more unpalatable by looking at Kenneth in a sulk.

'Do you realise how many people we could have housed in that hotel?' he finally said, pushing his plate away. Although Annie couldn't blame him – the haddock pie he'd ordered looked horrendous. It was shame that Kenneth was always so angry. He was such a handsome man. He was much fairer than Annie. His hair was dark blonde, his eyes blue. As children, whenever they'd met strangers, people would presume Kenneth was Nesta's son. He had the same fair hair and high cheekbones. When Annie was a teenager, she would bring friends home from school for the holidays, and they would often do all they could to get Kenneth's attention, or blush whenever he spoke to them. But it would go totally un-noticed. Now as a grown man, women would look at him, but as far as Annie knew, he'd kept his vow of chastity – even though he wasn't a priest; and she presumed that at twenty-seven, he was still a virgin. Maybe if he had some sex, he'd calm down a bit.

'Aunt Alice gave the place to me,' she sighed. 'I can't rely on Bruno's forever. We're getting visits from Maltese gangsters on a daily basis, all wanting to take it over. It's only a matter of time before someone does us some damage.'

'If you sold to Tanner Beresford, you'd have enough money to set yourself up somewhere else.'

'I don't want to set myself up somewhere else! You don't have to take over the world Kenneth. I know there are lots of people out there needing homes and it's very commendable you want to help each and every one of them. But there are also people out there earning money, who want nice shoes, and I want to make them for them.'

'But what are you going to do if it doesn't work out? You've had Uncle Michael's trust fund all in one go. You'll have no money left.'

'Well I'll just have to go on the game won't I?' Annie snapped.

She spotted something out the corner of her eye – a familiar head of blonde hair. She looked up and found Iris walking towards her. Annie groaned inwardly. As much as she tried to like Iris, and indeed she still intended to keep her promise and take her on as a model when Holland's opened, she was beginning to get sick of her. She was always around. Now that she and Patrick were an item, she was always at Bruno's, and having to stand back and watch them smooching, the insane jealousy Annie felt would make her hate herself for being petty.

'Hello Iris,' she smiled, as she came closer to the table. She'd changed since that first night in the club. That long, tarty, platinum hair had been cut to chin-length and set in a wave. Her make-up was more subtle and Patrick had obviously bought her a lot of smart shift dresses. She actually looked like a lady now.

‘I was just passing by and I spotted you. I thought I’d come in and say hello.’

‘Iris, this is my brother Kenneth,’ Annie said. ‘Kenneth, this is Iris Lindholm. She’s going to be one of my models.’

‘Pleased to meet you Miss Lindholm,’ Kenneth said, briefly shaking her hand. ‘Won’t you please join us?’

Without hesitation, Iris pulled out a chair and sat down. In a way, Annie was glad of the distraction. At least it would put a stop to Kenneth’s lecturing.

‘Have you been shopping?’ she asked, noticing Iris had a carrier bag from Dickens and Jones.

‘Yes. Patrick’s taking me to L’Escargot tomorrow night, so I thought I’d better buy something new to wear.’

‘So, how did you two meet?’ Kenneth asked, and Annie was shocked to see he was making an effort to smile at Iris.

‘Iris came into the club,’ Annie said. ‘I thought she’d make a great model. Now she’s going out with Patrick, my business partner.’

‘You run a charity don’t you?’ Iris asked Kenneth.

‘Yes. My Aunt founded Tanner Beresford with a man called Henry Beresford. He was killed in the war, and it was left to Aunt Nesta to run it, and when she had a stroke a couple of years ago, I took it over.’

‘There was a Tanner Beresford block near to where I grew up,’ Iris said, and Annie found this interesting – she rarely spoke about her childhood.

‘Where was that?’ Kenneth asked.

‘Cricklewood,’ she replied, rather sheepishly. Obviously embarrassed at this faux par – letting them know she wasn’t as well-to-do as she liked to appear. ‘It was all a very long time ago.’

‘We now have homes in every major city,’ Kenneth said proudly. ‘We could have more if my sister wasn’t so selfish.’

Annie bristled at this. It was bad enough that Iris had snatched Patrick from under her nose, before she’d decided whether she wanted to go out with him or not. Now she had to listen to Kenneth belittling her.

‘Kenneth, don’t embarrass Iris,’ Annie said. ‘She doesn’t want to know our business.’

‘Of course,’ he said, smiling at Iris. ‘I’m very sorry. So you’re a model? A very exciting job I would imagine.’

‘It has its moments,’ she replied. ‘Although it’s not a worthwhile job like yours.’

‘Thank you. I don’t know if Annie has told you this, but we were born in the slums of Battersea. I think it’s our duty to give something back. We were very lucky to be taken in by the Holland’s. If we hadn’t, who knows what would have happened to us.’

‘That’s such a nice sentiment,’ Iris gushed, laying her hand upon Kenneth’s arm. Annie watched her brother tense – he hated physical contact. ‘There should be more people like you.’

‘So what did you buy?’ Annie asked, changing the subject.

‘These are for Patrick’s eyes only,’ Iris smiled smugly. ‘If I was to show you, that *would* cause an embarrassment. Anyway, I must be going. It was so nice to meet you Kenneth.’

‘And you Iris,’ he said. ‘Look, we sometimes have charity events. Dinners and so on. Would you like to come to one? Maybe help out, as a hostess or something?’

‘That would be lovely, thank you. I will confess that like you, I too come from more humble origins, it would nice to help those who haven’t done better for themselves.’

She stood up and bent down, kissing Annie on the cheek.

'I'll see you soon,' she said. 'You're meeting with that cobbler this afternoon aren't you?'

'Yes,' Annie smiled. 'As soon as I know what's happening, I'll be in contact.'

'Super. See you both.'

She flounced out and Annie noticed the eyes of every man in the place focus on her backside. Iris certainly knew how to use her assets to get her way. It seemed she'd even enchanted Kenneth.

'She seems nice,' he said, draining his glass of ale.

'She probably realises you're worth a bob or two,' Annie replied. 'Girls like Iris are always on the make.'

'Not jealous are you?'

'Of course I'm not jealous. If I wanted to look and act like a scrubber, I could. I thought you were beyond being taken in by the likes of her.'

'You always see the worst in people. Anyway, haven't you an appointment to go to?'

'Yes,' Annie replied, standing up and throwing her napkin on the table. 'I'd better be going. Don't forget to tip the waiter when you pay.'

As Annie walked to Leicester Square tube, she did all she could to stifle her tears. She wished that Kenneth had never put Aunt Nesta in that clinic in Switzerland. She wished she was still in England so she could at least go and see her. Even though Nesta could hardly speak these days and had no movement down her right side. Just to be in the same room as her would be enough for Annie. She needed to be with someone who loved her unconditionally.

But she couldn't just go to Switzerland on a whim, so she pushed her feelings to one side and got on with business. She was going over to Whitechapel to meet with a cobbler called Solomon Glass. Out of the cobblers she'd contacted, he offered her the cheapest price, and promised that he could knock out a pair of shoes in an hour. She'd had had no commissions so far, but Annie was determined to get a couple of pairs made and persuade friends who were actresses or models to wear them, in order to be seen.

Kenneth was right. She had taken a huge gamble on her new venture. Her Uncle Michael had left her five thousand pounds – a considerable sum of money, and instead of having it in monthly instalments, she'd chosen to take it in one lump sum, and invested the lot into converting The Fortune into her emporium. The top two floors were being made into an apartment for her to live in, and the rest would eventually be taken up with salons where women could go to have shoes fitted and maybe even one day she would be able to make clothes. She still wasn't entirely sure how it was going to transpire, and she knew she would have been better off selling it to Kenneth and using the money to buy a little shop somewhere. But Annie had always had a reckless streak – it was how she'd ended up marrying Mario, and she wasn't going to change any time soon.

Entering Whitechapel, Annie got a flashback to her childhood - before she was taken in by Nesta and Michael. The cobbled streets. The smell of horse shit and diesel. People who looked as though they hadn't washed for ages. The area of Battersea she'd come from was very similar to this and just being in this environment again made her determined never to be poor again. It was imperative she made something of herself, because to live like this was out of the question.

Solomon's workshop was down a tiny alley that was sandwiched between two dingy looking shops and barely noticeable. As Annie walked along the uneven cobbles, she was glad she'd worn flat shoes as she would have fallen over in stilettos. The area was so dark and dingy, she kept thinking about Jack the Ripper walking around, looking for victims; and it made shivers

run down her spine, glad that whoever it was, was probably long dead, or too old to inflict any more damage.

To her surprise, outside the workshop was a very shiny, impressive-looking convertible Rolls Royce Silver Cloud. Annie knew a lot about cars - it would have been strange if she didn't after all those years married to Mario. And this was not the sort of car one imagined a back-street cobbler to own.

Entering the front door, her nose was hit with the smell of leather and boot polish. She could hear the sound of hammering from all around her, and she wasn't sure where she should go. It was dark, and it was only as she squinted her eyes, that she made out a light behind a leaded window at the back. The floor was as uneven as the cobbles outside, and she was scared of tripping.

As she got closer, she could see ledgers on shelves and realised the room was indeed an office. She briefly knocked on the door, and a voice called for her to come in. At first sight, on entering the office, it looked as if it had come straight out of a Dicken's novel. It was lit by lamps; smelt of dust and every surface seemed to be covered in ledgers and paperwork. It was only as she looked again, she spotted the tall man standing at the end of the room in a smart, grey suit. As she turned around, she gasped in shock to discover Soloman Glass was no more than forty and very handsome, with swept back, wavy dark hair and a craggy, well-boned face. She'd been expecting some wizened old man.

'Miss Holland?' he asked, coming towards her, offering his hand.

'Yes,' she replied. 'Mr Glass?'

'Mr Glass junior,' he smiled, causing dimples to form in his cheeks. He was the most attractive man she'd met since Patrick. 'My father isn't feeling too well today so he's asked me to see you.'

'Oh I see. I can come back if it's inconvenient.'

'No, I like being here. It reminds me of being a boy and Dad bringing me to work. I know the business like the back of my hand, so I think I can manage. But, this isn't the most salubrious office in the world. How about I take you round the building, so you can have a look; then we grab lunch somewhere more glamorous?'

'Sounds good to me...'

'Eddie.'

'Sounds good to me Eddie, thanks.'

He strode off and Annie followed, feeling rather pleased at this nice surprise. It was always a treat to meet a handsome man; and since Patrick's rejection of her in favour of Iris, she'd been feeling pretty neglected in that department. Not that she knew anything about Eddie Glass. He was probably married with a hundred children. But he was nice to look at and there was no harm in looking.

He ran up a flight of rather rickety stairs, while Annie held tightly onto the piece of rope at the side, to steady herself. When he got to the top, he looked down at her and smiled playfully, his blue eyes twinkling.

'Come on Slow Coach,' he teased.

'I'm scared my foot will go through one of these stairs,' she fretted, positive they were swaying.

'Rubbish. These have had three generations of Glass men running up and down them.'

When she got to the top, Eddie grasped her arm and pulled her up onto the landing. Part of Annie objected to him handling her roughly. Another part of her quite enjoyed it.

He let go of her and walked into the large workshop. It looked like a Victorian sweatshop – with half the windows boarded up; one of the electric lights not working and the brick-work chipped and cracked in places. Elderly men sat over their workstations, hammering and cutting bits of leather.

‘Who do you make shoes for?’ Annie asked loudly, over the noise.

‘Mostly Adams, Forbes and Delawares.’

‘Shoe shops then?’

‘Yes.’

‘But my shoes are going to be exclusive.’

He looked at her and pretended to be offended.

‘We can handle that.’

‘Those men look very old. Are you sure it’s good for them to be sitting like that all day?’

‘It’s all they know. Dad looks after them, don’t you worry.’

He walked off and Annie followed. Across the way was a canteen area. It was small but clean, and behind a little counter in the corner was a chubby woman wiping a tea urn.

‘Who’s your girlfriend Bubbelah?’ she asked.

‘She’s not my girlfriend Aunty May,’ Eddie laughed. ‘Miss Holland wants us to make shoes for her.’

‘Does she now?’ May replied. ‘What shop do you work for love?’

‘I don’t. I have my own company,’ Annie replied.

‘Well, we don’t have many like you round here. Lot of your sorts take their work abroad nowadays.’

‘No, I want to keep it in England.’

‘Well good for you.’

Eddie left and headed back down the stairs. Annie hated the thought of walking down them – they seemed almost vertical. Like a gentlemen, Eddie held out his hand and she took it and let him guide her down. When they got to the bottom, he led her into a room where great sheets of leather hung up ready to be made into shoes. The smell was horrible and Annie quickly walked out.

‘You’ve got to get used to the smell of leather if you’re going to make shoes,’ Eddie laughed.

‘I’m not the one making them,’ she retorted.

Sliding into the car and feeling the cool leather interior against her skin brought back so many memories of being with Mario to Annie, and she felt strangely at home. Eddie got in, and she liked the thought of sitting in a beautiful car with a handsome man in a well-cut suit beside her. It was this yearning for the good life that rattled Kenneth, but Annie couldn’t help herself.

‘Where are you taking me?’ she asked Eddie.

‘I was thinking of The Holbein. They do very good cocktails.’

‘The Holbein it is.’

He drove at speed out of the dinginess of Whitechapel, through the City, down through Holborn and into the West End. Annie enjoyed the admiring glances of those they passed – the men jealous of Eddie - the women envying her. It had been a long time since someone had made her feel like that.

‘So is it just shoes you’re going to be making?’ Eddie asked, as they turned into Tottenham Court Road.

‘At first, yes. I’d also like to make bags and purses and wallets eventually. But I realise I’ve got to start off small.’

‘I might have a few contacts for you. I’d have to see some of your work first though.’

‘Well, I’ve only got sketches, nothing else. This is all new to me.’

‘Good, we can start from scratch then.’

The Holbein was a large, grand hotel on Margaret Street. Annie always felt strange going into a hotel that belonged to another company. All her life she’d stayed for free at various Villiers Hotels around the world; and to go somewhere else felt almost treasonous.

Eddie led the way to the bar at the back of the building. There were very few women in there, and those that were, appeared to be over-made up high-class hookers. Annie felt very under-dressed in her basic dress with a full skirt, and flat shoes. What would Eddie think of her compared to these glamorous girls?

‘What can I get you?’ he asked her.

‘A vodka martini would be nice, thank you.’

‘Great, take a seat.’

She sat at one of the glass tables and watched Eddie as he sauntered to the bar. There was something very alluring about a man who oozed confidence, and Eddie certainly did that. He kept his hands in his pockets as he walked, and as he smiled at the two overly-made up blonde hookers at the bar, they both looked at each other and giggled like schoolgirls. He came back from the bar with the drinks – vodka martinis for both of them, and sat opposite Annie.

‘It feels strange for me being here,’ she said, sipping the beautifully-made drink. ‘I have a free pass to all the Villiers Hotels around the world, so when I come to somewhere like this, it feels somehow wrong.’

‘How come you have a free pass to Villiers Hotels?’

‘It’s quite complicated and a long story,’ she grimaced.

‘I have all afternoon, don’t worry,’ he laughed.

‘Well, my brother and I were evacuated to Oxfordshire at the beginning of the war. I was five and Kenneth was seven. We were taken in by Michael and Nesta Holland. They were very wealthy and lived in a grand house. Aunt Nesta owned Tanner Beresford.’

‘The housing trust?’

‘Yes. But before she was married to Uncle Michael, she was married to Roland Villiers, the head of Villiers Hotels. Her brother, my Uncle James, took over the running of Villiers when Roland died. Uncle James was also married to Alicia Bloom.’

‘You have a look of her you know.’

‘So people have always said. But we’re not related. All we have in common is that we originally come from Battersea. But because of Uncle James, I’ve always been able to stay in any Villiers. But he died a few years ago and Villiers is now losing out to other hoteliers. Aunt Alice is looking to sell it eventually, but she gave me The Fortune, primarily so I could sell it. I’ve only just finished paying off Mario’s gambling debts and I need my own money. But I went to look at it, and I just got this vision of a grand emporium selling shoes and accessories, and I decided to take a chance and build it.’

‘But how are you going to fill a big building like that up?’

‘Well I’m having the top two floors converted into a flat for myself and the rest of the place is going to be used for the business.’

‘Why don’t we meet tomorrow and you can show me your sketches? I’d like to help you.’

‘So what do you do then?’ Annie asked. ‘You say you don’t work with your father?’

‘I own Top Twenty Records.’

‘Really? A record company?’

‘Yeah. See when I was a little boy, before the war, Mum put me on the stage. The Tiny Rocket I was called. I couldn’t sing Annie, I just sort of shouted in tune, but I did a trade in the music halls. By the time the war broke out, my voice had broken and I couldn’t sing at all. I fought in Burma and helped with a lot of the entertainment for the troops, coaching the singers and so on. When I came home I used the contacts I’d made before the war and started promoting. I looked after this girl called Millie Soames for a while. Then in Fifty-Four, I got the offer from Ernie Lee to buy Union Records, and I bought it and renamed it Top Twenty. We did so-so until I took on a producer called Jack Wise. He’s bloody mad, but knows what he’s doing. He produced Look All Over, and it went to Number One.’

‘Look All Over by Jonny Sabre?’ Annie gasped. ‘I loved that song. That was on your record label?’

‘It was,’ he smiled proudly. ‘It went from there. I’ve now got a roster of twelve acts and we’ve had seven number ones.’

‘Gosh.’

‘I made my first million last year.’

How crass it was to talk about money, Annie thought to herself. It was clearly the mark of someone who had no class. But she didn’t mind it. The roughness behind his suave, handsome exterior made him all the more attractive.

‘Hopefully one day I’ll match you,’ she said smartly.

‘I’m not doubting you will.’

‘So have you bought yourself a big house with your money?’

‘Nope. I’ve got a modest little bachelor pad in Kensington, down the road from my office. I don’t need a big house. It’s not like I’ve got a wife to put in it.’

Annie smiled to herself, wondering if this nugget of information was for her benefit. She hoped so. It had hurt her so much when Patrick had chosen Iris, and she needed a little boost – someone to make her feel desirable.

‘Well it’s very good of you to still help your dad out. My brother would be most pleased with you. He likes people who don’t forget their roots.’

‘Is that what he accuses you of doing?’

‘Yes. Maybe I sound shallow, but Uncle Michael and Aunt Nesta paid for me to go to a good school and get a good education. I wasn’t prepared to leave and go to work in Woolworths and throw it all away. I married Mario and had a damned good time.’

‘I remember seeing you in the papers with Mario Stefani. Such a glamorous couple.’

‘We were, but the bastard left me with nothing but debts. All I have in the world is Bruno’s. He won that in a card game. But at least he left it to me to do as I wish, so I have that and my hotel. But I’ve nothing else. I’ve even been reduced to renting a scruffy flat in Fulham until I can move into the new place.’

‘Can’t your aunt and uncle help you?’

‘Uncle Michael died and left the family home to Aunt Nesta. But she had a stroke and Kenneth put her into a convalescent home in Switzerland. He got power of attorney as Nesta wasn’t in a fit state to make a decision, and took Tanner Beresford. He knocked down Elliott House and built a large housing estate over it. Uncle Michael didn’t have a lot to leave. He lost a lot of money after the war in taxes and so on. But he left me a nest egg and I used that to invest in my business.’

‘If it was me, I’d take myself off to America and live with Alicia Bloom.’

‘I don’t want to keep on relying on my family. If I was a blood relative it wouldn’t be so bad, but I wasn’t even formally adopted by the Holland’s.’

‘Really? How come?’

‘They were too old. They became our legal guardians and they changed our surnames to Holland, but that was it.’

‘What about your real family?’

‘I don’t remember my father and I only have vague memories of my mother. She died and we were put into an orphanage.’

‘Well it certainly doesn’t show. You come across as someone who was born with class.’

‘Thank you,’ she replied. ‘Just shows all the work Aunt Nesta and Uncle Michael put in was worth it.’

‘Well, I’ll drop by tomorrow and have a look at your sketches and see who I think would benefit from wearing a pair of your shoes. I know a lot of famous women.’

‘I bet you do,’ she quipped.

‘Cheeky,’ he smiled. ‘I’ll see who I can persuade to wear a pair. If she’s seen out and about in your shoes and photographed, it’ll get you publicity.’

‘You don’t have to do this for me.’

‘Listen, you get lots of commissions, my Papa gets lots of work. Everybody wins.’

‘And there was me thinking you wanted to impress me.’

He raised one of his heavy brows and smiled, sipping his drink.

‘Who says I didn’t?’

Chapter Five

April 1959

Iris lay next to Patrick, listening to the sound of the rain beating on the window - punctuated with his snores, and realised it was unlikely she was going to get to sleep any time soon. She rolled onto her side and in the half-light, looked at her lover and thought how strange men were. Patrick was probably one of the best-looking men she'd ever been with, and yet he bored her. In her time she'd had some ugly bastards – look at Arthur Hatfield. But they'd had something about them that had excited or interested her. Patrick was very pretty, but he was dull. When they were out, he'd rarely talk to her. Depending on where they were, he'd be talking business to some other heavy, or if they were at Bruno's, he'd still be drawn to Annie; and the rapport he shared with her was more natural than anything between him and Iris. In bed he was strictly '*wham bam thank you ma'am*'. Like all men, he'd made the effort at first, but now he was just concerned with his own pleasure, before rolling off her and going to sleep.

But despite that, he was probably the best catch Iris had ever had. She didn't tell him that she still saw Arthur Hatfield one evening a week – although he was usually too pissed to want to do anything; and there were her other two clients - the big boss from the railways who would treat her to an overnight stay at The Hilton Park Lane once a fortnight, and the judge who she saw one afternoon a week in his chambers. She saw them purely to pay the rent and keep herself afloat. As much as she disliked working for Annie, if she offered her regular work, she would have given up the whoring and stuck with modelling. But it didn't pay enough, simple as that

She was also aware that Annie was still attracted to Patrick. Sometimes they would be in Bruno's and Iris would catch her throwing him the occasional longing glance. That would always make Iris feel good – knowing she was the one going home with him at the end of the evening. Iris wasn't even sure why Annie still wanted Patrick – Eddie Glass was gorgeous. He was a proper man; almost forty, confident and rich of his own accord. Not a jumped up daddy's boy like Patrick. Iris often wondered if she could work her womanly ways on him, but decided not to. If she was ever going to get a share of what she felt she was owed, it wasn't going to happen if she carried on stealing men off Annie.

She sat up and lit a cigarette, and the movement was enough to disturb Patrick. He grumbled and turned his head to look at her.

'Can't you sleep?' he asked.

'No,' she smiled sweetly, reaching down and stroking his soft hair. 'Rain always keeps me awake.'

'Did you enjoy yourself tonight?' he asked, his eyes drooping. He wasn't so interested in what she had to say that it stopped him from sleeping.

'What, just then?'

'No. Dinner, with Oscar London?'

'Oh, that. Yes, it was very enjoyable. Are you going to invest money in his film?'

'I'd like to, but his old man will probably object to me getting involved.'

'What do you mean?'

'He's some big wig at the BBC. I'm the son of a villain.'

Before Iris could answer him, he started snoring again and the conversation was halted. Iris just carried on smoking her fag and thinking about the evening that had just gone. They'd had dinner at the American Steak House with Oscar London, a rather louche young man who used to

be an actor and now wanted to move into film production. Like a lot of young upper-class men, he was drawn to the seedier side of life and enjoyed mixing with businessmen who operated slightly outside the law. He wanted Patrick to invest money in the film he was making - the dramatisation of some seedy kitchen sink novel, which he was convinced was going to be the next big thing. Iris had zoned out during a lot of the conversation, but now she knew Oscar's father was a big wig at the BBC who wouldn't want to be associated with the likes of Bernie Collins' son, she guessed he'd need convincing that Patrick was respectable and distanced from his father's activities. An idea formed in Iris's head, a way she could kill two birds with one stone. But she was going to have to sleep on it.

When she awoke the next morning, Iris knew what she had to do. She checked Patrick was still asleep and went into the bathroom to re-apply her make-up. She'd never been brave enough to let a man see her without full slap. Even though she was only twenty-three and had perfect skin, she was convinced she looked pale and plain without make-up. She wished Patrick would let her stay at his place. She'd visited the neat little pad in West Hampstead before, but at the end of the evening he would always drive her all the way back to Streatham. Iris did her best to not listen to the paranoid voice in her head that told her he was ashamed to have her wake up in his house. She just put it down to men being funny.

'You know I'm sure you're just as beautiful without make-up,' he called from the bedroom. 'Come back and keep me warm.'

'You know I want to look perfect for you all the time,' she called back whilst rubbing rose pink rouge into her cheeks. She finished it all off with a dab of pink lipstick and went back into her bedroom. She hated catching reflection of her new, classy self in the mirror on her wardrobe door; then looking at the bed where she'd entertained so many seedy customers - it made her feel ashamed.

Patrick was sitting up, smoking a cigarette. This was when he looked the most gorgeous and Iris would fancy him all over again. His auburn hair was tousled and loose, and however much he tried to push it back from his brow, a few strands would flop back down onto his forehead. His biceps were well-defined and on his left arm he had a tattoo of a shamrock - all the men who worked for Bernie Collins were expected to have it. He looked rough and sexy, and Iris wished he'd stay like this.

'Come 'ere,' he growled.

Iris came and sat on the bed, and Patrick grabbed her and pushed her back and across his lap. She giggled and tried to wriggle away.

'Why won't you let me see you without make up?' he asked.

'Because I look a sight.' She reached up and stroked his stubbly face. 'I didn't sleep much last night. The rain kept me awake.'

'Well I suggest you come back to bed then,' he smiled.

'No. I was doing some thinking about your meeting with Oscar London last night. You say his father is a big wig at the BBC and he won't like you getting involved with his son's film?'

'Yes. Even though my dad paid for me to go to Bryanston, it's not enough to impress the likes of Charlie London.'

'What's Bryanston?'

'It's a public school in Dorset. Dad paid for me to go there when I was thirteen. I left in Forty Nine when I was eighteen.'

'I never realised you went to a posh school.'

‘I didn’t do much work. All I did was form allegiances with the sons of other crooks. I didn’t leave with a qualification to my name. Anyway, you were saying?’

‘Yes, why don’t you do something for charity? An event or something?’

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe something for Annie’s brother. He runs Tanner Beresford. I’m sure they would benefit from some help, and it would make you look good.’

‘You know that isn’t a bad idea. What could we do though?’

‘Why don’t I meet him and discuss it?’

‘You want to do it?’

‘I’ve already met him. He seemed to like me.’

‘I bet he did.’

‘Nothing like that. Please Patrick. I want to do something to help you.’

‘Okay,’ he smiled. ‘See what you can do.’

Iris didn’t even phone to make an appointment to see Kenneth Holland. She decided to grab the bull by the horns and go and visit him on spec. She wondered if she should call Annie to get the address of Tanner Beresford, but changed her mind. The least she could involve her, the better. Instead, once Patrick had left for the day, she put on her favourite suit - an emerald green dress and jacket that complimented her colouring, and was decorated with a beautiful diamante brooch given to her by a wealthy jockey she’d once had as a client. It was a reminder of the life she wanted to leave behind, but at the same time it made her look respectable and well-off.

There was a library round the corner from her flat, and Iris found a business directory, to look for the address of Tanner Beresford. She saw it was based on Horseferry Road, and so she set off and caught a bus to Victoria. Once there she took a taxi the short journey to Horseferry Road. She wanted to create the right impression and turn up in style.

The offices of Tanner Beresford were based in a large block close to Lambeth Bridge. Iris knew the area well. One of her clients had been an MP with a flat in a street off here, and she laughed to herself when she recalled her visits to him - when he would always get her to dress as a French maid and talk in a stupid accent. Who’d have thought just a few months later, she would be here on business; about to put a non-sexual proposition to the head of a major charity?

She entered the heavy, wooden rotating door that led onto a very grand-looking reception. A prim-looking girl in heavy-rimmed glasses sat behind a huge desk, and on spotting Iris, gave her a very insincere, well-rehearsed smile.

‘Can I help you?’ she asked in a snooty voice.

‘Yes, I’d like to see Mr Holland please.’

‘Do you have an appointment?’

‘No, but I’m a friend of the family.’

‘Well you can’t see him without an appointment. He’s a very busy man.’

‘But it’s important that I speak to him. Just tell him it’s Iris Lindholm.’

‘Mr Holland is indisposed. Could you please make an appointment Miss Lindholm?’

Iris took a deep breath. There was nothing she hated more than jumped-up office girls who thought they were better than her because they had a job where they got to skivvy after some man. But she couldn’t let the girl see her irritation - it would spoil the image she’d cultivated for herself.

‘Can you just telephone his office and ask him to see me for five minutes?’

‘No.’

There was the sound of a bell, and Iris realised it was the lift announcing its arrival. There was a bank of lifts to the left-hand side of the marble-floored lobby, and when the one nearest to her opened, and Kenneth Holland emerged, along with a tall, rather sleazy looking dark-haired man, Iris hoped and prayed he'd recognise her. At first he walked past her, just throwing her the slightest glance. She caught sight of the receptionist smirking and she felt her cheeks burn red. But suddenly there was a voice.

'Miss Lindholm?'

She silently thanked God and turned around. Kenneth and his associate had both stopped close to the revolving door and Kenneth was looking at her with a furrowed brow.

'Hello Mr Holland,' she said breathlessly – playing helpless always worked with men.

He came closer to her and took his hand from his pocket, offering it to her.

'Nice to see you Miss Lindholm. Are you here to see me?'

'I am actually,' she said. 'I have a proposition to put to you.'

'Lucky old you Holland,' the other man said with a lecherous sneer. Just looking at him, Iris could tell he was the sort who liked kinky sex. She could tell them a mile off. Either that or he was a closet homosexual. Sometimes the line between the two was very thin.

'What's that?' Kenneth asked her. He then stopped. 'Tell you what, Leo and I were just going for lunch at Shepherd's. Would you like to join us?'

'That would be super,' Iris beamed, hoping the receptionist behind her was seething. There was nothing she liked more in life than to be vindicated. 'Thank you.'

She turned and smiled sweetly at the receptionist and walked swiftly up to Kenneth and Leo.

'Miss Lindholm,' Kenneth said.

'Iris, please.'

'Iris, this is Leo Andersson. Leo, this is Iris Lindholm.'

'Enchanted,' Leo said, taking Iris's hand and bringing it to his lips like some old Latin lover. But as she looked into his dark eyes, they showed nothing but malevolence, and it excited her. There was no bigger turn on than a touch of evil. 'Lindholm?' he asked. 'Are you Swedish too?'

'My father was.'

'Same here. See we have lots in common already.'

Shepherds was on the corner of Great Peter Street and Embankment, and was very popular with MPs and very important men. Iris felt no fear in entering the rather stuffy restaurant, with its wood panelling and waiters that looked as though they had rods up their arses. She'd come here plenty of times with the various men she'd escorted; but the good thing about places like this was that they were discreet. No one was going to point her out and call her a whore. After all, to know this, they would have had to have used her services as well.

She sat with Kenneth and Leo, and Kenneth ordered a glass of ale for himself and both Iris and Leo asked for vodka and tonics.

'You don't drink spirits?' she asked Kenneth.

'I prefer not to. I'm not even that fond of ale, but one can't have water in a place like this.'

'So how do you know each other?' Leo asked them.

'Iris is the girlfriend of Annie's business partner.'

'So you're taken?' Leo said with a mock frown. His gaze was so intense that Iris blushed and looked away. It was as though he could see straight through her.

‘Yes, sort of,’ she replied.

‘Well that is a shame?’

‘So how do you two know each other?’ she asked, aware that she sounded flustered.

‘My father was friends with Michael Holland,’ Leo replied. ‘I like to think I’ve been like a big brother to Kenneth,’ he said, slapping Kenneth on the arm, which caused him to smile uncomfortably. ‘He repaid me by letting me sit on the board of Tanner Beresford.’

‘So what is this proposition you’d like to put to me, Iris?’ Kenneth asked.

‘I’d like to do something for your charity,’ she said. ‘Something to raise money.’

‘Like what?’

‘I was thinking of a fashion show, maybe at Bruno’s...’

‘Annie’s nightclub?’ Kenneth asked, wrinkling up his nose.

‘It’s really not that bad. You only think it’s sordid because that’s how Annie’s allowed it to become. Clear away the sleazy patrons and you’ve got a nice venue. I was thinking of a little intimate fashion show. I’ve some model friends who could take part. People could come and watch it, and profits from the drinks would go to the charity. At the end of the night, they could bid for the clothes and the money could also go to Tanner Beresford. How does that sound to you?’

‘Well we’ve never done such a thing before. I’m not sure our board members would want to be associated with a tacky Soho nightclub.’

‘Well this one would,’ Leo said. ‘Bloody spiffing idea if you ask me. What were you thinking of charging on the door Sweetheart?’

‘Oh I don’t know. Ten bob. A pound.’

‘I’d happily pay ten bob to see beautiful women parading around. As long as you’re one of them Iris.’

‘Oh I don’t know about that,’ she blushed.

‘I suppose it wouldn’t do any harm,’ Kenneth conceded.

‘And surely you’re always looking for people to donate money to the charity?’ Iris asked. ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if we could drum up some support? I mean, if we got some famous faces in, they might well donate large amounts.’

‘Yes they might. But why do you want to do this for us? You’ve no need for my charity and I would imagine you don’t know anyone who lives in a Tanner Beresford place.’

‘No, I don’t. Not any more. But I come from humble beginnings and I’d like to give something back. Like you do.’

They ordered lunch. Leo opted for steak, whereas both Iris and Kenneth had the salad. Iris found it amusing how, like her, Kenneth hated tomatoes and requested for them to be left out of his dish. While they were eating, the two men chatted about old times and Iris couldn’t help but wonder if Leo would have even considered being friends with Kenneth if he’d remained that rough and ready boy from Battersea. She doubted it.

Leo wanted to stay and move onto brandies afterwards, but Kenneth looked at his watch and made to leave.

‘I’ve a meeting this afternoon,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to go. You two might as well stay though.’ He took his wallet from his inside pocket and threw some notes onto the table. ‘That should cover it.’

‘Shall I get in touch as soon as I’ve made some progress with the fashion show?’ Iris asked tentatively.

‘Of course. Thank you for thinking of us Iris, it’s very kind of you.’

He shook Iris's hand, then Leo's; then headed over to the maitre d' to ask him to fetch his coat and hat. Once he'd gone, Leo looked at Iris and smiled slyly.

'Been here before have you?' he asked, reaching inside his pocket for his cigarette case.

'No. Why do you ask?'

'You called the waiter John. How would you know his first name if you'd never been here before?'

'Maybe I have been, I don't recall.'

'My brother-in-law is Simon Duffy, the Member of Parliament for Dudley North. I've done my fair share of socialising with him. You get to know certain haunts and what they're used for.'

'I don't follow you.'

He took hold of her hand and turned it over, running his rough fingers over her palm. It felt intrusive, and yet wildly exciting and sensual at the same time. Iris felt her heart start to race and her cheeks burn.

'I know what sort of girl you are Iris,' he said quietly. 'And I find that wildly appealing.'

'I'm not a tart,' she blurted out.

'No, maybe not any more. But I'd lay all my money on you once being one.'

'You won't tell Kenneth will you?' she fretted.

'Kenny? Dear God no. He hates anything like that. Me on the other hand....'

'What are you saying?'

'My flat is only in Chelsea. Ten minutes away. Fancy an afternoon of fun?'

Iris knew she should say no. She was with Patrick and she only saw her other clients to pay the rent. But Leo Andersson excited her in a way no man had in a long time. She was sure her formative years had shaped her. All that servicing horrible, sleazy men from the age of thirteen, had made her feel comfortable in their presence. Being treated like a whore had become normality. Maybe that was why Patrick bored her— he actually treated her like a worthwhile human being.

'Okay,' she replied quietly. 'But no one must ever find out about it.'

Chapter Six

Annie asked Iris to work the next day, so she was back playing the dumb mannequin. Eddie Glass had lots of showbiz contacts and had persuaded the actress Veronica Owen to wear a pair of Holland's shoes to the premiere of her new film the following week. Veronica Owen was the new big thing and was guaranteed to attract a lot of attention. Annie had designed a couple of pairs for her, and Eddie's dad had knocked up prototypes for Iris to model. But because they'd been done in a hurry, one was in a size four instead of a five, and pinched her toes as she paraded around Annie's salon at the back of the building, while Annie and Veronica sat and watched, oblivious of her suffering.

'The trouble with them ones,' Veronica said in the strong Lancashire accent that belied her porcelain doll features and glossy red hair. 'Is that they're a bit high. I'm not too good with heels.'

'Go and change into the other pair will you' Iris?' Annie asked with a fake smile.

Iris turned and hobbled out of the salon, into the 'dressing room' which had once been the broom cupboard when it was a hotel. On one of the shelves was a 'Glass of Whitechapel' box and in there lay the other shoes - a black court shoe with purple jewels running along the side. Iris slipped them on and they were far more comfortable. The heels were lower and they were a size five. She was glad it wasn't too warm today and she could wear a long sleeve blouse. Leo had got quite rough the day before and she had bruises around her wrists that were testament to it. She didn't know how she was going to explain it to Patrick. In fact, she didn't want to think about the two men at the same time. She felt slightly ashamed of what she'd got up to the previous day and it tainted her relationship with Patrick.

She left the changing room and walked into Annie's salon. She almost wobbled over in shock when she saw Patrick standing between Annie and Veronica and sharing a joke. Iris subconsciously pulled her sleeves even further over her hands.

'Hello Patrick,' she said - he hadn't even noticed her.

'Hello Sweetheart,' he smiled, coming over to her and kissing her on the cheek. 'You left a message with Stewie, saying you wanted to talk to me about Bruno's. I was in the area, so I thought I'd drop in and talk to both of you.' He looked at Veronica and laughed. 'I didn't realise you had company.'

'Oh don't mind me luv,' Veronica said with a wave of the hand. 'I've got to be at the Garrick in an hour. I'm just choosing me shoes.'

'Why don't you wait in my office Patrick?' Annie suggested. 'Iris will be with you in a while.'

'Will do.'

He kissed Iris once more and left the room. Iris could see the wonder on Annie's face as she tried to work out what he was up to. But she didn't say a word, just continued walking up and down in the room that Annie had had decorated like some sort of tart's boudoir; with a chaise lounge, drapes and Turkish rugs.

'Aye they're lovely,' Veronica said. 'I'll take a pair.'

'Fantastic!' beamed Annie. 'I'll take your measurements and we'll get to work.' She looked at Iris. 'That's all thanks Iris,' she said. 'Why don't you go and see what Patrick wants?'

Iris almost felt like doing a little curtsy and walked out of the salon, and as soon as the door was shut, she kicked the shoes off and returned them to the dressing room, slipping into the ballet pumps she liked to wear when she was working. Annie's office was on the next floor up. It

was the only occupied room on the whole floor, and Iris often wondered what the hell she expected to do with the rest of the space.

Patrick was sitting on the window-sill, looking out at the back of Regent Street, and the unglamorous back yards containing discarded cardboard boxes and massive dustbins – the part visitors to London never saw.

‘I didn’t realise Veronica Owen was common like that,’ he said, standing up.

‘It astounds me how she hasn’t been made to go to elocution classes,’ Iris replied, sitting in the chair by Annie’s desk. ‘I’ve known plenty of actresses and they were made to get rid of their accents as soon as they got their first job.’

‘Probably her agent’s idea of being modern,’ Patrick said, pulling out one of the many tea chests that littered the room and sitting on it. ‘What did you want to see me about anyway? Did you get anywhere with Kenneth Holland?’

‘Yes. I want to hold a fashion show at Bruno’s.’

‘A fashion show?’ he laughed. ‘Would old Kenny approve of that? Isn’t he a bit pious?’

‘I won him round eventually, by pretending that I care about his charity. We can make sure some journalists are there, and it’ll be in the papers the next day. Then Oscar’s father will get to see it and think you’re the right person to make a film with his son.’

Patrick smiled and leaned forward, chucking Iris under the chin.

‘What would I do without you and your deviousness?’ he laughed.

The door opened and as Annie entered, Iris noticed Patrick automatically spring back – as if he didn’t want her witnessing the moment of intimacy between him and Iris.

‘I can’t believe Veronica Owen is going to be wearing a pair of my shoes,’ she said as she sat down at the desk. ‘It’ll get us so much publicity.’ She sat back and looked at Iris and Patrick. ‘So what’s this about Bruno’s?’ she asked.

‘I want to hold a fashion show there, in aid of your brother’s charity,’ Iris said.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Annie uttered.

‘Iris wants to do me a favour,’ Patrick interjected. ‘I’ve got the chance to invest some money in a film being made by an acquaintance called Oscar London. Trouble is, his father is a manager of a department at the BBC and he isn’t going to want his son being associated with the son of a villain. Iris came up with the idea that if I did something charitable, it might just be enough to change his mind.’

‘And I think that’s a wonderful idea,’ Annie said. ‘But can’t you support another charity?’

‘Don’t you want to help your brother?’ Iris asked innocently. ‘Only when I met up with you both that time, he was accusing you of being selfish. I thought if you did something like this for him at your nightclub, it might change his opinion of you.’

‘Nothing will change Kenneth’s opinion of me,’ Annie sighed. ‘But thank you for trying to help.’

‘Oh come on Annie,’ Patrick urged. ‘It’ll be great publicity for Bruno’s too. You don’t like it when people accuse us of just running a dive for crooks and low-life’s. If a charity fundraiser was held there, it would change what people think of it.’

‘I suppose so. But who’s going to provide the clothes and the models?’

‘Leave that all up to me,’ Iris said. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘You’re lucky to have such a supportive girlfriend,’ Annie said to Patrick. ‘She obviously wants to see you do well.’

‘And you as well,’ Iris replied. ‘You’ve been such a good friend to me Annie. I want to repay you for giving me the job here.’

‘Okay,’ Annie smiled. ‘Why not? Maybe it’ll be the thing to bring Kenneth and I closer together.’

Iris went for her lunch break soon afterwards, leaving Annie and Patrick alone to talk business. This left a bitter taste in her mouth, as she was perfectly aware that Patrick respected Annie far more than he did her; and they had so much more in common. Iris wasn’t even sure if she was in love with Patrick – he didn’t excite her like Leo, and most of the time he just treated her like a pretty accessory on his arm. But she couldn’t sit back and see Annie Holland steal him from beneath her nose. Annie always got the long end of the straw - leaving Iris to get the dregs, and she was determined this wasn’t going to happen again.

She went to a telephone box on Piccadilly Circus and called the offices of Tanner Beresford. This time she got put straight through to Kenneth’s office.

‘Hello Iris,’ he said. ‘How are you?’

‘I’ve just told Annie about the fashion show,’ she replied. ‘She wasn’t happy about it. She doesn’t like the idea of helping Tanner Beresford.’

‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’ he sighed.

‘It took a lot of persuading on my part. To be honest with you, I think she’s only doing it for the free publicity. But don’t tell her I said that. I don’t want to cause any more bad blood between you.’

‘I don’t think that’s possible Iris. But thank you for being so considerate.’

After work, Iris walked to Soho and it was like stepping back in time. For a couple of years, from 1953 to 1955, she rented a room here that she worked from. Even back then though, she hadn’t been like the other tarts - with a ready stream of seedy men from all walks of life queuing up to be serviced. Iris still got a better class of punter. Maybe it was because she kept her flat in a more acceptable condition than the other girls. Maybe it was because her maid was an art school graduate who’d fallen foul of heroin and had to pay her way by looking after Toms; or maybe it was because she had that trait that was so inherent in her family - to survive and better herself, and the men who visited her could tell this.

She headed to Tansy Topham’s shop on Old Compton Street. It was the place where all the working girls went for their underwear and props. Before the war Tansy had been a dressmaker for the theatre, but after working as an ambulance driver during the Blitz, she’d turned to drink and had ended up drifting over to the seedier side of life. But she still had lots of contacts and would be the person to help Iris.

Anywhere else in London, the window to Tansy’s would have to be blacked out. But this was Soho and anything went. Headless mannequins modelled corsets and basques in vivid red with black lace trim. There were a few dirty books on display, and even a pair of very high stilettos with a steel heel took pride of place in the middle.

Iris stepped inside the door and was met with the smell of rubber and leather and the sight of and racks holding whips and chains. Tansy sat behind the counter looking like a caricature of a respectable housewife in her twin-set and pearls. Her bright orange hair was set just-so, but her pale face powder and gaudy pink lipstick aged her and made her look hideous. She looked up and did a double take when she saw Iris heading towards her.

‘Well look what the cat’s dragged in!’ she gasped in her raspy, cockney voice. ‘Where the fuck you been?’

‘I’m barely on the game these days dear,’ Iris said, flicking through a particularly grubby book of Victorian drawings that was lying on the counter. ‘I’m a model now.’

‘As I recall you were a model back in the old days,’ Tansy smiled wryly.

‘No, I’m a proper model now. I’ve got a job showing off shoes at a design house on Regent Street.’

‘How did you land that then?’

‘My boyfriend’s the manager of Bruno’s the nightclub.’

‘Mario Stefani’s place?’

‘Yeah, and Annie, his widow, has decided she wants to be a shoe designer and I work for her, modelling shoes now and then. Thing is I can’t stand her, so I’ve decided to get one up on her and organise a fashion show at Bruno’s, but to do it I need your help.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Alright, well meet me in The Brook in ten minutes. I’ll shut up shop for half an hour.’

Entering The Brook brought back memories to Iris. It was a local pub popular with all the working girls in the area. Iris realised her new respectable image would stand out a mile and part of her wanted to run out. But the other part of her was proud to show off how far she’d moved on from it all.

The place was half empty, just a couple of Toms she didn’t recognise, sitting at the bar drinking their gin and tonics and no doubt discussing business. In a corner by herself was Rene, who - rumour had it - had been born a man and had cut his cock off with a razor blade because he wanted to be a woman. No one knew if it was true, or even bothered to look. But Rene was rather large and muscular for a woman. The other punters were just elderly men nursing their pints; probably hoping to hook up with some young girl who fancied making a few bob.

Iris found a table close to the jukebox and waited for Tansy to come and join her. She thought about the fashion show, and how she hoped it would be a success. There was nothing more she wanted than to get Kenneth Holland on side. The more bad blood she could create between him and Annie, the better. She had no time for either of them, but at least Kenneth had some gratitude for what had been given to him. Annie paraded around behaving like someone who’d been born to money and privilege, and it stuck in Iris’s throat.

The door opened and Tansy came in. All her years of drinking had given her a wobbly gait and she looked prematurely old. Iris guessed she wasn’t even fifty, but she walked like someone twenty years older. She came over to the table and put her crocodile skin bag onto the chair next to Iris.

‘What can I get you love?’ she asked.

‘Gin and tonic would be nice, thanks.’

‘Coming up.’

Tansy hobbled to the bar, and Iris could only look at her and decide she never wanted to be like that. She was going to be rich. She wasn’t sure how she was going to go about it, but she never wanted to be poor or hungry again. One day she would come through Soho with her head held high, and no one would know who she was, and they’d accept the pound notes she’d graciously hand out.

Tansy came back with the drinks and sat before Iris. As she put the glasses down on the table, her hands shook.

‘You look lovely,’ she said. ‘This fella you’re with looking after you?’

‘He’s a diamond. Don’t get me wrong, he’s not whiter than white, his old man’s a villain, but you’d never think it. He’s been to public school and everything.’

‘You always did seem different to the other girls,’ Tansy lamented. ‘More classy. What’s this fashion show business all about?’

Over two gin and tonics, Iris sat and told Tansy everything. Why she wanted revenge on Annie and Kenneth, and what she hoped to achieve. Tansy sat listening avidly, even forgetting to finish her drink because she was so enthralled.

‘Why don’t you go and see Ralf Silver?’ she suggested.

‘Who’s he?’

‘He worked for me a for a while, about a year or so ago. He went to St Martins and everything, but he couldn’t get a job, so I took him on, designing ladies underwear. Then he met some rich older bloke who whisked him off to Paris. Last I heard of him, he was back in England designing clothes for Chaucers.’

‘Chaucers? They make clothes for old women.’

‘It was the only job Ralf could get. I think he’d love to show off his other designs.’

‘Alright. Well give me his details and I’ll go and see him.’

‘He’s a prickly character, I warn you. But I don’t think it’s anything you can’t handle.’

Iris was never one to procrastinate, and so when she left Tansy, she went to the head office of Chaucers, round the back of Oxford Street. Chaucers were a high street shop that sold a lot of tweed and corduroy for older women, and not the sort of thing Iris had in mind for her fashion show. But Tansy seemed positive that their clothes weren’t indicative of what Ralf designed for himself and she was willing to take a chance.

Stepping into the dark reception area, she wondered if it would be easier to get to see someone here than it had been at Tanner Beresford. The girl behind the reception desk was dressed in a Chaucer’s signature tweed two-piece and a silk shirt with pearls. Her brown hair set just-so and she looked as though she’d stepped straight out of finishing school. Iris guessed she would either be a complete push-over or else it would be like penetrating a steel wall.

‘Can I help you?’ the receptionist asked in a snooty voice.

‘Yes, can I see Mr Silver please?’

‘Can I ask what it’s about?’

‘I’m from Tanner Beresford, the charity. Mr Silver is a patron of ours.’

‘Oh, I see. Take the stairs to the first floor. Mr Silver’s room is at the end of the corridor.’

Like taking candy from a baby Iris smiled to herself as she headed for the concrete stairs at the back of the lobby. At the top, she walked along the narrow corridor until she passed an open door and spotted a small, dark-haired man sitting hunched over a drawing board. She gave a polite knock and he looked up. He reminded Iris of a little pixie, with his close cropped hair and elfin features.

‘Hello?’ he asked in a light, breathy, camp voice.

‘Are you Ralf?’

‘Yes.’

She walked into the room and noticed another drawing board opposite him – indicating that he shared the room with someone. But it was not occupied for now, so at least they had some privacy.

‘My name’s Iris Lindholm. Tansy Topham gave me your name.’

‘Tansy,’ he gasped, standing up. Iris almost giggled to see he was even shorter than her - no more than five foot three she would guess. ‘How is she?’

‘Same as ever. Is it alright to talk?’

‘Course it is Iris. Pull up a pew.’

As he spoke more, Iris detected a Welsh accent. But he seemed to be doing all he could to hide it. It seemed everyone was ashamed of where they came from – except Kenneth Holland.

Iris fetched the chair that was by the other drawing board, and placed it close to Ralf. She sat upon it, and looked at the sketch on his board of a lady in a very conservative-looking dress.

‘Tansy tells me this isn’t the usual thing you design.’

‘Well it’s how I make my living. Why do you ask?’

‘I’m holding a fashion show at my boyfriend’s nightclub. It’s in aid of charity, so I can’t pay the designer who supplies the clothes. But it would give them free publicity.’

‘And you want me?!’ Ralf gasped, dramatically clutching his chest.

‘What sort of things do you design?’

He didn’t reply, but instead got up and practically ran to the end of the room. He opened one of the fitted cupboards, and Iris saw that it was a wardrobe and from it, Ralf fetched a dress. As he brought it over to her, she saw it was quite something. It was made from dark red corduroy - halter-necked with a pinched waist and a full skirt. The style and the fabric it was made from didn’t match, but somehow it worked and made it more interesting.

‘I ran it up one lunchtime from some spare material,’ he enthused. ‘What do you think? Is it the sort of thing you’re looking for?’

‘It’s wonderful,’ she said, fingering the needle thin corduroy. ‘Is it typical of the sort of things you make?’

‘I like to use heavy fabrics and jewels. I love jewels.’

‘Alright,’ Iris said. ‘Why don’t we meet properly and you can show me more of your work? This dress is perfect.’

‘Of course they can’t know about any of this, here,’ Ralf said. ‘I’d get in terrible trouble for moonlighting.’

‘I’m the sole of discretion,’ Iris smiled. ‘Secrets are my speciality.’

Chapter Seven

Late May 1959

Annie wasn't sure why she objected to this fashion show. It was a chance for her to impress her brother, and show the world that Bruno's wasn't just some sleazy dive. But what sat badly with her was that Iris had cooked the whole thing up with Kenneth. And instead of using it as a chance for Annie to showcase her shoes, they had asked the supremely irritating Ralf Silver to design the clothes; and the models were providing their own shoes! Annie wasn't sure about Iris, but she knew Kenneth like the back of her hand and guessed he was enjoying every minute of rubbing her face in it.

Bruno's looked completely different with all of the tables removed and replaced by the rows of chairs that Annie had brought in from the old ballroom of The Fortune. A 'catwalk' ran down the middle, along which the models would walk. Annie's office had been transformed into a dressing room for the night, and right now it was covered in dresses and accessories, and models were bumping into each other and screeching while Ralf dressed them. Close to the bar, a small PA system had been set up, where Al Dunne - Eddie's latest signing - would be singing as the models walked along. Eddie thought it would be a great way to get some free publicity and Annie was happy to help him.

Annie was behind the bar, helping Sylvio check they had enough bottles of cheap beer and vodka to keep everyone going for the night, when the door opened and Iris walked in, expensive handbag swinging from the crook of her arm. Patrick trailed along behind her, looking rather henpecked.

'How's it all going?' she asked.

'Very well thanks Iris,' Annie said. 'Although I'm guessing Ralf might say something different.'

'Where is he?'

'Back office. It's been turned into a dressing room.'

Iris flounced off, but Patrick remained behind, leaning on the bar and smiling at Annie.

'You look knackered,' he said.

'I am. Your girlfriend has arranged this bloody fashion show, but I'm the one who's been roped into doing all the hard work.'

'It's all good publicity for the club,' Patrick said, reaching out and grasping her hand. Annie quickly pulled it away. She didn't like it when he touched her. It reminded her how attractive she still found him, and how his touch was like an electric shock running through her body. And that he was Iris's boyfriend.

'Maybe so,' she replied, blushing and turning her attention to putting a bottle of Smirnoff into an optic. 'But I've got to rush home and get changed and come back and make sure everything is all in place before the guests arrive.'

'And you'll cope perfectly,' Patrick said. 'Now, where are the models? They might need some help dressing.'

He walked off and Annie gave a deep breath. She still didn't know what it was Patrick did to her – she was happy with Eddie. But when he was around, she felt nervous and on edge and he affected her so much she couldn't wait to be away from him. And yet when he wasn't there, she yearned to see him.

Once everything was in place, she took her chance to leave and walked the short distance to Regent Street, making the most of the early evening sunshine. Sometimes Annie felt like running away from everything. She never seemed to get a moment's peace. It was either something going on at Bruno's or else trying to establish Holland's. Veronica Owen's film premiere was the following week and Annie felt nervous at the thought of the world's press seeing a pair of her shoes. Eddie thought it was good business sense to make five extra pairs in exactly the same style, in case anyone saw them and wanted a pair too. Annie on the other hand was convinced everyone was going to hate them. Then what would she do? Her whole future rested upon people wanting to buy her shoes.

One thing she was proud of was her flat at the top of the old Fortune building. The bottom floor was now made up of three hotel rooms knocked into one, which made a huge reception room. Another one was a dining room, and another two were knocked into one room to make a massive kitchen. Annie was fascinated by kitchens. As a child she used to like going down to the kitchen in Elliott House and helping Mrs Cray cook dinner for them all. She made sure her new kitchen had all the mod cons she'd had when she was married to Mario – a refrigerator and a washer and spin dryer. Upstairs in the flat were five large bedrooms, two bathrooms and another room she'd converted to a dressing room. It gave her comfort to know that it belonged to her and no one could take it away from her. At least if she had somewhere nice to live, it made her feel as though she wasn't on her uppers.

Walking into the front door she was greeted with Ella Fitzgerald singing *Manhattan* on the gramophone, and Eddie standing at the drinks cabinet in the corner, mixing them both a cocktail. He looked so dapper and handsome in his tuxedo and Annie felt proud that he was her boyfriend.

'What would I do without you?' she smiled, sinking down onto one of the cream, leather sofas.

'How are things?' he asked, bringing her over a vodka martini with three green olives in.

'Chaotic,' she sighed. 'That woman makes my skin crawl, just by being in the same room.'

Eddie laughed and sat beside her, passing her the drink, which she took and drank down practically in one gulp.

'Well I do have a bit of good news for you that I hope will cheer you up.'

'Go on.'

He looked down at his lap, smiling sheepishly.

'Did I ever tell you that I used to go out with Fiona Miller?'

'Fiona Miller the actress?'

'Yep.'

'Who's marrying the Duke of Loxborough?'

'The very one.'

'What about her?'

He picked up his own drink and drank it down quickly. Annie started to feel nervous. Was he going to finish with her? What had she done to upset him?

'Well we kept in touch over the years and I had lunch with her today.'

'Why didn't you tell me?!' she cried.

He looked at her and gave a hapless smile, reaching out and stroking her face.

'What are you looking like that for Sweetheart?' he said. 'I had lunch with her today because I wanted to find out who was supplying her shoes for the wedding. It turns out she hasn't made her mind up, so I offered my beautiful girlfriend's services.'

'She wants me to make her wedding shoes?' Annie gasped.

‘Yes,’ he smiled.

‘Thank you!’ she cried, throwing her arms around his neck. ‘Thank you so much.’

Annie was so excited. Fiona Miller, the starlet from Bermondsey’s wedding to the handsome and mega-rich Duke of Loxborough was going to be one of the events of the year, and already people were speculating about the dress. If she could design a pair of spectacular shoes, then this would give her the sort of exposure she could only dream of.

‘You didn’t think I wanted to finish with you, did you?’ Eddie said, rubbing her back. ‘I love you too much.’

She pulled away and looked at him.

‘You’ve never said that before.’

‘I’ve not said it very much to anyone. I’ve never been in love before. But I’m mad about you Annie.’

‘I love you too,’ she replied. And she did love him. He was dependable and devoted and wanted to look after her. What more could she ask for? ‘I’m so glad I met you Eddie.’

Annie pulled out all the stops when choosing her outfit for the fashion show. Mandy worked for the designer Horace Pendelope and had secured Annie one of his most glamorous creations – a blue silk dress that had shimmers of green running through it and a pattern made of peacock feathers around the bottom. She was also wearing a jade hair pin that Aunt Nesta had given her for her eighteenth birthday. It had belonged to Betsey, Nesta’s American mother who Annie had only ever met once - when she visited London after the war; but she died shortly after returning to New York. She used it to fix her hair up on one side and finished the outfit with the pair of dark green silk stilettos Eddie had had made especially for her. Annie had no idea what Iris would be wearing, but she could guarantee it would be something either ostentatious or inappropriate, and she was determined to be the one who came off better dressed.

Mandy arrived, looking sensational in a blood red dress that clung to her every curve, and Annie could see by the expression on Eddie’s face that he was looking forward to arriving at the club with two beautiful women on his arm. They took a taxi the short journey to Bruno’s, and Annie was pleased to see the red carpet had been laid out on the pavement as she requested. The doormen had been provided by Patrick, but they weren’t the usual thugs, instead they were much more acceptable-looking, and no one would ever guess they made their living from beating the shit out of people.

Bruno’s was awash with hip young things. Some were already sitting down waiting for the show to begin. Others were standing by the bar, chatting. Annie didn’t recognise many of the people here. The usuals certainly weren’t here, and it seemed these guests had been invited by Iris, Patrick and Ralf.

‘I’m going to see how Al’s getting on with setting up,’ Eddie said, heading over to the young man with the Elvis quiff and rather baggy suit in the corner, who was fiddling with the microphone stand.

‘Who are these people?’ Annie asked, looking around at the Bohemian types in their strange clothes; smoking coloured cigarettes and laughing far too loudly. Annie was sure she could smell marijuana. She and Mario had once shared a reefer with a Spanish artist when there had been a race in Barcelona. Annie hadn’t been keen on it, but Mario had thoroughly enjoyed the experience and had ‘scored’ some more when he came back to England. He would smoke it with his arty friends and Annie always hated the smell that got left behind. Now that smell was wafting about her nightclub.

‘Friends of Miss Lindholm?’ Mandy replied. ‘Let’s face it, we know so little about her, we don’t know what sort of people she hangs around with.’

Annie jumped out of her skin when a voice came from behind her.

‘I’m surprised you bothered to turn up.’

She turned around and found that it was Kenneth. He had that usual disapproving look on his face, and was accompanied by a rather plain looking girl in horn-rimmed glasses.

‘Hello Kenneth,’ Annie said.

‘Not like you to have a ladyfriend Kenneth,’ Mandy quipped. She was convinced that Kenneth was homosexual, but Annie refused to believe it of her brother – he was far too religious to be that way.

‘This is Miss Sykes, she works with me,’ he said. ‘Miss Sykes, this is my sister Annie and her friend Miss Norris.’

‘Why would you think I wouldn’t come?’ Annie snapped, not even bothering to acknowledge Miss Sykes. ‘This is my club.’

‘Iris seemed to think you weren’t very keen on the idea of having the fashion show. Catering to spivs is more your sort of thing.’

‘I had no objections to having the fashion show. I just would have liked to have been involved. Sometimes Iris forgets that Patrick doesn’t own any part of this club. He just has an interest in it.’

‘Talk of the devil,’ Mandy said quietly.

‘Glad you could make it Kenneth!’ Iris boomed as she walked towards them. She was squeezed into a silver, sparkling creation that, along with her blonde hair and pale skin, made her look like the fairy on top of the Christmas tree.

‘Iris,’ he smiled, sounding more affectionate to her than he ever had to Annie. ‘You look wonderful.’

‘Thank you,’ she gushed.

They kissed each other’s cheeks, and Kenneth introduced her to Miss Sykes, who told her that her dress was beautiful. It was only then that Iris seemed to notice Annie and Mandy were there.

‘What a pretty dress,’ she said to Annie in a patronising tone of voice. She then looked at Mandy and frowned. ‘Have you lost weight?’ she asked.

‘Not that I’m aware of,’ Mandy replied.

‘Well that dress is very slimming. You should wear more like it.’

Annie had to get away from Iris as soon as she possibly could, and made her excuses, saying she was going to see how Eddie was getting on. She was stopped by Patrick, who stepped out from the queue at the bar and stood in front of her.

‘That’s quite some dress,’ he smiled.

‘I feel quite dowdy compared to your girlfriend.’

‘It’s her night, she feels she’s got to make the effort.’

‘If you say so.’

‘Let me introduce you to Oscar London,’ he said, ushering forward a young man who was prematurely balding. ‘Oscar, this is Annie Holland.’

‘It’s a pleasure Annie,’ Oscar said, kissing Annie’s hand. ‘I was a great fan of your husband. His death was a loss to motor racing.’

‘Thank you,’ she replied. ‘I hear you’re making a film.’

‘Hopefully,’ he smiled. ‘It’s dramatisation of a John Crayford novel ‘Just A Girl’. Have you heard of it?’

‘I’m afraid I haven’t. I always find I’m too busy to read. What’s it about?’

‘It’s about a girl from Manchester who becomes pregnant by her dad’s friend and runs away to London to become an actress. It’s all very depressing and doesn’t end well. But there’s a future for these kinds of films so I’m told.’

‘You want to talk to Eddie, my boyfriend,’ she said, liking to talk about Eddie in front of Patrick – reminding him that he’d chosen Iris over her. ‘He knows lots of people in the music and film business. He might be able to help.’

‘I’ll do that, thank you.’

Like a bad smell, Iris appeared again. Draping herself all over Patrick, hanging onto him and staking her claim.

‘I hope you’re going to buy one of Ralf’s dresses for your girlfriend,’ she said to Oscar.

‘Alas I’m a single man,’ Oscar said. ‘But I’m looking forward to seeing what he has on offer.’ He looked at Annie. ‘I hear you design shoes. Are you supplying the shoes for tonight?’

‘No, I wasn’t asked to,’ she said bitterly, then realised it sounded very unprofessional. ‘I’m sure Iris would have asked me if she’d had longer. But look how quickly she’s arranged all this. I wouldn’t have had time to make any shoes!’

The show soon got underway and the atmosphere was electric as the models paraded up and down, showing off Ralf Silver’s rather garish clothes. Al Dunne’s light, breezy pop music provided the perfect backdrop, and it stuck in Annie’s throat that something Iris had arranged was going well. She stood watching on, holding onto Patrick’s arm and smiling like the cat who’d got the cream. At the end, Ralf walked along the ‘catwalk’ accompanied by two models, while everyone clapped him. Annie joined in reluctantly, and Eddie stood beside her, chuckling at her.

‘Now now, be a good sport,’ he said.

‘They could have at least used our shoes,’ she pouted. ‘I’m a bloody shoe designer and everyone’s asking why they’re not wearing my shoes.’

‘Yes my darling. But your shoes are high couture. His clothes are the sort of tat that’ll be worn by shop-girls.’

Once the applause had finished, Annie got a surprise when Kenneth went over to Al and gestured to his microphone. Al pulled a puzzled face and nodded, and Kenneth took the microphone from the stand, holding onto the cord. With his suave good looks, and in his tuxedo, he looked like some sort of crooner about to break into song.

‘If I could just say a few words,’ he said, his stammer seeming more obvious when amplified by a microphone.

Everyone stopped and listened to him, and Annie wondered what the hell he was going to say.

‘I’d like to thank everyone for coming here tonight. People may think Tanner Beresford gets money from the government, but we don’t. All our funds are provided by the public, or left to us in trusts. The money raised tonight will go towards building new housing estates for people who are still displaced after the war.’

There was a collective gasp around the room, and this made Kenneth smile smugly – there was nothing he liked more than to prove a point. For those who had never suffered, the thought of people still being homeless - fourteen years after the end of the war - seemed horrendous.

‘Oh yes,’ he continued. ‘We still have serious overcrowding. Many people who were left homeless in the war are still sharing with friends or family, or renting off unscrupulous

landlords. It is immoral that in 1959 there are still slums in many parts of London. Especially the new immigrant areas in West London.'

'Oh God it's going to be a lecture,' Annie groaned, leaning her head against Eddie's shoulder.

'I'd like to thank Patrick Collins for allowing us to use his club for the event,' Kenneth continued. 'And my sister Annie for making sure everything ran smoothly. But mostly, I'd like to thank Miss Iris Lindholm. This was all her idea and I'd like her to come here, so we can all give her a round of applause.'

Iris acted all bashful but she practically flew over to Kenneth, and giggled girlishly when he put his arm around her shoulder and everyone applauded her. Annie looked over at Patrick and he was smiling proudly and clapping, but he caught her eye and when he did, he mockingly rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

'Kenneth's done this deliberately,' Annie said to Eddie. 'Everyone knows this is my club, and yet he thanked Patrick and treated me as if I was some little lucky.'

Before she had the chance to confront her brother, the journalists gathered around Kenneth and Iris - dazzling them with their flashbulbs, and throwing questions at them. Right at that moment Annie felt like telling Bernie Collins he could have the club. With each day she felt more and more like a spare part.

Suddenly, from the throng, Iris appeared - holding out her hand towards Annie. The journalists all followed her, capturing her every move.

'We couldn't have done this without Annie,' she said, grasping Annie's hand. 'Come and have your photo taken with us.'

Reluctantly, Annie went and stood with Iris and Kenneth. Her brother put his arm around Iris's waist, but didn't do the same to his sister. The photographers knew it would make a fabulous photo - the handsome charity owner flanked by two beautiful girls. No doubt the accompanying article would mention the fact that he and Annie were the adopted niece and nephew of Alicia Bloom. And Iris Lindholm was going to cash in on it all.

Once the press had left, and the guests started to go too, Annie wondered if she should help tidy up. They would be open for business the following night and the club would have to go back to normal. But in the end she couldn't be bothered. Let Iris do it. This night was all hers, she could do some hard work for once.

'Come on,' she said to Eddie. 'We're going home.'

'Don't you want to help clear up?' he asked.

'No. According to my brother, Patrick's the owner. Let his girlfriend do it for him.'

Chapter Eight

June 1959

Iris was so exhausted she couldn't move. An afternoon spent with Leo was like a week with any other man. She had to lay on her stomach because he loved to spank her bottom with a wooden handled hairbrush, and it was too painful to lay on it. These afternoons at The Wallace Hotel were becoming a regular occurrence, and Iris found herself looking more and more forward to them. She didn't like going to Leo's flat – it made it feel as though they were having an affair. Meeting in hotels was more what she was used to. Leo was a brute who often treated her worse than any of the punters she'd had in the past – she lost count of the times she'd told Patrick she'd fallen down stairs, or wobbled over in a pair of Annie's heels. But she couldn't give him up. As a child, while her mother went out whoring herself, Iris would sit at home waiting for her to come back and would burn her fingers with matches. She'd test herself over and over again, doing it for longer each time until the pain was unbearable. She'd always been drawn to the darker side of life and enjoyed things that hurt her, and Leo was just the person to tap into that.

He sat at the dressing table, fixing his cuff-links and running his hands through his thick, dark hair. He was probably the vainest man Iris had ever encountered.

'Why don't you come down to Cannes with me next week?' he suggested.

'Cannes?'

'Yes. Gideon Banks has invited me down to stay on his yacht.' He turned and looked at Iris, smiling. 'You'll love Gideon's crowd. Anything goes. Any sort of debauchery is allowed.'

'What would I say to Patrick?'

'Couldn't you say you were staying with friends?'

'I haven't got any friends. Well, none Pat knows about. There are plenty of girls I know from back in my working days. But these days Ralf's probably the only friend I've got.'

'He'd cover for you wouldn't he? Little queers like him love a good scandal.'

'I doubt if her ladyship would let me have a week off anyway,' Iris said, daring to roll onto her back and wincing as her tender skin met the crumpled sheets.

'Why don't you stop working for her?' Leo said, getting up and sitting on the end of the bed so he could put on his shoes. 'Let me keep you.'

'What do you mean? Keep me?'

He lay back on the bed and looked up at her, a devilish smile on his face.

'Be my plaything Iris. I'll give you as much money as you need. All you have to do is be a beautiful accessory on my arm; do whatever I want you to do in bed, and turn a blind eye if I should stray. I'm worth millions Iris. You'd never want for anything.'

While it was a very tempting offer, there was a big obstacle that stopped her accepting, and that was Patrick. While he didn't excite her like Leo - she found the sex they had, boring and she didn't like the way he took Annie more seriously than her, the truth was, she loved him. He was the only man who'd ever treated her like a lady. He knew nothing of her past, and never asked her about it. She couldn't bear the thought of never seeing him again; just to be the plaything of a man who would never be serious about her.

'Let's keep things how they are,' she said to Leo, stroking his wavy hair. 'What we have is so delicious, it would spoil things if we were together all the time.'

‘Have it your way,’ he sighed, sitting up. ‘You’re a tough nut to crack Iris Lindholm. But I’ll get there eventually.’

Iris went home to Streatham and had a long, hot bath, soothing away all the aches and pains after her time with Leo. She was going to dinner with Patrick that night and she wanted to wash Leo away before she saw him. As she lay in the silence, with just the sound of the water lapping against the side of the bath, she thought about Leo’s offer. The old Iris would have accepted it without thinking; but what Leo offered her wasn’t as thrilling as the thought of making Annie Holland’s life a misery. Of seeing that sour little face wince every time Iris touched or kissed Patrick. Knowing that it stuck in Annie’s throat whenever Iris met up with Kenneth to discuss ideas for fundraising for Tanner Beresford. She could tell it angered Annie that after the fashion show, commissions had started to come in for Ralf Silver, whereas orders for her shoes were dripping in slowly. And most of all to go with Leo would mean giving up Patrick. She’d never go to Bruno’s again, and Leo definitely wouldn’t tolerate her working for Annie. She’d only recently given up all her clients; if she accepted Leo’s offer she would just become a glorified whore again. She’d been prostituting herself since she was thirteen years old, she never wanted to do it again.

She dressed for dinner in a dress that Ralf had made exclusively for her. It was an emerald green, silk evening gown with white flowers stitched all the way down the side. She put her hair up and applied subtle make up. The only evidence of her time with Leo was a bruise around her right wrist, which she covered up with a silver cuff bracelet. She looked the picture of elegance and sophistication and that was the new image she had no intention of changing.

It was Patrick’s birthday and they were going to La Mancha for a celebratory meal. It was the only restaurant in England that served Spanish food and was terribly expensive. Of course Patrick wouldn’t be paying full price; Carlos, the head waiter owed Bernie Collins a lot of money in gambling debts, so they were getting their meal half price. Iris ordered squid in tomato sauce, thinking it made her sound sophisticated, but it was so revolting, she could only push it around her plate and claim she was watching her figure.

‘I want you to get used to eating exotic food Iris,’ Patrick said, chomping his way through a horrible-looking, over-cooked sausage. ‘When I’m rich, I’m going to take you all around the world.’

‘Are you now?’ she laughed. ‘Where are we going to go first?’

‘America. I’ve never been. I went skiing in Switzerland with school once, and that was it. I’ve never been anywhere else. I was at school with boys who’d lived in India and Kenya. Where had I lived? Kilburn!’

‘Well at least you’ve had to work for what you’ve got. I can’t stand people who have everything handed to them on a plate.’

‘Annie you mean?’ he quipped. Iris had never hid her feelings for his business partner and Patrick found their rivalry amusing.

‘Yes. She doesn’t know what it’s like to struggle. Although I do think she’s finding running the business difficult. No one’s interested in her shoes.’

‘Don’t sound so smug about it Iris love,’ Patrick said.

‘Well I think you should make her another offer to buy Bruno’s. I reckon she’d take it. She’s spent all her uncle’s trust fund and she’s hardly making enough money to pay me and Shirley our wages. Before long she’ll have to model the shoes herself.’

‘I didn’t realise it was that bad for her. Can’t that Eddie help?’

‘He’s got a few of his acts to wear her shoes, but no one’s interested. I think if nothing happens after Fiona Miller’s wedding, she’ll give up the ghost, sell the building and probably marry Eddie.’

Iris regretted saying this, as the puzzled and hurt look on Patrick’s face, told her a lot. She was going to have to make this work to her advantage.

‘Eddie’s asked her to marry him?’ he uttered.

‘No, but it’s only a matter of time. If she sold Bruno’s to you, she’d have more money to invest in the company and she wouldn’t have to marry him. I suppose if she didn’t marry Eddie, she might move to New York instead and stay with Alicia Bloom.’

‘I wish she’d told me things had got that bad. Poor Annie.’

‘Poor Annie my backside,’ Iris tutted. ‘She’s brought it all on herself.’

Patrick looked at her and frowned.

‘Why do you dislike her so much?’ he asked. ‘Don’t give me all that ungrateful stuff. There’s more to it than that. It’s personal.’

Dare she tell him? Could she trust him with such a big secret? Or would he go running to his precious Annie and tell her everything? Before Iris could make her mind up, they were interrupted by a loud cry of;

‘Collins old chap!’

They both looked up and saw Oscar London heading towards them. He looked happy and slightly drunk, as he was almost bashing into the tables he was weaving in and out of.

‘Hello old chap,’ Patrick said as he joined them. ‘You look happy.’

‘I wanted to thank you both,’ Oscar said, sitting on the spare seat next to Iris. ‘Dad was so impressed with the fashion show you put on, he’s accepted you as a backer for the film. And not only that, he’s persuaded Walter Hatton to invest the rest of the money, so we can go ahead.’

‘Walter Hatton the film director?’ Patrick asked.

‘Yes, and he wants to direct Just A Girl. We’re all systems go. You’ve just produced your first film Patrick!’

‘This calls for champagne!’ Patrick beamed. He looked at Iris. ‘Don’t worry about eating this muck love. We’re going to Bruno’s to celebrate.’

They walked the short distance to Bruno’s, and all the way there, the two men discussed their film, leaving Iris trailing behind. The fundraising had been her idea – she was the one who guessed it would prove to Oscar London’s father that Patrick was respectable; and yet, as typical with men, they were taking all the glory. Even worse was when they got to Bruno’s, and walked in the door, they were immediately greeted by Annie. She looked exhausted, and Iris knew this was because Fiona Miller was making her life a misery - constantly making changes to her wedding shoes and calling Annie up all hours of the day and night to express her concerns.

‘I wasn’t expecting you all,’ she said, taking the men’s raincoats. ‘Happy Birthday Patrick.’

‘Thanks darling,’ he said, kissing her on the cheek. ‘We’re celebrating.’

‘Oh yes, what is it?’

‘I’m going to become a film producer.’

‘Fantastic!’ she gasped. ‘Come inside and tell me all about it.’

So once again Iris was pushed to the sidelines. Even worse, Eddie wasn’t there, which meant Patrick could lavish all his attention on Annie without worrying about getting a punch on the nose. Annie, Oscar and Patrick were all young and wealthy and on the threshold of success,

whereas Iris felt like a hanger-on. She decided to go off and mingle and play the part of the owner's girlfriend. Even though Patrick didn't own Bruno's, she was hoping her meddling would work and he'd soon make Annie an offer she couldn't refuse.

Iris walked off, spotting Reg Chisholm, one of the regulars. He was a backbench MP who liked to come here before sauntering off to Soho to pick up a hooker. He was always alone - he wouldn't want his cronies knowing he indulged in such behaviour. Iris thought she would go and chat to him. But before she reached him, she was stopped by a woman stepping out in front of her. For a moment she just looked like another bottle blonde in her mid-forties, but there was something in the steely blue eyes that took Iris back in time to a place she never wanted to visit again. She quickly stepped to one side, trying to by-pass the woman, but she stepped in front of her once more.

'Talk to me Iris,' she pleaded. 'Since I saw you all in the paper I've been coming in here hoping to see you.'

'Have you said anything to Annie?' Iris hissed, taking her arm and leading her to a dark corner - where she belonged.

'Of course I haven't said anything to her, she's no idea who I am.'

'And it's got to stay that way. Get out Norma.'

'Norma is it?' she said, putting a hand on her skinny hip. 'You used to call me Mum.'

'You stopped being my mum when you walked out on me when I was thirteen and left me to whore myself.'

'And I'm sorry about that Iris. At least give me the chance to explain myself. I want make it up to you.'

'No, just get out.'

Iris felt a hand on her shoulder and her blood ran cold.

'Everything alright here.' It was Patrick, and Iris was terrified that Norma was going to say something.

'Hello love,' Norma said. 'I'm Norma Francis. I'm an old friend of Iris's.'

'Yes but she's got to go now,' Iris said quickly. 'I'll see you out Norma.'

She grasped her mother's bony arm and practically dragged her out of the club. Norma could ruin everything for her. Iris had come so far and she didn't need her sordid past coming back to haunt her. She frogmarched Norma out of the door and up the stairs to the street. The sodium streetlight showed up the lines and wrinkles in Norma's face, and she didn't look quite so glamorous now. She looked like someone who'd had a hard life, and this pleased Iris - she deserved to suffer.

'Are you after money?' Iris snapped.

'No. I just wanted to make up for everything I've done.'

'Well I don't want you around, now get lost.'

'You can't shut me out Iris. I know too much about you.'

Iris opened her handbag and took out her purse, pulling out every single note of money she had in there, and thrust it at her mother.

'Take this,' she said. 'Take it and leave me alone.'

'I'll be back,' Norma said. 'You can't get rid of me that easily.'

She turned and sauntered off. From the back, she looked good. She'd kept her figure and she still had that model walk Iris had tried to copy as a little girl. As she disappeared into the misty night, Iris started to shake. Her whole life flashing before her. She tried to breathe but it was as though no air was entering her lungs. She needed to talk to someone, but knew she

couldn't say a word to Patrick. He only knew so much about her and she wanted to keep it that way.

Composing herself, she went back down into the club and found Patrick still with Annie and Oscar. They were laughing and happy, and she'd never felt more of an outsider. If Patrick had been content with just being the son of a gangster, a girlfriend like her would be enough. But Patrick was ambitious. He wanted to be a film producer - he wouldn't want some ex-tart hanging around him.

'You alright?' he asked Iris, as she joined them. 'Who was that woman? You seemed keen on getting rid of her.'

'I used to work with her, years ago when I was a dancer. She's always after money.'

'She looked like a right old scrubber.'

'Yeah, she is. But seeing her's given me a headache. Would you mind if I went home?'

'No, of course not. Do you want one of the lads to run you?'

'I'll get a cab. I fancy a bit of a walk.'

'Do you want me to drop by later?'

'No. I just want to get my slap off and go to bed. I'll see you on Monday.'

'Alright love,' he said, kissing her on the cheek. 'You look after yourself.'

Iris walked out of the club, and as she looked in her purse she realised she all she had left was a couple of pennies – she'd given everything else to Norma. It was enough for her to make a phone call. She walked to the middle of Wardour Street and phoned Leo's flat. It was Saturday night, so it was quite possible he was at a club or indeed entertaining another woman; but he was the only person who knew the true her and she was willing to take the chance.

She breathed a sigh of relief when he picked up the phone.

'Chelsea 29402.'

'It's Iris,' she said. 'Can I see you?'

'Of course you can. Come round now, I'm not going anywhere this evening.'

'I'm in Wardour Street and I haven't any money for a cab or a bus.'

'Get a taxi. I'll settle the bill as soon as you get here.'

Iris entered Leo's rather small, shabby house off the Kings Road, to find him already in his pyjamas and robe. He seemed slightly drunk, and as he started pawing her, she could smell the alcohol on his breath. She eased him away.

'Can we do this later?' she asked. 'I need to talk to someone.'

'Okay,' he purred. 'Take a seat. I'll get you a gin and tonic.'

Iris slumped down on one of the lumpy sofas, throwing her head back in despair. A spring was sticking in her bottom, and she wondered why he put up with living like this. He was a millionaire and his family had a huge mansion in Sussex, and yet he preferred to live in this scruffy flat with its old sofas, wonky shelves full of books and curtains that had seen better days.

Leo returned with a bottle of gin tucked under his arm, a bottle of Schweppes tonic and two glasses. He put them down on the table and made the drinks.

'So what's wrong with you?' he asked.

'My mother turned up tonight,' she sighed.

He looked round at her.

'You've never mentioned your mother before. I got the feeling she was dead.'

'She's dead to me, the bitch. She abandoned me when I was thirteen.'

‘Is that when you went on the game?’

‘Yes.’

She took her drink and gulped it down in one. She then held out her glass to Leo, so he could pour her another one.

‘Why did she walk out?’

‘She was involved with this pimp called Maurice. We were living in this dive in Cricklewood and she used to leave me every night to go and work in Soho. Mum being Mum, she couldn’t keep her legs closed and started seeing this other pimp called Cyril and worked for him as well. Maurice found out and threatened to kill her. So one morning I woke up and there was a note on my pillow from her saying that she had to get away from Maurice. She left me a ten bob note, told me to be a good girl and I haven’t seen her again until today.’

‘So how did you end up on the game?’

‘Maurice turned up. Found out Mum had gone, went mad, beat me up and dragged me into his car. He drove me to the flat Mum had been using and told me I had to take her place.’

‘Jesus.’

‘Luckily it wasn’t my first time. Mum’s boyfriend Vince took care of that when I was eleven. I still hated it though. In the end I ran away from Maurice and worked my way up the ladder you could say. Norma turned up at Bruno’s tonight after she saw the picture of me with Annie and Kenneth in the paper. Thank God she didn’t say anything to Annie.’

‘What you did in your past is nothing to do with Annie.’

‘But Norma’s got everything to do with Annie.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’s her mother too.’

Leo almost dropped his glass and had to put it on the coffee table.

‘Are you serious?’ he uttered.

She nodded.

‘No one must know. It’s a secret.’

‘Annie’s your sister?’

‘Half sister, and Kenneth is my half brother.’

‘How do you know this?’

‘Mum told me. Her father was Desmond Higgins, who had a younger sister called Alice. Although you’d probably know her better as Alicia Bloom.’

‘Alicia Bloom’s your great aunt?’

‘Yes. My mother’s maiden name was Higgins. She married a man called Samuel Brady when she was sixteen and she had Kenneth, then Annie. Samuel caught her in bed with another man when Annie was a baby and kicked her out. She heard that he re-married and that must be the woman Kenneth and Annie think of as their mother. Mum went on the game and she had me. She maintains that I’m so blonde because I’m the daughter of a Swedish sailor. That’s why I took on the name Iris Lindholm. I’m really called Iris Brady.’

‘Cripes,’ Leo said. ‘So how did you find Annie and Kenneth? Why don’t you tell them the truth?’

‘Because I hate them,’ she stated. ‘Especially Annie. You see, Mum went back to Battersea one day and bumped into an old neighbour. She told her that Samuel had walked out on his wife, leaving her with Annie and Kenneth; and when she died of pneumonia, they were taken in by this rich couple - Michael and Nesta Holland. Mum used to boast about it, as if their good fortune was some sort of reflection on her. Then there’d be me, stuck living with her in some

dingy bedsit that was crawling with fleas. She didn't even allow me to be evacuated because I was so young she'd have had to come with me, and she couldn't earn as much as a prostitute if she was in the countryside. All I could think about was why I was lumbered with her when Annie and Kenneth had been taken in by rich people. Then Annie married Mario Stefani and she was always in the papers, all smug and happy and I hated her more and more. I don't know what it was, but this year, something in me snapped, and I decided that I wanted a piece of the action. I was seeing Arthur Hatfield at the time and I got him to take me to Bruno's. It sort of went from there.'

'You're amazing,' Leo said with a shake of the head. 'What do you plan to do to them?'

'I don't know. But I want a share of their money. They both owe me. I can tolerate Kenneth. He is at least grateful for what he's got. But Annie swans around like she was born to it. She reminds me a lot of Mum.'

'So that would explain why she looks so much like Alicia Bloom, she's her great aunt too.' He took a sip of his drink. 'Does Patrick know any of this?'

'No. He doesn't even know my real name is Iris Brady. He can't find out either.'

'So do you think your mother will come around again?'

'I don't know. I just want to get away from her. I could kill her for what she did to me.'

Leo reached out and grasped her hand.

'Come away with me,' he urged. 'Come to Cannes and live it up.'

'But what will I tell Patrick and Annie? She expects me to work for her.'

'Fuck her. Tell her you've gone to visit a maiden aunt. Tell Patrick the same. Come to France and have fun.'

Iris thought about it, but deep down she knew he was right. She didn't think Norma would approach Annie and Kenneth directly. She probably had too much respect for them to do something so crass. Iris was her way of getting to those two, and maybe if she was out of the way, she'd leave them all alone and crawl back under her stone. Iris was the one owed by Annie and Kenneth Holland, not Norma. She'd let them down, but they'd benefited from it.

'Okay,' she said. 'I'll tell them I've got a modelling assignment and I've got to go away. You're right, I need a holiday.'

'You won't regret it,' he replied, bringing her hands to his lips and kissing them. 'We'll have such fun.'

Kissing turned to nibbling and then he bit one of her knuckles hard. Iris yelped but didn't retract her hand. Feeling pain helped her deal with so much.

'Come to bed,' he said. 'Let's get in practice for Cannes.'

Chapter Nine

July 1959

Annie had never been inside St Paul's Cathedral before. She'd walked past it many a time, but had never gone in; and now, as she sat waiting for the wedding of Fiona Miller and the Duke of Loxborough to commence, she looked around and marvelled in its majesty and beauty. Concentrating on the architecture or the paintings on the ceiling took her attention away from her racing heart and sweaty palms. Veronica Owen wearing her shoes to the premiere of her film had provoked a little interest in Holland shoes, and she had enough commissions to keep her going until the end of the summer. But Fiona Miller's wedding was something else. The world's press had gathered here. The Duke of Loxborough was handsome and had dated some of the most beautiful princesses in the world, and yet he had fallen for an actress from Bermondsey. Everyone loved a Cinderella story, and this was certainly one of them. With her golden hair and doll-like features, Fiona even looked the part. Every part of her outfit was going to be scrutinised and it terrified Annie to think someone might hate the white, lace shoes she'd made.

Eddie sat beside her, fiddling with his cufflinks and shaking his leg nervously. Annie wondered how much of this was to do with his ex-girlfriend getting married, or the fact that he was waiting to see how high Paulette Singleton - his latest signing - had done in the Hit Parade. Paulette was a novelty in that she was a young Jamaican girl who sang like an American pop singer, and Eddie wasn't sure how the public were going to take to her. Annie hoped it was this that was causing him anxiety. She didn't like the thought that he might still have feelings for Fiona.

Handel's wedding march struck up and all eyes turned to the back of the church. Annie was one of the few people here who'd seen Fiona's wedding dress. It was a rather controversial in that it was tight fitting and only fell to mid-calf. The scalloped neck was trimmed with the same lace that covered the shoes, and instead of a traditional head-dress and veil, she'd opted for a jaunty Robin Hood hat in white lace. There had been much speculation in the press about her outfit. With her marrying into the aristocracy, commentators and fashion experts had been convinced she'd go for the traditional look, but she'd confided in Annie that she wanted to make her own mark and not look like the fairytale princess everyone expected. As she walked up the very long aisle, accompanied by her very cockney father, Sid, Annie couldn't take her eyes off the shoes - worried they didn't match the outfit or looked cheap.

'What a horrible dress,' Eddie whispered to her. 'She looks like a hooker.'

'Yeah but people have her down as a gold-digger. If she plays the demure bride, it'll look as if she's just doing it all for show. By dressing like this, she's doing her best to seem independent.'#

Eddie looked at her and smiled.

'So would you wear a dress like that then?'

'Well I couldn't get married in white for a start - I'm a widow. But no, I wouldn't want a dress like that.'

Eddie had never mentioned marriage before and it alarmed Annie a little. They hadn't been seeing each other very long and it seemed a bit presumptuous to speak of such things. She wasn't even sure she loved him.

The ceremony went off without a hitch and Fiona Miller the actress became The Duchess of Loxborough. The congregation all then left St Paul's and got into their respective taxis and

headed back into town to The Ritz, where the reception was being held. It would be the first time Annie would have been to The Ritz since her own wedding reception to Mario. She remembered the disappointed faces of Nesta and Michael, who'd both wanted her to go to finishing school and come out and do things properly. Kenneth had disapproved of her marrying a racing driver because he considered it a frivolous profession and claimed it was just further proof that Annie had no morals. The only person who'd been on her side had been Alice, who told her to enjoy being young and that this was the time to make her mistakes because everyone would forgive her.

The ballroom of The Ritz had been decorated beautifully. A water feature had been placed in the middle of the floor, and a string quartet was playing in the corner. As Annie and Eddie took their seats at a table with Henry Wilde, the designer of the dress, and his sister Edith; Annie couldn't help but laugh at the top table. On one side were the very stuffy-looking Duke and his mother - the Dowager Duchess of Loxborough. The Dowager was unable to hide her distaste and kept firing filthy looks at the other end of the table where sat Sid and Pearl Miller, who both looked uncomfortable in their finery, and their working-class roots were so obvious. Their loud voices rang out amongst the hushed tones and polite laughter and it reminded Annie very much of her own life. Like Fiona, she too had working-class relatives in South London, but she knew if she met them she'd have nothing in common with them.

'I hate this place,' Eddie observed, sipping his champagne. 'My old nan used to clean here.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. She was this poor little Jewish woman straight off the boat from Belarus who didn't speak a word of English and they treated her like shit. Then years later Mum and Dad paid for me to have my Bar Mitzvah here, and one of the waiters recognised Nanna and refused to serve her.'

'What a pig. I'm not overly keen on the place either. It reminds me of my wedding reception.'

'So you regret marrying Mario?'

'Well I wouldn't be saddled with debts if I'd never married him. But you live and learn don't you?'

Once the speeches were finished, the party could begin. More guests arrived, and to Eddie's delight, they were friends of Fiona's and mostly from the world of showbusiness. Eddie knew most of them so he took it as an opportunity to go off and schmooze. Annie was just about to go and speak to Fiona to congratulate her, when she was stopped by Clarissa, the Duke's cousin, who was one of the bridesmaids.

'Are you free this week?' she asked. 'I'd like to come in and see you about something?'

'You want me to make you some shoes?'

'No. I want to work for you.'

'Work for me! I can barely afford the staff I've got.'

'No I want to design for you. You see I've made a few bags over the years for friends, and they love them. I'd like to do it for a living.'

Annie went to refuse - she hadn't established herself enough yet to start diversifying. But girls like Clarissa Balfern had huge circles of friends who could be valuable future customers; and what might start off as an expense could end up being an asset.

'Okay, come in and see me on Monday. We'll have a chat.'

'Super!' Clarissa gasped, clasping her hands together. 'I've got so many ideas.'

Annie finally made it to Fiona, sitting alongside her at the top table - now it had been vacated by everyone except the bride and groom and the best man. Fiona was normally quite an uptight girl, but today she looked radiant and happy.

‘Thank you so much for my lovely shoes,’ she said, taking hold of Annie's hand and squeezing it. ‘You will become my official shoemaker now won't you?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I hope you'll agree to become my official shoemaker. I have a list of engagements coming up and I'll need shoes for all occasions.’

‘And you want me to do it?’

‘Yes. As soon as Ronald and I come back from honeymoon why don't you and Eddie come and stay at Norcross and we can discuss designs?’

‘Certainly, thanks Fiona. This means a lot to me.’

The following day, the pomp and circumstance of Fiona's wedding seemed a million miles away, when Annie returned to Bruno's to interview cleaners. Patrick was in Scotland with Oscar London, scouting for cheap locations to use for the film; so it was left to Annie to do the mundane jobs like this. Patrick had been putting a lot of pressure on her to sell Bruno's lately, and she was still holding out. But with this new commission from Fiona Miller, Annie knew the time would soon come when she wouldn't be able to juggle both things. And if she was honest with herself, the main reason she didn't want to cut all ties with the nightclub was because it meant she'd have no reason to see Patrick again, and she couldn't bear the thought of that. But Eddie was becoming more serious and she'd soon have to put all thoughts of Patrick out of her mind.

As she hadn't been there the night before, she wasn't aware of what had happened, but by the fact that there was a split in the wood on the bar, and there was still remnants of broken glass on the floor, she guessed there had been a fight. The place looked a mess, and the couple of women Annie had interviewed so far had turned their noses up at it. One of them used to clean at Claridges and saw this as a comedown. Another had been a slip of a girl who'd been more interested in the celebrities that frequented the club. Annie was just about to give up, and went to the store cupboard to get a dustpan and brush to sweep up the glass, when the door opened and a woman walked in. She was a tall, skinny blonde who'd seen better days. She carried a plastic handbag in the crook of her arm and her cardigan was rather baggy and unflattering.

‘I saw the advert for a cleaner, love,’ she said in a broad London accent. ‘It said you were interviewing today. Is that right?’

‘Yes, it is,’ replied Annie. ‘Take a seat. Can I get you a drink?’

‘Oh, thanks love,’ the woman said, sitting in a booth. ‘A cup of tea would be nice.’

‘I meant something stronger,’ Annie smiled. ‘How about a sherry?’

‘A sherry would be lovely. You're a good girl.’

Annie laughed and went behind the bar, pouring herself a gin and tonic, and the woman a small dry sherry. She returned to the booth and sat opposite her.

‘Sorry, what's your name?’ Annie asked.

‘Norma. Norma Francis.’

‘I'm Annie Holland. So what are you doing at the moment Norma?’

‘I do a bit of cleaning at the Locarno on Willesden High Street. I also used to clean at the Red Lion in Maida Vale, but they've changed landlords and the new one's brought his own cleaner with him, so I'm out of a job.’

‘Have you been cleaning long?’

‘Ooh years love. I have references.’

With a shaky hand, she opened the handbag and pulled out a piece of paper, passing it to Annie. It read;

To Whom It May Confirm

Norma Francis has worked for me for three years as a cleaner and I can confirm that she is hard working and honest.

P Donnelly – Manager The Locarno Ballroom, Willesden.

‘Well that’s good enough for me,’ Annie said, handing Norma the paper back. ‘Are you okay working on a Sunday? You don’t have family who’ll want to see you?’

‘My children are all grown up. They won’t miss me.’

‘Well, I need someone who can clean on a Friday, Saturday and Sunday morning. I already have a lady who comes in Monday to Thursday. It’s ten shillings an hour and I’d like you to do eight until one. Is that alright?’

‘Fine with me love. So is this your club?’

‘Yes. I have a manager, Mr Collins. He’ll deal with you when I’m not available. One of us will leave your wages on the bar on a Sunday. So, Norma, would you like the job?’

‘Yes,’ Norma smiled. ‘Thank you Miss Holland.’

‘Annie. Call me Annie.’

‘Thank you Annie.’

The following day, Annie went into work to find Mandy at her desk, which was covered in bits of paper. Mandy came in for a few hours every morning to answer calls and sort Annie’s diary out. Quite often there was so little for her and Annie to do, they’d end up just going along to Gino’s Coffee Bar on Regent Street until it was Mandy’s time to go home. But today was different. As Annie walked in, she found her friend on the phone, scribbling something down, and at the same time, she indicated to Annie at all the messages she’d taken.

Annie picked up one of the pieces of paper and it simply said ‘*Binky Longford, Cambridge 928032*’ another one said ‘*Grace Bryce, Staines 923219*’

‘Who are these people?’ Annie asked, sitting in front of Mandy’s desk.

‘Some are guests from the wedding. Others are girls who saw pictures of Fiona’s shoes in the paper and want you to make the same for their weddings.’

‘How am I going to cope with all of this?’ Annie fretted. It was what she’d always wanted. But it had all come at once and she was scared she wouldn’t be able to manage.

‘You’re going to have to get more people in to help.’

‘And that bloody Iris has gone off on some modelling assignment - according to her. It wouldn’t surprise me if she’s actually seeing some man behind Patrick’s back.’

‘Jealous are we?’ quipped Mandy with a knowing smile.

‘I had many chances to be a model, as well as you know.’

‘I wasn’t talking about modelling,’ Mandy replied.

Annie blushed and stood up, gathering the pieces of paper and taking them into her office. She shut the door and sat at her desk, and to salve her conscience, got on the phone to Eddie at his office in Hammersmith.

‘This is a pleasant surprise,’ he purred down the phone.

‘I’ve come in this morning to hundreds of messages from girls wanting me to make wedding shoes for them. What am I going to do Eddie? Can your father’s factory cope?’

‘Probably. But if you injected some more capital into it, he could probably expand.’

‘Sell Bruno’s you mean?’ she sighed. They’d had this conversation before.

‘It’s nothing to do with you now Annie. It’s just a reminder of the past. Of bad times with Mario. Why don’t you sell it to Patrick’s father then use the money to buy a bigger factory for Dad?’

Annie knew what he was saying made perfect sense, but it was the thought of severing all ties with Patrick that made her hesitate. She’d tried so hard to fight her feelings for him, but she couldn’t help it. If he hadn’t been involved with Iris, she would have probably found the courage to tell him how she felt. But from what she could tell, he was mad about her. And judging by the fact that he’d been with Trixie the night she’d met him, he obviously preferred buxom blondes; which meant she - as a skinny brunette - wouldn’t stand a chance.

‘I’ll have to talk to him about it when he gets back from Scotland,’ she said.

‘You know it makes sense darling. It’s daft holding onto the past.’

Chapter Ten

It was with a heavy heart that Annie met with Lewis Finkel, her accountant, at Bruno's later that week. She knew she had no choice but to sell the club. Things had gone crazy since Fiona's wedding. She had sixty orders that needed to be made within the next three months, for weddings alone. There were also other orders come in from friends of Fiona's who wanted shoes to take on holiday with them. A lot of them were going off to spend the summer in the South of France or the Caribbean, and wanted comfortable but stylish shoes they could wear all day. Annie worked until midnight most nights, designing, and during the day she was on the phone hiring office staff. She needed a full-time secretary as well as someone to order supplies; and on top of that, Glass's were trying to fulfil their usual orders, as well as hers. Now she potentially had Clarissa Balfern on board, designing bags and something had to give. And she guessed that something had to be Bruno's.

Lewis went around the club, measuring things up, checking stock and the state the interiors were in. All the time weaving in and out of Norma's way as she tried to do her cleaning. Annie hid away in one of the booths, looking through the books. She hadn't examined the ledgers in ages and she was surprised to see takings had almost doubled since Patrick had joined the business. Indeed he was there more often than she was these days. She had to dedicate her time to Holland's, and it was easier for Patrick to oversee the running of the club. He had a lot of contacts – both in the London underworld, and in show-business, who he would invite to the club to talk business, and they were obviously spending their money and boosting the profits.

When Lewis finally joined her in a booth, he took the books from her and started to look through them.

'I have to say this place is certainly healthier than it was when Mario left it to you,' he said, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses up his nose. 'You could ask for a good price for it.'

'What sort of price?'

'I'd say three thousand.'

'Three thousand pounds! That much?'

'Definitely. It would be more than enough for you to invest in a factory in East London.'

'I see. Well that's it then.'

'Have you spoken to Mr Collins about it?'

'Not yet, no. But I will as soon as he returns from Scotland tomorrow.'

'The pair of you have turned this place into a goldmine. If you didn't need the money to invest, I'd say hang onto it. The profits alone are very healthy, but they're not enough for you to buy somewhere outright.'

'So with the money I make in profit, I could pay the mortgage on a factory; without buying it outright?'

'Yes, but you'd always run the risk of losing profits one month and having to pay out of your own money.'

'You're right,' she sighed. 'Leave it with me Lewis. I'll get back to you as soon as I can.'

Lewis left and Annie took the ledgers back into her office. She came back out to find Norma polishing the bar. She looked different today. When she'd interviewed her that Sunday, she'd looked like someone who was down on their luck. But today her make up was applied better, and the dress she wore under her overall was smarter and more attractive. She actually looked too glamorous to be a cleaner.

'Everything okay?' she asked Annie.

‘Not really,’ Annie said, sitting on a stool by the bar. ‘I’m probably going to have to sell this place.’

‘Really?’ Norma frowned.

‘Oh don’t worry, it’ll only be to Mr Collins. You’ll still have a job.’

‘Why have you got to sell? If you don’t mind me asking.’

‘I’ve got another business, making shoes and bags. Did you see Fiona Miller’s wedding at the weekend?’

‘Oh yes,’ smiled Norma. ‘I saw the photos in the paper. Didn’t she make a beautiful bride?’

‘I designed her shoes. Now suddenly I’ve got orders coming from all over the place and I need a bigger factory. The only money I can get my hands on is by selling this place.’

‘But you seem quite attached to it.’

‘I am. I’m being sentimental I suppose. It belonged to my husband, and I did love him once upon a time. I also like having somewhere to come to when it’s all getting too much. My accountant reckons that Mr Collins and I have really turned the place around and it’s making a healthy profit. It seems such a shame to let it go.’

Annie wondered why she was confessing all this to the cleaner. She didn’t know what it was, but Norma seemed so easy to talk to - almost as if Annie had known her for years. Maybe it was because she was neutral, and it was always easier to talk to someone who wasn’t involved.

‘Well I’ll tell you something Annie. A confession if you like. I’ve been here before. I came here a few weeks ago with a friend and I ran into a girl I used to know, Iris Lindholm, Mr Collins’s girlfriend. Please don’t think I’m speaking out of turn if she’s a friend of yours.’

‘She’s no friend of mine,’ Annie chuckled.

‘Well, she totally knocked me back when I tried to say hello. Snotty cow. If you sell this place, I could just imagine her swanning around like she owns it just because she’s Mr Collins’ girlfriend.’ She suddenly checked herself and started polishing the bar again. ‘Anyway, I’ve said enough.’

‘No, I appreciate your honesty. I just wish I knew what I should do.’

‘Only you can decide that. But I know what I’d do if it was me. I’d find some other way of buying a factory. This place is like your baby, and you wouldn’t want to stand by and watch some other woman bringing it up would you?’

‘No,’ Annie said. ‘I wouldn’t.’

Annie slept little that night, going through all the possible ways she had of making enough money to buy a factory without selling Bruno’s. She had no jewellery to sell. She’d had to do that to pay off Mario’s debts. All she owned in the world was Bruno’s and her building on Regent Street. She thought about what Norma had said about Iris taking the place over if it was left to her and Patrick, and Annie knew it was true. Iris was intolerable as it was, let alone becoming Queen Bee of Bruno’s.

But what else could Annie do? She couldn’t ask Kenneth for a loan. She guessed her Aunt Alice would help, but she’d done enough in giving her the building in the first place. Her only other option was her cousin Max. He owned Bloomberg Foods over in America and he was richer than Midas. She could ask him for a loan and pay him back out of the profits from the shoes. That seemed a better prospect than selling Bruno’s.

She finally drifted off to sleep just as it was getting light, but was awoken by the phone beside her bed ringing. She fumbled for the receiver, expecting it to be Eddie giving her one of his early morning calls.

‘Hello,’ she yawned.

‘Well top of the morning to you,’ Patrick laughed, and to Annie’s dismay, her heart did a little flip on hearing his voice.

‘How are you?’ she asked. ‘Are you back?’

‘I am. We found some great streets in Glasgow that we can use.’

‘That’s good,’ she yawned. She looked at her watch. ‘Patrick it’s half past eight. Can we talk later?’

‘Why don’t you come round this evening?’

‘I can’t. I’m having dinner with Eddie. We could meet at the club tomorrow.’

‘Okay. Well, if you change your mind. I’ve brought you back some shortbread.’

‘What woman could refuse?’

Annie dressed and went down to her office. She was tired and a little spaced out, but awake enough to draw up a telegram to her cousin. She didn’t phrase it that she wanted money as such, instead she said she had an interesting business proposition. People like Max Tanner could never resist the temptation of making more money. Even though he owned half of New York, and practically every fast food restaurant in the United States served his food. He had a mansion in Beverley Hills, an Island in the Caribbean, and Tawny, his youngest daughter had a place at Roedene. But if it meant earning a few grand extra, he’d still do it.

Putting it to the back of her mind, she got on with her day. She had a meeting with Lady Davinia Watson, who was marrying a Crown prince of some obscure European principality and wanted wedding shoes, and they were sitting in Annie’s office, going over designs, when Eddie came bursting in - a huge smile on his face.

‘Are you free?’ he beamed.

‘No I’m in a meeting,’ she snapped, subtly indicating at Davinia.

‘Well how long will you be? I have something to show you.’

‘Okay, go and wait for me in the flat.’

He left and Annie apologised to Davinia before showing her the sketches she’d done. She wondered what Eddie had to show her. She hoped it wasn’t an engagement ring, or a house they could move into or something. She had enough on her plate; the last thing she needed was worrying about settling down with someone.

She went up into the flat and found that as usual, Eddie had made himself at home. He was sprawled out in the sofa drinking vodka, his moccasins kicked off in different directions. On seeing Annie, he stood up and quickly slipped his feet back into his shoes and went over to her, holding his arms out.

‘There you are,’ he crowed. He grasped her shoulders and kissed her cheeks. ‘You are coming with me.’

‘Where?’ she moaned. ‘I’m not in the mood Eddie.’

‘You will be when you see it,’ he said.

He took Annie’s hand and pulled her out of the room, along the corridor and into the lift.

‘I thought you were having a meeting with the Hit Parade people or something,’ Annie said.

‘That can wait. The needs of my beautiful girlfriend are far more important.’

He practically manhandled her into the Rolls and drove off. Soon they were heading through Holborn and into the City and out to East London. Annie thought he was taking her to the factory, but when he went through Whitechapel, and towards Stratford she wondered where the hell they were going. Annie wished he'd put the roof up - she felt quite vulnerable driving along in such a shiny, fancy car through one of the poorest areas of London.

'If you're taking me to some fancy hotel in Essex you can forget it,' Annie said. 'I've got clients to see.'

Eddie just laughed and drove on.

Eventually they ended up in Barking in Essex - a particularly dreary area with bomb sites, fields and a smattering of mock Tudor houses. Eddie drove into a large industrial estate and stopped the car in front of a massive red bricked building with the name 'Kirks' written on it. The only Kirks Annie was aware of were the shoe-makers.

'What's this?' she asked.

'A factory. They've moved up to Peterborough and this place is vacant. I thought it would be perfect for the new Glass factory. I've got the keys, come and have a look.'

He grabbed Annie's hand and pulled her into the large building. It was indeed a huge factory that - compared to Glass's factory in Whitechapel - looked like something from the Twenty First Century. It had workstations for at least a hundred people and a whole suite of offices on the top floor. Eddie pulled Annie to the middle of the floor, in between all the heavy machinery, and took her hands, kissing her on the lips.

'What do you think?' he asked.

'It's fantastic,' she replied. 'But how much does it cost?'

'Moray Kirk, the owner is an old friend and he's going to do us a deal. He's selling it for five thousand pounds.'

'Five thousand pounds?'

'Yes. I realise Bruno's isn't worth that much. But if I can persuade Dad to sell the Whitechapel factory, I thought we could buy half of it each.'

'It's okay. I'll just ask my cousin Max to lend me two thousand five hundred pounds.'

Eddie frowned.

'What?'

'I'm not selling Bruno's. I'm going to ask my cousin Max to lend me the money. He owns Bloomberg Foods in the States, and he's worth several millions. Two and a half thousand pounds will be nothing to him.'

'Why aren't you selling Bruno's?'

'Lewis Finkel, my accountant was looking at the books yesterday and he reckons that we've turned it around and it's making really healthy profits.'

'You're not in the nightclub business Annie,' Eddie snapped. 'You're a shoe designer. Why are you hanging onto it?'

'It's mine. It's hard for me to let it go.'

He let go of her hands and walked off, banging his fist against a huge iron lathe.

'It's Patrick Collins isn't it?' he said.

'What are you talking about?'

He turned and looked at her.

'You're in love with Patrick Collins.'

'Don't be stupid,' she blushed. 'Why are you saying that?'

‘I’ve seen the way you look at him. The way the pair of you gravitate towards each other whenever you’re in the same room. That’s why you don’t want to sell Bruno’s. It’ll mean severing all ties with him.’

‘You’re wrong,’ she pleaded – even though it was partly true. ‘I just don’t think it’s wise selling off my assets.’

‘A run down club in Soho is hardly an asset love,’ he said mockingly.

‘Don’t be rude about my club,’ she snapped. ‘It’s kept me going up until now. You were grateful for Al Dunne to showcase his act there.’

‘I wouldn’t have put anyone high profile in there. It would be an embarrassment.’

Enraged by this, Annie walked up to him and slapped him across the face.

‘You pig!’ she cried. ‘You absolute pig.’

She turned and walked out of the factory and out of the industrial park. She marched along in anger and could hear Eddie calling after her. But right now she couldn’t bear to see him or speak to him. His reaction had angered her so much, although she feared it was partly because it had struck a raw nerve and this was making her cross with herself. She just needed to get away from him for a while, and go back to London. But she was completely lost. Barking was alien territory to Annie, and she had no idea how she was going to get home. She didn’t even have a handbag with her, and all she had was a shilling in the pocket of her Capri pants. She couldn’t get a taxi with that.

Hearing footsteps and Eddie’s voice, she was too proud to run to him and instead did the foolish thing of sticking her thumb out at the first van that came along. Luckily for her it was being driven by an elderly man who looked far too old to try anything funny.

‘Where you off to love?’ he smiled.

‘I’m not sure,’ she replied. ‘Is there a train station around here?’

‘I’m driving past Barking Station,’ he said. ‘Hop in.’

Whilst the elderly man was very personable and not at all intimidating, the smell of potatoes from the back of the van was overwhelming and made Annie feel quite nauseous.

‘You got lost?’ he asked in his broad cockney accent.

‘Sort of,’ she replied. ‘I had a row with my boyfriend. I’ve left him behind. I didn’t want to be around him a minute longer.’

‘You sound a bit posh for these parts? You from Up West?’

‘Sort of. Although sometimes I don’t feel as though I’m from anywhere.’

The old man dropped Annie off at Barking Station and she caught the District Line back into London. It was a long, rattling journey and it gave her time to think. She felt guilty for Eddie guessing her true feelings for Patrick, but she was positive that it wasn’t reciprocated. Patrick always seemed really hung up on Iris, and although he flirted with Annie, it was half-heartedly and there never seemed to be any feeling in it. But despite this, she longed to see him. He’d been away for over a week and she’d missed him so much. That was why she knew she couldn’t sell Bruno’s and sever all ties with him. He may not have felt the same way, but he was like a drug to her and she couldn’t take away the only chance she had of seeing him on a regular basis. She would just have to convince Eddie that he was wrong, and that nothing was ever going to happen.

She got off the train at Victoria and took the Victoria Line to Green Park and changed onto the Bakerloo Line, up to West Hampstead. It was only as she travelled that she realised she had no means of getting home. Her only shilling had paid for this journey. If Patrick was out, or

busy, she'd have no choice but to catch a cab and promise the driver she'd pay him at the other end.

Patrick lived in a smart mansion block five minutes from the underground station. When his mother had been alive, they'd all lived in Kilburn, but now Bernie and his twenty-two year old girlfriend lived in a country pile in Uxbridge. Patrick, however, liked to stay close to his old stomping ground and Annie knew he often went to the Irish pubs, where members of his extended family would buy him drinks and sing rebel songs. When he'd told her this, it made him seem even more attractive to her. On the surface he seemed so well-cultured - his public school education had given him a posh accent and good manners. But under it all, he was still a working-class boy of Irish extraction who could be rough and ready. Maybe it attracted Annie, because it was a reflection of herself. Was she not the poor girl who'd been taken in by rich guardians and made into a lady? Perhaps somewhere under it all, that Battersea girl still lurked.

As soon as she rang the bell and he answered the intercom, she breathed a sigh of relief. At least he could give her a lift home, or lend her the money to get a cab. Her legs couldn't carry her fast enough up the steps to his flat on the top floor, and when she got there, she found him waiting for her in the doorway, looking very casual in just a white shirt and black trousers; the neck open on his shirt and his cuffs undone.

'Have you come for the shortbread Miss Holland?' he smiled.

'Something like that,' she replied, stepping up to him. He smelled of soap and aftershave and she could see his hair was slightly damp.

'Were you going out?' she asked.

'I was just going to pop into Bruno's, see how things were going,' he said. 'But I don't have to. Not if I've got company.'

He stepped back and let her into the flat. It was very smart - all open-planned and obviously belonging to a bachelor. There were no family photographs, or chintz furniture. A brand new record player took pride of place on the sideboard, and the doors to the cupboard in which the television was, were wide open. Most women Annie knew preferred to keep the doors closed and for the television to remain hidden. Patrick followed her in and went over to the tortoiseshell covered bar in the corner.

'Can I get you a drink?' he asked.

'A gin and tonic please,'

She sat down on a black leather sofa that still smelt very new. Patrick made the drinks and came over to sit beside her.

'You look as though you've got the weight of the world in your shoulders,' he said.

'I had a row with Eddie,' she sighed.

'Oh yes? What about?'

Annie paused, wishing he was single and she could tell him the truth. Eddie was right, she *did* love him. She realised that now. She felt so happy being with him. She'd last felt that way about Mario. She'd never felt it about Eddie.

'He's found a big factory in Barking that he wants me to buy with him. When I told him I wasn't selling Bruno's and that I was going to ask my cousin Max for money instead, he went mad.'

'What's it to do with him?' Patrick asked, sipping his drink.

'He's under the impression that I'm clinging to Bruno's because of some strange loyalty to Mario, but I'm not. I want to hang onto it because I met with Lewis Finkel and he went over the

books and said how brilliantly it was doing. The profits have really turned around since you came on board. I don't know what you're doing but it's working.'

'I think it's partly down to having Eric and Jim on the door. People are scared to go into Soho clubs because they've heard of all the trouble that goes on due to the Maltese gangs and so on. Now they feel safer because the two guys are there to stop trouble coming in.'

'Well I'm grateful, but I suppose I shouldn't be telling you how well it's doing; your dad will want to start getting rid of me again.'

'Nah, I told Dad what a sweetheart you are and he's backed off. Your old man was a waste of time but you're sound as a pound.'

Annie blushed. She wished he'd stop talking like this. It was as though she was special to him.

'Iris is back soon isn't she?' she asked.

'Yeah on Monday. God knows what's she's been up to.'

'What do you mean?'

He looked down and smirked slightly.

'How can I put this without sounding horrible about my girlfriend? Iris isn't the sort of model who gets offered high-level fashion shoots in the South of France.'

'So you're saying I employ cheap-rent models to show off my shoes?' she giggled.

'No,' he laughed. 'But you only employ her for her feet. What I mean is that she isn't classy. Usually they want classy girls who've been to finishing school for those sorts of shoots. I can't help but think she's off with another bloke.'

'I wouldn't have thought it,' Anne said, although she agreed with him. 'I think she knows she's onto a good thing.'

'Is that a compliment?' he smiled.

'Take it as you will.'

He put down his drink and suddenly grasped Annie's hands, making her jump slightly.

'Why don't we go out somewhere?' he said. 'I could take you to a pub. Show you the other side of life.'

'I have been in a pub before Patrick!'

'Not anywhere like The Fiddle on Kilburn High Road. What do you say?'

In truth Annie didn't care where they went. She just liked being with him, and if that meant spending the evening in a rough Irish pub, so be it.

'Okay,' she said. 'I'm hardly dressed for Quaglinos.'

As they walked the short journey to Kilburn High Road, Annie held onto Patrick's arm. She'd already had three gin and tonics and felt a bit tipsy. The Fiddle was a particularly dingy-looking pub in the middle of the busy high street, sandwiched between an ironmongers and a shop selling strange coloured milkshakes and ice creams. As soon as Annie entered the pub, she felt her shoes stick to the floor, and the smell of Guinness was overwhelming. As her birth name was Brady, she was obviously of Irish stock, but she felt no affinity with the country. In the corner a man was playing a banjo and singing a traditional song. Annie couldn't quite make out what he was saying, as his drunken slurring was making it indecipherable, but it was amusing all the same.

Patrick led her to the bar, where behind it hung an array of wooden sticks of various lengths.

'What are they?' Annie asked Patrick.

‘Shillelaghs,’ he replied. ‘Seamus the landlord uses them to see off anyone causing trouble.’ He looked to the tired old barman and whistled. ‘Brendan, a pint of Guinness and half for the lady.’

‘Guinness,’ she groaned. ‘I hate Guinness.’

‘Nonsense woman,’ he said in a broad, Irish accent. ‘That’s only because you haven’t had it poured for you properly.’

Annie had to admit that there must have been something in the way the drink was poured, as it tasted different to how Guinness had in the past. The man playing the banjo started singing some song about being in prison, and Annie guessed this was a rebel song.

‘I feel awfully naughty listening to this,’ she giggled, draining her glass. ‘Uncle Michael’s cousin is Simeon Wright, the MP. He hates the Irish.’

‘Simeon Wright? Was he the one calling for the Death Penalty for all rebels?’

‘The very one. We had little to do with him. But I do remember him coming to Elliott House one Christmas and boring us all.’

‘But your birth name was Brady. You must be Irish.’

‘I guess so. I know so little about my family. All I can remember is living in a scruffy house with my mum and Kenneth and our dog. Then Mum got pneumonia and died and we were taken into an orphanage. Uncle Michael and Aunt Nesta took us in and that was it. I suppose I’ve got family out there, but I don’t know who they are or where they live. Battersea I suppose.’

‘Well there’s obviously a Colleen in there somewhere. So come on, you’re having another Guinness.’

Two glasses later and Annie could barely stand. Everything was hazy and it was as though her conscious, sober brain was watching what she was getting up to and disapproving. She was aware of dancing for the men who stood by and watched her. She stumbled a bit, but she found she could do Irish dancing and she had no idea who’d taught her this. The men all clapped and she remembered enjoying the attention. Soon it was closing time and Patrick had to help her out of the pub. The fresh air hit her and made her feel even worse. She giggled and clung onto Patrick, and even though she was drunk, she enjoyed the feeling of his body close to hers.

‘You need fish and chips to sober you up my lass,’ he said. ‘Otherwise your head is going to feel as though it’s been put through a mangle tomorrow.’

He pulled her into a small, brightly-lit fish and chip shop and ordered two rounds of cod and chips. Annie wondered how she was going to eat such rich food with a belly full of Guinness. But it smelt so good - wrapped up in newspaper and covered in vinegar - she found it easy to eat. As she and Patrick walked back to his flat. She gradually started to feel a bit more sober; but was still too drunk to find her way home to Regent Street.

‘I think I should stay with you tonight,’ she said to Patrick, snuggling in close to him.

‘Might be an idea. I’ll put you up on the sofa.’

They got into the flats and every time Annie tried to put her foot on a stair, she kept tripping and giggling. In the end, Patrick scooped her up and carried her up the stairs. Annie put her arms around his neck and nuzzled her head close to his.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered. ‘I didn’t know you were so strong.’

‘My back’ll pay for it in the morning,’ he laughed. ‘Don’t you worry!’

He took her up to the flat, easing her down as he opened the door.

‘Come on, let’s get you a glass of milk.’

‘I don’t want milk,’ she purred, wrapping her arms around his neck. ‘I want a kiss.’

Patrick darted his head forward and kissed her briefly on the lips. He then pulled away and pushed her in the door, shutting it behind them. He went to walk off, but Annie grasped his sleeve and pulled him back to her. He paused for a moment, then kissed her. Annie knew it was wrong – she was Eddie’s girlfriend and Patrick was with Iris, but she couldn’t help herself. She was drunk and contented and didn’t want her time with him to end.

Making love with Patrick wasn’t as romantic as Annie had imagined. It was all very rushed and fumbled, and the drink made her feel queasy and a bit dizzy. Afterwards Patrick just rolled off her and went to sleep. Annie too was exhausted - it had been an eventful day and she now felt drunk, sick and confused about everything. She hoped when she woke up the next morning, everything would seem clearer.

She slept well, but awoke with a pounding head. The room seemed far too bright, and as she opened her eyes, she saw that the curtains were wide open, letting the sun stream in. Wincing, she laid back down, pulling the covers over her head.

‘You can’t stay there all day,’ a voice said, and as she ventured out again, she saw that Patrick was standing in front of the wardrobe in the corner, doing up his shirt.

‘What time is it?’ she groaned.

‘Half nine.’

There was something abrasive about his tone that concerned Annie. Last night was fresh in her mind, and while it hadn’t been the fairy tale encounter she’d envisaged; they’d made love and their relationship had changed. Perhaps she could split up with Eddie and he could dump Iris. Surely anyone could see her and Patrick belonged together.

‘Come back to bed for a while,’ she said, trying to sound seductive, which was difficult with a hangover and a terribly scratchy throat.

He turned and looked at her, and to her horror, she could see he was embarrassed. Was she that terrible a sight? Had making love to her been that horrible?

‘I’ve got a meeting in town,’ he said. ‘I’ll give you a lift home.’

‘Do you regret last night?’ she asked.

He paused, then came over to the bed and sat beside her. He smiled sadly and reached out, stroking back her hair.

‘Of course I don’t. But you and I could never work. What about Eddie? He’s mad about you. And I love Iris. I know you think she’s a bitch, but there’s something about her that keeps me hooked. Look at you Annie, you’re a lady. I’m never going to be anything more than a villain’s son. I deserve someone like Iris.’

His words were like daggers to Annie’s heart. How could he think this way?

‘Don’t be silly. You’re going to be a film producer. But even if you carried on working for Bernie, I wouldn’t care. You deserve so much better than Iris bloody Lindholm.’

‘Maybe I do,’ he shrugged. ‘But she’s what I feel comfortable with. I was with Trixie when you met me don’t forget. Tarty blondes have always been my type. Also, you’re mad about Eddie.’

‘I’m not,’ she whined.

‘I saw your face yesterday when you’d had a row with him. You were devastated. He’s the one you want. Not me.’

‘You’re wrong,’ she cried, grasping his arm. ‘I want you.’

‘No Annie. Let’s put last night down to a mistake, okay. Now get dressed, I’ll drop you home.’

Seeing as she had no money on her, Annie had no choice but to accept his lift. As they drove down to Central London, he chatted away as if nothing had happened. He laughed about the men they'd spoken to in the pub and joked about Annie's dancing. His coldness was wounding and Annie couldn't wait to get away from him. Why couldn't he see that he was worthy of so much more than busty blonde tarts? She was so hurt, for a while she made up her mind that his father could have Bruno's. It would be too painful to be Patrick's business partner, knowing she was never going to be anything more than that. But the more she thought about it, the more she decided not to. She knew she hadn't been imagining things last night. He'd been loving towards her. He'd said sweet words and held her like she was the most precious thing in the world. She was perfectly aware that men would do anything to get you into bed. But her instinct told her that deep down, Patrick wanted her too. And while she held onto Bruno's, she held onto the hope of one day winning him round.

He dropped her back at Regent Street and she got out of the car without giving him a kiss on the cheek or barely acknowledging him. It was taking all her strength not to cry. She went into the building and up to her flat, and as she put the key in the door and opened it she groaned on smelling The Overnighter – Eddie's aftershave. He was the last person she wanted to see.

She walked into the flat to find him on the sofa, covered in blankets, asleep. She wondered if she could sneak into the bedroom and get into bed without him hearing, but he suddenly sat up, running his hand through his thick, dark hair.

'There you are,' he gasped. 'Where have you been?'

'I got a lift back to Barking Station and I took the tube to town and stayed at The Villiers Marble Arch.'

'Why didn't you come home?'

'Because I guessed it would be the first place you'd come looking for me.'

He got up off the sofa and came over to her, grasping her by the shoulders and giving her that hapless smile.

'Don't say it like that sweetheart,' he said. 'I'm sorry about what I said. I was unreasonable. Of course it makes sense to hold onto as many assets as you possibly can.'

'That was what I was trying to tell you.'

'And I'm a thoughtless oaf. Do you forgive me?'

'Of course I do,' she smiled. 'Now let me go and have a bath and get changed. I look a mess.'

'No you don't. You look perfect, as you always do.'

Chapter Eleven

Iris stepped off The Queen Victoria at Southampton and felt as though she was entering a different universe. After a week of sun, sand, sex, and hobnobbing with society's richest and most debauched; to suddenly be back under England's grey skies, and surrounded by dreary looking people, felt like the most enormous jolt. Leo carried their cases down the ramp and joined her at the jetty, quickly finding a porter to put the bags onto a trolley.

'England's so boring,' Iris sighed. 'Let's turn around and run back to France.'

'I would in a jiffy,' Leo replied. 'But it's you who's been going on about having responsibilities.'

'We can't all be carefree like you,' she said. 'I've got a job and a boyfriend to think of.'

He slipped his hand under her swing coat and ran his hand over her backside, giving it a discreet but firm squeeze.

'You're not going back to boring Patrick now are you?' he said quietly. 'You'll be falling asleep under him.'

She looked up at him and smiled and moved away from his hand.

'I love Patrick,' she said. 'I don't love you.'

'But you love what I can give you. You love the danger, and don't deny it.'

She couldn't deny it. The past week had been the most amazing of her life, but there had been times when all she'd been able to think about was Patrick. She wished she could tear herself in two, and the part of her who loved danger and excitement could stay with Leo and the other part of her who craved love and stability could be with Patrick forever.

'Come on,' Leo said, taking her hand. 'Let's go and find my car.'

He drove them back to London, and as the car sped along the A3, Iris felt the strangest of sensations. It felt as though her stomach was somewhere back behind them in the road, and this made her feel shaky and dizzy. She tried to put it down to the shock of being back in cold, old England after the heat of Cannes. But it didn't sit well with her. She remembered feeling this way once before. She hoped to God it wasn't the same thing this time. It would make her life even more nightmarish than it already was.

'You're quiet old girl,' Leo said. 'I meant what I said back there. We can turn around and head back to France. I've nothing on that can't wait.'

'No, I can't do that to Patrick.'

Leo took his hand off the steering wheel and stroked her cheek.

'Well let me do something to cheer you up. Let me buy you something.'

'I don't need anything,' she said. 'You've just given me the most wonderful week of my life. I'm happy with that.'

'If you'd be mine all the time, we could live half the year in the South of France and half the year in Austria, skiing. Imagine that.'

'I can't ski,' she quipped.

'I'll pay for you to learn.'

'We'll see. Just take me home Leo. I can't escape forever.'

Streatham looked grey, dirty and hideous compared to the South of France, and Iris wished she lived somewhere more glamorous. It was the first time Leo had seen her home and she wished he hadn't. It was so suburban and boring.

'This is where you live then?' he said, looking up at her little flat at the top of a terraced, three storey house.

'Yes,' she sulked. 'Don't come in. It needs a tidy up.'

'Okay. Well, I am going to see you again aren't I? Please don't say Cannes was 'it'.'

'You'll see me,' she said. 'I just need some time to get used to being back in London.'

As Iris walked up the three flights of stairs to her flat, her legs ached in a way she'd never experienced before. It wasn't some injury or exhaustion; it simply felt as though her legs were filled with lead. Her heart began to race and she had to stop and hold onto the banister as all her fears came up to greet her. She'd last got pregnant when she was seventeen. It was by a punter, and she'd got rid of it as soon as she could. The infection she'd got afterwards had left her in hospital and she just managed to escape prison because the doctor who cared for her was sympathetic to prostitutes and wrote that it was an infection caused by a miscarriage. It was the most horrible thing Iris had ever experienced and she didn't want to go through it again. She'd been convinced she wasn't even able to have kids. Most women who got infections after an abortion were left infertile. Why was she so unlucky? And more to the point. Who was the father?

She was only home for ten minutes, when the street door bell rang. Convinced it was Patrick, Iris wondered if she should ignore it. He was the last person she wanted to see at this present time. She felt bad enough about spending the past week with Leo as it was, let alone the prospect that she was now having the other man's baby.

Suddenly there was a call of;

'Are you up there you tart?' from the street below and she realised it was Ralf. She ran down to the street door with an energy she couldn't muster for the walk up and the sudden change in feeling astounded her. Once the door was open, Ralf practically barged his way into the hallway and went running up the stairs. He was the only person who knew the truth about her trip to Cannes. Iris didn't have that many friends and those she did have, she didn't feel she could trust with such delicate information. Ralf didn't care. Being homosexual, he lived a clandestine life himself. He'd had several affairs with men in positions of power and knew the importance of secrets. He wasn't going to say a word.

'How was it?' he asked as he walked into the flat and flopped down onto her old sofa, the dust flying up and making him wince. He looked at her and frowned in disapproval.

'You don't look very tanned,' he said.

'I don't feel well,' she replied, sitting beside him. 'I feel sick.'

'You look awful. Haven't been over-indulging have you?'

'Well, let's just say there wasn't much I didn't do,' she said with a knowing smile.

'You dirty bitch. Are you going to make me a drink or what?'

'What do you want?'

'Whatever you've got,' he said, sitting back and crossing his legs.

Iris went into the kitchen and made him a gin and tonic. The tonic was flat as she'd bought it before she went to France; but she knew Ralf would care more about the gin than the mixer.

She returned to the living room and passed Ralf his drink and sat beside him.

'You not having one?' he asked.

'As I said, I feel sick. I think I've done enough drink and drugs to last me a lifetime.'

'So how was Leo?'

'He was Leo. He knows everyone on the Riviera and he was as dirty and disgusting as ever. Have you ever gone with someone and hated yourself afterwards?'

‘Of course I have darling,’ he said, sipping his drink. He then pulled a face. ‘Ugh, this tonic’s flat.’

‘I know. I bought it before I went away.’

‘Oh well, makes me able to taste the gin more.’

He swilled it down and put the glass on the coffee table. It made her laugh how he took care to put it on the raffia coaster; Patrick would just put his cups and glasses down anywhere, not caring about stains.

‘So are you going to see Leo again?’ he asked. ‘Or are you going back to Pretty Boy?’

‘I love Patrick,’ she sighed. ‘That’s the one thing I’m sure of. All the time I was in France I kept thinking about him. I don’t know why I prefer him over Leo. He’s not even really my type; and at first, I only started seeing him to piss Annie off. But he’s a nice guy. And I like the fact that he’s got ambition apart from looking after his dad’s interests. He wants to be a film producer and get a name for himself. Leo’s in his forties and all he does is swan around living off his trust fund. He’s got no purpose in life, no ambition. But that makes him exciting. Sometimes I think I’m not good enough for Pat.’

‘Rubbish. He’s a villain’s son from Kilburn.’

‘Yes but he’s been to public school and he’s far more intelligent than me. Leo doesn’t know anything remotely intellectual. He doesn’t give a toss about who wrote War and Peace. All he cares about is smoking, taking drugs, drinking and bedding women. If I stayed with him I’d just bum around doing nothing.’

‘Well I have a proposition for you, which will mean you being nice to one of those men of yours.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Well you can’t stand that bitch Annie can you?’

‘You know I can’t.’

‘Well how would you like to go into competition against her?’

‘I can’t design shoes.’

‘No but I can design clothes. I want you to go into business with me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s crippling me Iris, working day in day out in that little factory in Margaret Street. Since the fashion show, a day don’t go by I don’t get some commission. I need proper premises. A factory. A showroom. All the things that little witch Annie’s got.’

‘And you want me to pay for it?’

‘I can put up half. I want you to put up the other half. All I want is five hundred pounds. Just think, you’ll be part owner of a fashion company.’

‘It sounds a great prospect, but I can’t just go and ask Patrick or Leo for cash. Five hundred pounds is a lot of money, and besides, it makes me look like a tart.’

‘No it doesn’t. Patrick’s supposed to be your boyfriend. Surely he wants you to be happy. And Leo’s richer than Midas.’

‘I know. But if I ask him, I’ll just feel like a tart. I have sex with him then ask to borrow money. What would it look like to you?’

‘Well ask Patrick then. Go on Iris.’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think I’d be much of a business partner.’ She looked down and rubbed her hand over her flat stomach.

‘No!’ gasped Ralf. ‘Surely not?’

‘I don’t know. I keep feeling sick and dizzy.’

‘It’s probably something you ate or took while you were on holiday. You’ve been careful haven’t you?’

‘Not really. I had an abortion years ago, I didn’t think I could get pregnant again.’

‘If you are, who’s the father?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine love.’

Iris pondered on Ralf’s proposition for the rest of the day. She remained alone in the flat – Patrick didn’t call her or come round, and when she rang Leo’s home there was no-one in. She knew she could have got dressed up and gone to Bruno’s, and Patrick wouldn’t turn her away. But she needed to think hard about her two predicaments. The thought of going into business with Ralf was wonderful. How nice it would be to stop working for Annie, and even better to become the co-owner of a fashion house. But she felt bad about asking Patrick for money. She’d spent so many years feeling like a cheap tart and relying on men for money. Then of course there was her other problem. She guessed if she told Patrick she was pregnant, he would want to marry her; but what would happen if it came out looking like Leo? Patrick was auburn-haired and she was a natural blonde. How would she convince him a black haired, olive-skinned kid was his? On the other hand, she knew that Leo would pay for her to go to the best ‘fertility’ clinic in Harley Street for an abortion. It wouldn’t be some back-street affair like the last one. This one would be done properly, with anaesthetic and a comfortable bed, and nurses to look after her.

But Iris wasn’t sure if she could go through it again. Even though she hadn’t wanted the other baby, she’d still felt the most enormous sense of loss afterwards and sometimes would lie awake at night imagining what it would have been like to be a mother. She guessed she’d be a lousy one like Norma. She was selfish through and through, and like her mother, would find it difficult to make sacrifices for a child. Deciding that she was going to put it to the back of her mind for now, she did one last thing and went into the kitchen and poured the rest of the bottle of gin into a tumbler and drank it down in one go. She then went and had a very hot bath. She told herself it was so she could relax after her journey from France, but she knew deep down it was for other reasons.

That night Iris tossed and turned, and when she did sleep, she dreamt about her childhood. She dreamt she was locked in a room with Vince – her mother’s boyfriend who’d raped her when she was eleven. She couldn’t even see him; the room was dark and all she could hear was his breathing, and she could smell his body odour. Norma only used to hang around with him because he could get her things on the Black Market. It certainly wasn’t for his looks. When Iris finally awoke from the dream, she was shaking and frightened and all that bitterness and resentment came rushing back to her. Annie and Kenneth were the lucky ones. If they’d remained with Norma, no doubt Annie would have ended up on the game too, and Kenneth would probably be in prison now for something or the other.

Unable to go back to sleep, Iris got out of bed and went into the kitchen, making herself a cup of strong coffee, with a dash of whisky in it. She sat on the sofa and pulled back the net curtain, looking down at her shabby street. Right now Annie was probably tucked up in bed with Eddie in her beautiful flat on Regent Street, and Kenneth was no doubt at home in his house in Chiswick. Over in America, her Aunt Alice was probably starring in some play, or attending some fancy gala, and her cousins Max and Alana were both rich and successful. And yet here she was – the poor relation. Well she didn’t want that any more. She made up her mind that she was

going to go into business with Ralf. And she was going to ask Patrick for the money. If he loved her, he'd do this one thing for her.

It took a lot of make-up to hide the dark circles under her eyes, but Iris wanted to look her best when she went and saw Patrick the next day. She took a chance on him being at Bruno's, as he often went there on a Sunday morning to go over the books. He wanted to make sure he got a fair cut of the profits – not that Saint Annie was likely to try and diddle him.

Dressed in a white dress that showed off her tan, Iris made her way to Soho. She splashed out on a cab, as she didn't like the thought of travelling on a rattling old bus, breathing in other people's BO and sitting on fag ends. She felt queasy enough as it was, she didn't want to throw up and get chucked off the 109!

She arrived at Bruno's to find the door wide open and a puddle of soapy water in the area outside it. The cleaner was obviously in, but that was no guarantee Patrick was as well.

Iris did her best to step over the water and went into the club. That smell of disinfectant, stale cigarette smoke and alcohol rushed up to greet her, and it felt as though she'd never been away. She spotted Patrick in a booth at the back, the ledgers spread out before him. He looked up and spotted her, giving her that cheeky, wolfish smile and her heart melted. She blushed, thinking about what she'd done with Leo and she felt that self-loathing that had plagued her all her life.

'Hello love,' Patrick said. 'This is a nice surprise.'

'Hello,' she replied, sitting before him. 'How are you?'

'I'm fine. What about you? Have you got a tan? I can't see in this light?'

'Yes, I'm all tanned. Although I don't want you thinking I was spending all my time sunning myself. I did do some work.'

She glanced up at the bar and saw the cleaner behind it, and for a moment thought she was seeing things. She then looked away and looked again and felt her blood run cold. Norma was behind the bar; wearing an overall and cleaning glasses.

'What's she doing here?' she whispered to Patrick.

'Annie took her on,' he replied quietly. 'She did it while I was in Scotland.'

'Well you've got to sack her.'

'I can't do that,' he laughed. 'She's a good cleaner. Just ignore her.'

'You don't understand. I don't want her anywhere near me.'

'What went on between the two of you when you worked together?'

'She was a cleaner at the club where I worked and she was often caught stealing.'

Patrick glanced round and looked at Norma. Then turned back to Iris.

'Really?' he asked, and she could tell by the tone of his voice that he believed her. 'Well we'll keep an eye on her.' He smiled and grasped Iris's hands. 'So anyway, tell me all about France.'

'I don't want to talk about it,' she snapped. 'Can't we get out of here? It's so dingy.'

'I thought you liked it here.'

'I do. But after Cannes, it all looks so dark and horrible.'

'Honestly!' he laughed. 'I can't keep up with you. Alright. Let's go along to Dino's. He'll probably be open for coffee.'

They got up to leave and as Iris passed the bar, Norma stopped what she was doing and smiled at her. But it wasn't a loving, motherly smile; there was nothing but spite in her eyes. Iris had never felt so terrified in her life.

Dino's was on the corner of Wardour Street and Sheraton Street, and of an evening it was populated by Teddy Boys and Maltese spivs. But during the day it was quite respectable and the couple of customers who were in there looked like showgirls from one of the more respectable clubs in the area, having a break before starting the evening shift. Iris and Patrick found a table, and Iris sat down and lit herself a cigarette while Patrick went to the counter to get them a coffee. Iris could hardly steady her shaking hands as she smoked, trying to work out why her mother had got a job in the bar. Why couldn't she just leave her alone?

Patrick came back with two coffees and sat opposite her.

'What's on your mind?' he asked her.

'Ralf came to see me last night. He wants me to go into business with him.'

'What?' he spluttered. 'What do you know about designing clothes?'

'I wear them,' she snapped, hurt by his lack of faith in her. 'Besides, what did your little girlfriend know about designing shoes before she started?'

'She's not my girlfriend, don't be stupid. And Annie always designed shoes. You're a model Iris, you've never designed anything or run a business. What does he want you to do?'

'He wants premises of his own, and he wants me to help out. I can help with booking the showroom models and so on.'

'Can't you do that without giving him money?'

'But if I invest I'll get money back from the profits. I was hoping you'd help me out.'

'No,' he said with a resolute shake of the head. 'It's ridiculous Iris. I don't trust that Ralf and I think he's ripping you off.'

'I thought you loved me,' she uttered, swallowing down her tears. 'If you loved me you'd want me to be happy.'

'And I do want you to be happy,' he smiled, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips. 'I don't begrudge you the money. Do you want me to buy you something? Do you want a car or a fur coat?'

'I want to be somebody!' she protested. 'I want to be successful and have money of my own. Is that too much to ask for?'

'Why don't I see if I can get you another job? I know you don't get on with Annie, so why don't I see if one of my friends has got a manageress job going in one of his clubs?'

Iris was so angry with Patrick that she couldn't bear to spend another moment with him. She stood up, kicking her chair back roughly, causing the two showgirls to look up.

'You make me sick Patrick' she said. 'You treat me like shit and I don't know why I'm with you.'

She walked out of the cafe and practically ran to Oxford Street. She walked along the deserted street, past the shops that were all shut up; the silence only punctuated by the odd bus that rumbled past. She looked for a cab, but nothing came, so she had no choice but jump onto a 137, which took her to Sloane Square, and from there she caught a taxi, which took her to World's End, and Leo's flat.

She received a surprise when he opened the door and she found him in nothing but a pair of navy swimming trunks; a rather fat, marijuana cigarette hanging between his lips. For a moment, she panicked, wondering if he was entertaining another woman.

'Iris!' he beamed, taking the joint out of his mouth and kissing her on the cheek. 'Come on in.' He put his mouth close to her ear. 'Big brother's here,' he whispered.

'Kenneth?'

'Yes, we're out in the garden. Come on.'

He took her hand and pulled her out into the small patio garden at the back of the house. She found two deckchairs had been put out there, and sitting in one of them was Kenneth. He looked strangely debauched, with his shirt undone and his pasty chest on show, a patch of red sunburn across his collarbone. On seeing Iris, he looked a little embarrassed and sat up, fastening his shirt.

‘Hello Iris,’ he said. ‘This is a nice surprise.’

‘Hello Kenneth,’ she replied.

‘I’ll go and get another seat,’ Leo said, beckoning to the deckchair. ‘You sit that pretty little backside down in there. Can I get you a drink? Or do you want to share my joint? Kenneth won’t partake.’

‘I’d love a gin and tonic please,’ she said, sitting down in the rather rickety deckchair.

‘Coming up,’ he said, and he went into the house. Iris looked at Kenneth and thought how different he looked when he was relaxed. He really was quite handsome, with strands of his honey blonde hair falling onto his forehead, and where he’d caught the sun on his face, it highlighted his blue eyes. It was strange how they’d both inherited Norma’s colouring, and yet Annie was so dark. Knowing her mother, it was quite possible the three of them had different fathers.

‘Leo’s been telling me about Cannes,’ he said. ‘Did you enjoy yourself?’

‘It was wonderful,’ she sighed. ‘Made me wonder why I came back to England.’

‘Yes it is rather splendid. I remember the summer Annie and I went to stay with our cousin Alana in Los Angeles. I was about fifteen at the time, it was so beautiful there. So sunny and warm, I just wanted to stay forever.’

‘It must have been a thrill for you, being with Alana,’ Iris said. Thinking it ironic that only she knew the beautiful movie star was their cousin by blood. To Kenneth, they were only related by marriage.

‘She was rather too much for me if you must know the truth. You know me Iris, I’m a modest man. Alana lives in this fantasy world of movies and famous people and parties – all the things I hate. Most of the time I would go walking along the beach by myself. Those were the times I loved the most. The solitude. Just me, God and the sea. It was beautiful.’

Leo came back out with Iris’s drink and a dining chair, which he put down alongside the deckchairs. In typical Leo fashion, it didn’t worry him that he was wearing skimpy shorts and smoking an illegal cigarette whilst sitting in a small patio garden that was overlooked by all the other terraced houses on his street. Anyone could have looked down and saw him, and called the police when the smell of marijuana wafted through their windows.

After just a couple of sips of gin, Iris suddenly felt very morose. She was so used to gin that it normally had hardly any effect on her; but she felt as though a black cloud had passed over the beautiful blue sky – blocking out the sun. To her horror, she started crying. Normally she hated crying and would do all she could to stop it – usually only using it as a way of manipulating some stupid man. But today it was like someone had dropped the floodgates and she couldn’t help herself.

‘Hey what’s the matter?’ Leo asked, reaching out and putting his hand on her knee. ‘Who’s upset you?’

‘Patrick,’ she sniffed. ‘I went to see him to tell him about the offer Ralf made me, and he laughed at me.’

‘Ralf Silver?’ Kenneth asked.

‘Yes,’ she sniffed. ‘He wants me to go into business with him. I thought Pat would be pleased for me, but he just laughed.’

‘Did you ask him for money?’ Leo smiled.

‘I would have paid it back!’ she protested. ‘Every penny. Ralf’s inundated with commissions since the fashion show. I’d soon make the money back. Pat would rather me work for Annie and be at her beck and call.’

‘Annie wouldn’t be very pleased, you going into business with a rival designer,’ Leo said. ‘That’s probably why Patrick objected. Annie’s his business partner and you’re his girlfriend. He probably wants as little trouble as possible.’

‘Well Iris can’t pass up on a golden opportunity just because it might upset Annie,’ Kenneth said brusquely. ‘Besides, she designs shoes. Ralf designs dresses. So they’re hardly in competition with each other. How much does Ralf want Iris?’

‘Five hundreds pounds.’

‘That’s quite a hefty amount,’ Leo said. ‘I’d be surprised if Patrick even has that sort of money.’

‘Oh he’s got it. His dodgy deals bring him in a fortune. Then of course he’ll make money when this film’s made. I bet I don’t see any of it though.’

‘I’ll lend it to you,’ Kenneth suddenly announced.

Iris wiped away her tears and looked at him.

‘I beg your pardon?’ she sniffed.

‘I’ll lend you the money to invest in Ralf Silver’s company,’ he said. ‘I saw for myself that Ralf is a good designer, and there was a lot of interest that night at the fashion show. Call it a repayment for your help with Tanner Beresford.’

‘Do you mean it?!’ Iris gasped. ‘You’d do that for me?’

‘Yes,’ he smiled – a rare occurrence. ‘Why don’t you come to my office tomorrow? We can draw up a contract and come to an arrangement about repayments.’

‘Thank you!’ she gasped. ‘Thank you so much. I’ll pay you back every penny, I promise.’

‘I know you will,’ he said with a wise nod. ‘I think you’re capable of so much more than just modelling Annie’s shoes. This will give you the chance to prove yourself.’

‘Yes it will,’ she uttered, another tear falling onto her cheek. ‘That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.’

Chapter Twelve

Late August 1959

Annie felt sorry for Eddie. He was doing his best to make the atmosphere cheery. It was a beautiful summer's day. He had the top down on the car. The wireless was playing *Move It* by Cliff Richard and Eddie was singing along – out of tune, trying to make Annie laugh. But all she could do was sit and scowl. Too deep in her funk to get out of it. They were on the A23 heading down to Sussex, and Norcross – the official seat of the Duke of Loxborough. It was supposed to be a romantic break for her and Eddie, as well as a chance for her to go through some designs with Fiona Miller. But her mood had been ruined by her brother and that scheming bitch Iris Lindholm and she couldn't shake it off.

'I do hope you're not going to be like this all weekend,' Eddie said. 'You shouldn't let them get to you.'

'That's easy for you to say. You don't have a brother, and your sister adores you.'

'Kenneth's just had his head turned by Iris, that's all. From what you say, he hasn't had much female attention and he's just probably impressed by a beautiful blonde being nice to him.'

'She's only interested in his money. He's richer than Patrick so she's latched onto him.'

'I suppose you can't blame him for investing his money elsewhere. It's just a shame he's chosen to invest in a fashion house.'

'He's always been like it. When we were children living in Oxfordshire, there were some other evacuated London kids staying in the village. Two big boys called the Powell brothers. They used to wait for me down the lane on the way to school and jump out and hit me. One day Kenneth was with me and they started on me and he stood there egging them on.'

'Little bastard, why did he do that?'

'I was sick the previous Sunday and hadn't gone to church. So Kenneth told me it was God's punishment for me not going.'

'He's a strange one your brother. But leave him to it. Ralf Silver's no threat to you. He's a fashion designer, You design high-class shoes and bags. Besides I've not seen one famous person in his clothes. You're a guest of the Duchess of Loxborough for goodness sake.'

'I know,' she sighed. 'I've got to try and have fun haven't I?'

'Yes. Now put that lovely smile on your face and get ready for a weekend of mixing with the landed gentry.'

Norcross was a beautiful mansion on the outskirts of Brighton. Going there was not as exciting for Annie as it was for Eddie. As a teenager, her best friend had been the Earl of Egerton's daughter and she'd spent several summers at their mansion house in Wales. But for Eddie – the son of a Jewish cobbler from Bethnal Green – this was a big deal. His world was populated with new money – pop stars, models, the odd gangster. He'd not mixed with the aristocracy much and Annie could see the look of trepidation on his face as they pulled up outside the house, and a fleet of servants automatically came out to tend to their every whim.

Down the stairs came Fiona, carrying a little black fluffy poodle. Next to her was the Roland, the Duke, and they looked the picture of respectability in their tweeds. No one would have ever guessed Fiona was a docker's daughter from South London.

'Hello,' she said, as she came to greet them. 'Thank you for coming down.'

'How was the honeymoon?' Annie asked, as they kissed on both cheeks and the men shook hands.

‘Wonderful, but it went too fast. Come into the drawing room. We can have a chat.’

Eddie made Annie laugh as they sat in the small, cosy drawing room, drinking tea and eating the lemon drizzle cake the cook had made. She tried not to giggle out loud, but he looked comical, holding his teacup daintily within his big fingers. His pinky sticking up like some maiden aunt in an Ealing Comedy.

‘So do you shoot?’ Roland asked Eddie.

‘Sorry?’ he replied.

‘Do you shoot? Thought we two could go out tomorrow morning when the gals are discussing the shoes, and shoot some grouse. What do you say?’

‘I er...I er...’

Roland burst out laughing, rocking back and forth.

‘Of course not you idiot! I’ve got a pool table in my games room. Fancy a game?’

‘Definitely,’ laughed Eddie. ‘You had me there with the shooting. Only thing I’ve ever fired is an air rifle.’

Everyone laughed, and as Annie did, she felt all the blood rush to her head and the room spin. She’d never experienced such a thing before and it shocked her. She made up her mind that all of the stress of recent weeks had got to her. Every time she was with Eddie she would be racked with guilt at what had happened with Patrick. But at the same time a part of her wished he’d change his mind and decide he wanted her. She wondered if she should take a holiday – go and see Nesta in Switzerland. One of her friends, Kiri, had fallen in love with the Swiss owner of ski resort when they went there in ’56. Maybe she could stay with them. The thought of fresh Alpine air and no work or men for a week or so, seemed like heaven.

The men went into the games room, while Fiona took Annie on a guided tour of the house. It was over three hundred years old and large parts of it were in dire need of repair. Fiona confessed that the family didn’t have enough money to do the works and that the time might soon come when they would be forced to sell part of it off, although everyone hoped that with her profile raised so high through marrying Roland she would earn enough money to plough back into Norcross and it would be kept intact for future generations.

They took lunch on the veranda overlooking the beautiful grounds, and in the distance the white cliffs of the Seven Sisters could be seen. Annie envied Fiona living here. She missed Elliott House and wished she still had it to go back to; but that was impossible because her brother had destroyed it, and the grounds would soon be covered with ugly council houses.

‘These shoes are beautiful,’ Fiona said, looking through the book of sketches Annie had brought with her. ‘I’ll be spoilt for choice.’

‘I’m very grateful for your patronage,’ Annie said. ‘I’ve brought some of Clarissa’s sketches for bags too, if you’re interested.’

‘Yes of course. I’m off to Hollywood for six weeks at the end of September, I know the press are going to be following me, so it’ll be good to have some decent shoes and accessories.’

The butler emerged from the French doors carrying a tray with two gin and tonics on it. He laid on the table, and the two women took a glass each; but as soon as Annie took a sip of hers, she felt sick and started spluttering.

‘Are you alright?’ Fiona asked.

‘Yes, I’m fine. I just feel a bit queasy that’s all.’

Fiona looked up at the butler.

‘Fetch Miss Holland a tonic water won’t you Haines?’ she asked.

‘Yes Ma’am,’ he replied and he went into the house.

‘I’m alright, honestly,’ Annie said. ‘It’s been such a tough year for me, I think it’s making me ill.’

‘You need a holiday by the sounds of it.’

‘Yes, I was thinking of going to visit my friend Kiri in Zermatt. I could maybe go and see my Aunt as well. She’s in a convalescent home in Geneva.’

‘You look really peaky Annie. Are you sure you don’t want me to call for a doctor?’

‘No I’ll be fine,’ Annie smiled bravely. ‘Let’s get back to the shoes.’

Annie slept little that night. Whilst it was nice to be back in the country, and not have to try and sleep with the sound of buses going past her window and people spilling out of clubs and bars, shouting and disturbing her. She was so full after the five course meal that they’d been served that evening, and it felt strange sleeping alone that she couldn’t settle. Of course she and Eddie didn’t live together - it wasn’t the done thing, but Eddie stayed over at her flat most nights; or on occasion she would stay at his, and the bed felt cold and empty without him. Added to this, her head was pounding and if she sat up, she felt dizzy. If she laid down, her head pounded more and she felt like crying.

In the end, she gave up and went to the desk in the corner of the room. She pulled down the flap and took her book of sketches from the bag on the floor. Fiona had made a few changes to a couple of the designs and Annie made notes about how to go about accommodating them. Anything was better than having to contend with her racing mind. She’d never felt these weird symptoms before, and like any woman would, she couldn’t help but wonder if she was pregnant. She hadn’t had a period since she’d spent that night with Patrick a few weeks ago, which meant she should have been due around now; but she had none of the usual symptoms. Her belly wasn’t swollen and her legs didn’t ache. Her breasts were tender but that was about it. She didn’t normally feel sick and dizzy with it.

Annie didn’t even want to think about being pregnant. For one, it couldn’t have come at a worst time. Her business was only just taking off and having a baby would hold her back; and two, the only time she’d not had sex recently without wearing her cap, was with Patrick. What if she told him he was the father and the baby came out looking just like Eddie? Or what if she convinced Eddie it was his and it came out with red hair? No, it was just too horrible to contemplate, and she put it to the back of her mind. She convinced herself that her weird symptoms were merely down to everything that had happened. A holiday and a thorough rest would do her the world of good and she’d get back to normal in no time.

She finally crawled into bed at 3am and fell asleep. When she awoke again at just gone 8am, the most horrendous wave of nausea swept over her, followed by deep-set panic. She wanted to go back to London and go to Mandy and cry on her shoulder. Mandy was good at dealing with things like this. She’d know what Annie should do to sort it all out. Maybe a little man in Harley Street who was quick and discreet; or some Chinese herbalist in Limehouse who could cook up a potion to get things moving. It was ironic because all the time she’d been with Mario, she’d longed to become a mother, but it never happened. Now she had two possible fathers for her baby and she was hoping and praying it was a false alarm.

That morning she went to church for the first time in ages. As the Duke and Duchess, Fiona and Roland were expected to attend the Sunday Service when they were at home, and so they went to the little chapel on the outskirts of the estate, where the villagers all packed in – most of them eager to get a glimpse of the newlyweds. Eddie was fortunate enough to get out of

it. As a Jew he felt it inappropriate to attend an Anglican church and so remained at the house; making phonecalls to his various acts who'd performed at Saturday night showcases the night before.

Sitting listening to the vicar give his sermon took Annie back to her childhood and having to attend church with Nesta, Michael and Kenneth. Her brother always had a morbid fascination with anything religious and by the time he was a teenager, unlike most boys who would have tried to persuade his guardians to allow him to go into town to go to the pub; Kenneth became verger at the local church. Annie was positive he would have been happier if he'd not taken over Tanner Beresford and had become a priest instead.

They got back to the house and Fiona called down for lunch to be served out on the terrace. Annie was glad. She needed some fresh air after being cooped up in that church all morning. She still felt so wretched, and as she ate the smoked salmon sandwiches and drank the elderflower cordial, she could feel everything battling to come back out.

'You alright Annie love?' Eddie asked. 'You look peaky.'

'I said the same thing to her yesterday,' Fiona joined in. 'She needs a holiday.'

'Do you fancy getting away somewhere?' Eddie smiled, reaching out and taking Annie's hand. 'We could go anywhere you like.'

'I was thinking of going to Switzerland to see Aunt Nesta,' she replied. 'I can't expect you to keep taking holidays with me.'

'I'm the boss of my company!' he laughed. 'I can do as I like.'

'I'll be fine,' she said, trying not to snap. 'This weekend away will probably do me fine.'

'Why don't we go for a walk this afternoon?' Eddie suggested. 'I reckon we could make it down to the cliffs.'

'What a splendid idea,' Roland said. 'While you're gone, we'll make sure a lavish afternoon tea is laid on for you before you make your journey home.'

Annie smiled sweetly but wished she could go home. She was so tired and dizzy, the last thing she wanted was to have an afternoon walk with Eddie, but she knew she couldn't protest. To do so would just arouse suspicion and until she knew what was happening, she had to behave as normally as possible.

The walk to the cliff was bracing. Even though it was a hot summer's day, a chill wind blew in from the sea and the nearer they got, the more convinced Annie was that she could feel salty sea spray on her face. It was strangely refreshing and she enjoyed it. Eddie held on tightly to her hand, and she felt protected by him. That was the thing about Eddie. He made her feel safe, in a way no man ever had before. Patrick was like Mario - he had an air of danger. Whereas Eddie was mature and dependable and would do anything for her, and she loved him for that.

'It's amazing to think this was the first thing my grandparents would have seen when they got to England,' Eddie said, standing and staring out at the sea.

'Wouldn't they have sailed into Dover?' Annie quipped.

'Yeah, well it's all white cliffs ain't it? Who'd have thought their grandson would one day be the guest of the Duke of Loxborough?' He put his arm around Annie's shoulder and pulled her to him, kissing the top of her head. 'And it's all thanks to you.'

'Don't be silly,' she replied. 'You were a success long before you met me.'

'Yeah, but being with you has given me the drive to do even better. I want to give you the world.'

She looked up into that craggy face and wished she felt the same way about him. They were so comfortable with each other, but the feeling wasn't there that she shared with Patrick.

Even after him rejecting her, she still wanted him. Sometimes she wondered why love made people act so stupidly.

Eddie let go of her and stepped back. Annie could only stand and watch in horror as he took something from his trouser pocket and got down on one knee. She cringed inside, terrified of what was going to happen next.

‘I know we haven’t been together long,’ he said. ‘But I love you. It’s taken me thirty-nine years to meet someone so special and I’m glad it’s you. I want you to be my partner in life as well as my partner in business. Will you marry me Annie?’

What did she say? If she turned him down there was a chance he would withdraw his money from the purchase of the Dagenham factory. But what if she accepted and she was pregnant with Patrick’s baby? How would she fob a ginger haired baby off as Eddie’s?

His face fell. She’d paused for too long.

‘Well?’ he asked.

‘Okay,’ she replied.

‘You’ll marry me?’

‘Yes,’ she smiled.

‘Oh Annie,’ he gasped, standing up and pulling her to him. ‘Oh my darling. Thank you. I’ll make you the happiest girl on earth, I promise.’

He eased her away and took hold of her left hand. He slipped the ring onto her finger. It was a beautiful solitaire on a shiny gold band and fitted perfectly. Eddie raised her hand to his lips and kissed the engagement ring.

‘I love you Mrs Glass to be,’ he laughed.

‘I love you too,’ she replied quietly.

‘Come on,’ he said, putting his arm around her shoulder. ‘Let’s go and tell Fiona and Roland.’

Afternoon tea was replaced by champagne, as the four of them raised a toast to Annie and Eddie’s engagement. Annie faked a smile and got on with it. At the end of the day, an engagement wasn’t as concrete as a wedding, and maybe once they got back to London they could talk about it and postpone things.

The champagne had a terrible effect on Annie, and as they stood on the veranda, she felt the most overwhelming need to vomit. Quickly excusing herself, she ran from the veranda and through the house and up the stairs, just making it to one of the bathrooms on the first floor, and was sick into the toilet. This was followed by violent shaking from head to toe and she had to sit on the bath and steady herself. Fiona appeared in the doorway, a worried frown on her face.

‘Are you alright?’ she asked.

‘Yeah,’ Annie replied. ‘I’ll be fine.’

Fiona flushed the toilet, washed her hands then came and sat beside Annie, putting her arm around her shoulder.

‘Are you having to get married?’ she asked outright.

Annie looked at her.

‘What?’

‘Are you pregnant? Is that why you and Eddie are getting married?’

‘He doesn’t know anything about it. I’ve only started getting symptoms today. I’m not even sure if I am.’

‘I’m in pretty much the same boat as you,’ Fiona said. ‘I had it confirmed with my doctor on Friday?’

‘You’re pregnant?’

She nodded.

‘Not a word to anyone though. We’ve got to tell Roland’s mother when she comes back from Australia in October. Then we can tell everyone else.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘You need to get yourself to a doctor Annie. Get it confirmed and get Eddie to the register office before anyone can tell.’

‘I guess you’re right,’ Annie sighed. ‘I hope I’m not. It’s the last thing I need.’

‘But you and Eddie are getting married. It would work out okay. I must have got pregnant before Roland and I married, but no one will ever know. People get so confused about dates and things.’

‘I suppose so.’

To Annie’s absolute mortification, Eddie had found her and was standing in the doorway, a puzzled look on his face.

‘What’s going on here?’ he asked.

‘Annie’s just feeling a bit sick,’ Fiona said, rubbing Annie on the back. ‘She’ll be down in a minute.’

Eddie came into the room and sat on the toilet, leaning forward and looking at Annie.

‘Are you okay darling?’ he asked. ‘You look really pale.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ she said through gritted teeth. ‘Just go downstairs Eddie.’

‘Alright. You’ll be well enough for the car journey home?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay. I’ll see you in a minute.’

He got up and left the room and Fiona hugged Annie once more.

‘Why don’t you wash your face and come downstairs? I’ll get Mrs Elms to make you a nice cup of tea before your journey.’

Even the delicious cup of tea made by the housekeeper wasn’t enough to stop Annie feeling sick, and as she and Eddie sat in the car heading back to London, she had to keep taking deep breaths to stop herself from throwing up. She hoped Eddie didn’t want to come home with her. She needed some time by herself to come to terms with everything before she made her next move.

‘You’re not keeping something from me are you?’ Eddie asked her all of a sudden, as they drove through Redhill.

‘What do you mean?’ Annie uttered, scared he had some suspicion about what had happened with Patrick.

‘You and Fiona. You looked very close in that bathroom, like you were confiding in her about something. You’ve been a bit quiet and peaky this weekend. You’re not pregnant are you?’

‘Of course not,’ she blushed. ‘I’m over-worked, that’s all. I just need a holiday.’

‘Because if you were, we could bring the wedding forward so no one would know.’

‘There’s no need because I’m not pregnant,’ she insisted. ‘And I’d prefer it if we got married next year.’

‘You don’t seem very excited about it.’

‘You just sprung it on me Eddie. I’ve a lot on my plate, without having to organise a wedding as well.’

‘I know, I’m sorry. I’m just excited about finally getting married. But I understand you need a break. We need to get you away somewhere. I’ve a friend with a private jet. He’ll fly us to Switzerland.’

‘I need to go alone,’ she insisted. ‘I want to spend some time with Aunt Nesta. You and I can have a fancy holiday when we go on honeymoon.’

‘Okay. As long as you promise to let me organise a big engagement bash for us on your return?’

‘Yes of course,’ she smiled weakly. ‘It’s the least I expect.’

Chapter Thirteen

September 1959

Iris couldn't believe she actually wanted to go to Annie's engagement party. She hated her sister and had no desire to celebrate the fact that she was getting married (except of course that it would get her away from Patrick once and for all), but it was going to be full of Eddie's showbiz chums and it was in her best interests to mix with these people to draw up trade for the business. Ralf had designed an amazing Spring Summer collection for 1960 and they needed some big names to wear their gowns in order to get really noticed. They couldn't all be lucky like Annie and have famous friends like the Duchess of Loxborough. They were going to have to work their way up from the bottom.

Eddie had managed to secure the ballroom of The Villiers Marble Arch for the party. Bruno's wasn't good enough for his engagement party and Iris was glad in a way. Bruno's was Annie's territory and she always liked to lord it over people when she was there. Away from her comfort zone, she would be on edge, and wouldn't object to Iris taking some of her limelight. Which is exactly what she planned to do that evening.

As she stood in her bedroom, trying to get into her silver and white gown, Iris realised she was putting on weight. And it wasn't just on her belly. Her usually big breasts were even fuller and rounder and she was worried that if this was how big she looked at two months gone, how huge would she get if she went full-term? She still hadn't told anyone except Ralf about her pregnancy, as she hadn't decided what she wanted to do about it. She didn't know if Patrick would marry her if she told him, or how he'd react if the baby came out looking like Leo. It was a horrible situation and she knew she couldn't bury her head in the sand forever; but once her dress was done up and she'd wrapped her fur stole around herself, it hid it all, and did all she could to put it to the back of her mind.

The phone rang and Iris ran up into the front room to answer it. She still got a thrill from answering her own phone. She'd only had it installed a couple of weeks ago. Ralf had paid for it as he figured he might need to contact her about the business. It was a small thing to some people, but to Iris it really felt as though she was moving up in the world.

'Streatham 294910,' she said in her poshest voice.

'Doll it's me,' Patrick said. 'I'm not going to be able to make it tonight.'

'Why not?' she snapped.

'I think it's going to be a busy one at Bruno's. Paulo Spiteri's been released from the nick and I've a feeling he's going to start causing trouble for us club-owners. I'd rather be around in case anything happens. Dave's here with me to keep an eye on things too.'

'That's what you employ Eric and Jim for,' she said, swallowing down her tears of disappointment. 'I'm going to look stupid going on my own.'

'Can't Ralf go with you?'

'I don't know. I doubt it. He's busy.'

'Give him a ring and see. I'll call you tomorrow. See how it went.'

'Please yourself,' she snapped and she slammed the phone down. She sat fuming, knowing full well why he didn't want to go to the party. It had nothing to do with the threat of Maltese gangsters. It was because he couldn't bear to see his precious Annie getting engaged to another man. Iris felt so let down by him that she made up her mind there and then that she was going to see Leo the next day to ask him to lend her the money for an abortion. She didn't want to marry

Patrick knowing he was in love with another woman. She had some pride. And she certainly didn't want to bring a kid up on her own. Her own mother had made enough of a mess of that, she didn't want to follow suit.

Picking the phone back up, she called Ralf's flat. He shared with two actors in a grotty place in Islington, and like Iris, dreamed of the day he could afford somewhere grand to live.

'Yes?' a camp, male voice sounded at the other end.

'Can I speak to Ralf please?' Iris asked.

'Who is it?'

'Iris.'

'Hold on.'

She heard the receiver be put down on the telephone table and a shout of;

'Oi Ralf! Blondie's on the phone!'

Soon it was picked up by Ralf.

'You alright Iris?' he asked.

'No. Patrick can't make it tonight. He reckons there's some Maltese gangster on the scene, but I know it's because he can't bear to see Annie getting engaged. Silly sod. Are you free?'

'To go to the engagement party?'

'Yes.'

'Course I am darling. Give me half an hour to tart myself up.'

The party was in full swing by the time they arrived. The massive ballroom had been subtly lit and a band was playing light jazz, but the sound of Eddie's loud, Jewish relatives could be heard above everything else. Iris got the feeling he thought he was marrying into the aristocracy – even though he knew Annie's true history. But it was easy for him to have his head turned by the fact that Alicia Bloom was her 'adopted' aunt, and that she was Alana's cousin and that she'd grown up in a big house in Oxfordshire. Would he feel the same if he knew the depths to which some members of her birth family had stooped?

The 'happy' couple stood in the middle of the proceedings. Annie looked stunning in a black, sleeveless dress with a Mandarin collar, her hair up in a chignon, making her look even more like Audrey Hepburn. She appeared to be drinking orange juice and Iris wondered why she was avoiding alcohol. Was she pregnant as well?

A waiter approached them with a tray with glasses of champagne on and they both took one - although Iris only sipped hers as alcohol was still making her queasy. To her dismay, the only person who approached them was Belle, the young girl who worked behind the bar at Bruno's.

'Hello,' she smiled sunnily. 'Where's Patrick?'

'Busy,' Iris replied. 'He sends his apologies.'

'Why don't you both come and join us? Mr Glass was so nice and invited all the staff. It's a shame Eric and Jim have to work tonight.'

'Isn't it just?' Iris said, trying to appear uninterested, but knowing that no one else seemed to want to include them in their social group.

They followed Belle over to the corner of the room, where most of the staff were gathered. As they went, they passed famous faces - the people her and Ralf needed to be talking to. The sorts of starlets and established actresses who would be able to do wonderful things for Ralf's designs. Iris's heart sank even lower when when they reached the various staff members

gathered like a bunch of outsiders and she spotted Norma in the middle of it all. What was Eddie doing inviting the cleaner to his swanky engagement bash?

‘You look lovely Iris,’ said Sylvio, stepping forward. ‘Is that one of your gowns Ralf?’

‘It certainly is. Doesn't she look a million dollars?’

Iris cringed when she looked up and saw Norma heading towards them? Her mother scrubbed up well, she had to concede that. Iris recognised the green dress as a Hartnell and concluded that Norma must have either got it in a more upmarket second-hand shop, or else she'd nicked it off someone she cleaned for.

‘Hello Iris,’ she said. ‘I didn't think you'd want to mix with the likes of us.’

‘Well I'm here on Patrick's behalf, so it's my job to talk to everyone.’

‘Where is Patrick?’ Sylvio asked.

‘He's staying at the club,’ she said quickly. ‘Apparently there's been threats from some Maltese gangsters, so he's holding the fort.’

‘I thought Vice Squad had locked most of them up,’ Sylvio frowned, making it clear that he didn't believe her. ‘Still, one can never be too sure.’

There was a gasp all around the room, and everyone looked to the door, as Alicia Bloom entered the room. It shocked Iris to finally see her great aunt in the flesh. She'd watched so many of her films as a child – Norma loved going to the cinema and would drag Iris along, crowing on about her Aunt Alice and how it was just an accident of fate that she wasn't a big star too.

Alice was still beautiful, despite being almost seventy. She was tall like Norma and whippet thin. She wore a floaty, ivory-coloured gown with a necklace of huge diamonds. Her greying dark hair was rolled up and decorated with diamond clips. Alongside her was a much younger man in a dinner suit, and Iris had no idea who he was. It was amazing how this room was filled with celebrities of varying degrees of fame, and yet none of them compared to this superstar. Alicia Bloom had been famous since the 1920s. Her first films had been silent, and now she was a doyenne of Broadway. It ate away at Iris that she wasn't included when Alice went up to Annie and Eddie, and grasped her niece's hands and kissed her on both cheeks.

‘I think I've died and gone to heaven,’ Ralf uttered. ‘Alicia Bloom. Is that really Alicia Bloom?’

‘Of course it is,’ Iris snapped. ‘She's her aunt isn't she?’

‘She's so lucky. Imagine being related to her.’ He looked round at Iris and smiled mischievously. ‘Let's try and get introduced.’

‘We won't be allowed within six feet of her.’

‘Watch me,’ he giggled and he minced off. Iris dare not follow him, too scared of being turned away. Sylvio went back to the bar, and she found herself alone with Norma.

‘Beautiful isn't she?’ Norma lamented. ‘I wonder how she'd react if I went and told her that I'm her niece.’

‘Don't you dare,’ Iris hissed. ‘You'll ruin everything if you tell her who you are.’

‘Why? What have you got planned?’

‘Nothing in particular. I just want to make Annie's life a misery. I'll tell her I'm her sister when I'm good and ready.’

‘You've always been the same,’ Norma hissed. ‘You've never liked anyone to be happy and you've always thought the world owes you a living. Maybe if you'd have been a bit more contented with what I could give you, I wouldn't have felt the need to go out on the game.’

Iris dug her nails into her palm, fighting the urge to slap her mother. She turned and looked at her, face on; hoping none of the other members of Bruno's staff noticed the tension between them.

'Why don't you get lost?' she spat. 'Just go away. I don't want you around. And Annie wouldn't want you around if she knew the truth. Just crawl back under your stone and stop causing trouble.'

'Annie and me get on very well. If she's in the club on one of my mornings, she'll make me a cup of tea and we'll have a chat. She's confided in me on a number of occasions. To her I'm just the cleaner, so my opinion doesn't matter. But it gives her the chance to talk to someone.'

'You disgust me and I don't want to look at you any longer. I'm going to tell Patrick to sack you.'

'Annie took me on.'

'Oh just fuck off Mother.'

She took a chance and walked off, joining Ralf, who was on the perimeter of the people around Annie and Alicia Bloom. The actress was holding court with everyone and Iris could see Annie standing looking on in awed pride. How it ate away at her - she should be part of it too and yet she was treated like a nobody.

'She's not going to speak to you,' she said to Ralf. 'Shall we just go? We could go back to Bruno's, see what Patrick's up to.'

'Are you joking?' Ralf whispered, glancing round at her. 'This is my once in a lifetime chance to meet Alicia Bloom. I'm not going anywhere. Go and talk to Annie. Tell her you're sorry Patrick isn't able to make it.'

'No!'

'Go on.'

With a disgruntled sigh, Iris pushed through the people and stepped up to Annie and Eddie, who were still listening to what Alice had to say. When Annie glanced over and saw it was Iris, she looked away quickly.

'Where's Patrick?' she asked out the corner of her mouth.

'At the club,' Iris replied. 'There's trouble brewing apparently.'

Annie finally looked at her.

'What sort of trouble?'

'Maltese gangsters. Patrick thought it was more important to keep an eye on things than to come here.'

'You look beautiful tonight Annie,' Ralf suddenly said. 'Is that a Devonte dress?'

'It is, yes.'

He looked at her feet, at the black satin slippers she was wearing with diamante crowns on them.

'Did you design them yourself?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'They're beautiful.'

'How is your collection going?' Eddie asked Ralf, a patronising smile on his face.

'Wonderfully,' Ralf replied. 'We've got commissions coming out of our ears.'

'That's what I like to hear.'

‘I love your dress Miss Bloom,’ Ralf practically shouted out. Iris wanted the earth to open up and swallow her whole. Alice turned around and looked at him, first in puzzlement, then she smiled.

‘Thank you dear,’ she said in her gravelled voice that had a strange mid-Atlantic accent. ‘It’s Chanel.’

‘It’s gorgeous.’

‘Alice, this is Ralf Silver, he’s a designer,’ Alice said grudgingly. ‘And this is Iris Lindholm, one of my models.’

‘Nice to meet you both,’ Alice said, and she turned back to the person she was talking to. Iris had never felt more dismissed in her life, and that familiar anger rose up in her. Here was her beautiful, rich and famous aunt, and her beautiful and rich sister, and there was she, lumped in with the staff; and the only person who wanted to talk to her was her whore of a mother. Why had she drawn the short straw? It was so unfair.

‘We’re going,’ she said to Ralf.

‘Why? We’ve only just started.’

‘Because I hate it here.’

‘Well you can go love. I’m staying here.’

‘Suit yourself.’

Iris walked out and managed to find a cab with a driver who was willing to take her to Streatham. He told her he lived in Mitcham and was on his way home and as he dropped her off, he also tried to get a grope of her tits as part payment - but a slap put paid to that. Iris got in, tore off her dress and stamped all over it, she then got into bed and lay awake sulking. She made up her mind there and then that she didn’t want Norma in her life any more and she had to get rid of her. From her days as a prostitute, she knew plenty of men who would kill her mother for a price, but she could end up in prison for that. She decided the easiest thing was to get Norma the sack from the club. Hopefully if Patrick found out she was a thief, it would be enough for him to get rid of her.

Luckily for Iris, Patrick had stayed over one night and his keys to the club had fallen from his pocket. Because he had several sets of them, he never took those ones back and asked Iris to keep them safe. For her they were a Godsend and would make her mission so much easier. She knew that Norma got into Bruno’s at around 9.30am, so she got up at seven, dressed in a pair of ski pants and a shirt, tying her hair back in a pony tail, and went out to get the bus into town.

Central London was like a ghost town. A few street sweepers were going along Wardour Street, whistling as they worked and that was it. Great for Iris’s plans, as she didn’t want anyone to see her. She moved swiftly, darting down the steps to the club, letting herself in and going inside. She knew that last night’s takings were kept in Annie’s office, but they weren’t put in a safe - just left in a draw in the desk. She kept the light off - using the light from the window to illuminate her way. She went into Annie’s office and opened the bottom drawer of the little desk where the money bags were kept. She then quickly locked the office and made her way out of the club. Locking the door behind her.

Reaching the top step, she came face to face with one of the street sweepers and he gave her a brief smile, which she returned and then scurried off. She held the money bag close to her chest, wondering what she should do with it. There was bound to be around a hundred pounds in there – more than enough to pay for an abortion. But she still wasn’t sure if that was what she wanted to do. She could have ploughed the money into the business, but Ralf would wonder

where she'd got it from. She just wanted rid of it. The money was nothing more than a way of getting her mother out of her life.

She still had it clutched to her when she stepped off the bus, and it felt as though the little Hessian bag was burning a hole in her chest. There was a Salvation Army hostel on Streatham Hill, and on a spur of the moment move, Iris darted in there and was met by a bewildered lady in full Sally Army uniform.

'Can I help you dear?' she asked.

'Yes,' Iris replied. 'I'd like to give you this.'

She thrust the bag at the elderly woman and ran out.

Back home, Iris made herself a cup of tea and waited and waited. She tried to picture Patrick going to the club later that day and finding the money gone. Hopefully he would blame Norma and would sack her on the spot. So many ideas for revenge ran through Iris's mind on a daily basis. She'd often thought about trying to seduce Eddie and making sure Annie found out. She knew he was devoted to Annie, but all men could be led astray. It was as easy as breathing. Sometimes she also thought about ruining her brother's life. Kenneth had been good to her in lending her the money to buy into Ralf's company, but it wasn't the same as being part of that inner circle. No doubt during her visit to London, Alice would visit him. Iris was positive he was homosexual and thought it would be funny to pay one of the little rent boys she knew, to go to the papers with an expose on him.

It was thoughts like this that kept Iris going. Sometimes she wondered if she should have played it all differently and been honest with them from the beginning. But she knew what would have happened then. She would still have been treated like the poor relation, and for the likes of the apparently pious Kenneth, to have been associated with an ex-prostitute, would be too much and he'd have distanced himself from her. It was far easier to act as she had, and wheedle her way into their lives, creating as much havoc as she could and getting what she could from Kenneth - who saw her as some sort of ally. She liked the life that getting involved with these people had given her. Six months ago she'd never even imagined that one day she'd be part owner of a fashion company. Ralf's little factory in Mile End was churning out dresses by the day. Most of his customers were the daughters of East End gangsters, and a shop in Dalston Market was selling a few of his things; but they were making a profit and that was the most important thing. Those daughters of gangsters normally had lots of friends and spent loads of money in West End clubs, making connections for them.

After lunch, she found herself feeling very tired. This had only happened since she'd got pregnant and it was uncontrollable. She lay on her bed and nodded off; wishing she didn't ache so much and wondered if this would go on for the whole nine months. In a way she regretted giving that money to the Salvation Army. It would have paid for an abortion, and she wouldn't have to worry about making a decision about Patrick or Leo.

She was awoken by the sound of someone banging on the door downstairs and suddenly she was jolted back to her past - reminded of the times when she would have some pimp come banging on her door, demanding his money. It took a moment for her to compose herself and remember that those days were over. She got out of bed and as she walked down the stairs, and the banging continued, she realised who it was.

'Are you in there Iris?' Patrick called. 'There's no point in hiding.'

She felt nervous. He sounded angry and she wondered why. Had she left some trace of herself behind at the club today? Had he confronted her mother about stealing and she'd told him

everything? Heaven forbid that should be the case. Iris was sure she'd throw herself under a number 109 if Patrick found out the full extent of her sordid past.

She opened the door and he was standing there, his face red with anger.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Let me in,' he hissed, barging past her.

'What's the matter?' she whined, following him up the stairs. 'Are you okay Pat?'

He went into the flat, and as soon as Iris joined him, shutting the door behind her, he came up close to her and for a moment she was scared he was going to hit her.

'Why didn't you just ask me for money?' he said angrily. 'Why steal from me?'

'I don't know what you're talking about!' she cried, wondering how the hell he'd found out.

'What do you need it for? Kenneth Holland's loan not enough to keep you and your little fairy friend going?'

'Pat just calm down. I didn't steal any money off you.'

'Okay. So how come I go into the office today and find that I'm seventy quid down on exactly the same day that when I was going in, the street cleaner remarked to me that my little girlfriend was up and about early that morning? I said to him, *'No, Miss Holland's my business partner'* so he goes *'No, not her. The sexy blonde one. I saw her coming out of the club this morning.'*

'I thought I'd lost an earring in the club the other night. You left those keys here so I thought I'd go and have a look for it.'

'And take my money in the process.'

'I never touched your money! You can search this flat, there's no money here.'

'Did you give it to Ralf Silver?'

'I haven't got your money. It was probably Norma.'

'Norma didn't come in today. I gave her the day off because she was going to Annie's party last night.'

Iris felt her legs almost buckle beneath her and she had to sit down in the nearest chair. She felt light-headed and shaky, and knew this wasn't the baby. It was the shame of being found out.

'Why did you do it Iris?' he asked, his voice calmer. 'Why did you steal off me?'

'I didn't steal off you. Not really. I gave it to the Salvation Army. I just wanted you to sack Norma.'

'Why? What did she do to you that's so bad?'

'Because she's my mother!' Iris cried, immediately regretting it.

'What?'

'She's my mother alright? She's nothing but trouble and I think she's just come back to try and get money, so I wanted rid of her.'

'Fucking hell,' he gasped, sitting down on the settee. 'Are you just saying this to get yourself off the hook?'

'No. She's my mother. I haven't seen her since I was thirteen and she walked out on me.'

'Thirteen! What happened to you?'

'I got by. I don't want to talk about it. But I will just say that she's poisonous and I want you to sack her.'

'I can't. She hasn't done anything to me.'

'I'm supposed to be your girlfriend. Isn't it enough that my mother who abandoned me is working for you?!'

‘Norma's a good worker. You don't have to deal with her, so what does it matter?’

‘You bastard,’ she hissed. ‘You don't want to sack her because Annie took her on, and you don't want to upset Saint Annie.’

‘Don't be stupid.’

‘You don't care about me. You want her.’

He stood up.

‘Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing with you,’ he sighed. ‘You can be so spiteful at times and you seem to enjoy seeing people suffer.’

‘Is it any wonder?!’ she cried. ‘I've been looking after myself since I was thirteen. Do you expect me to welcome her back with open arms?’

‘Why did she walk out on you?’

‘Because she was being threatened by her pimp. She was scared, so she just ran out and left me to it.’

‘She was a Tom? Who looked after you?’

‘I looked after myself.’

‘Well I can tell Annie and see if she'll sack her.’

‘I don't want Annie knowing!’ she gasped.

‘Why not?’

‘Because I just don't.’

‘Are you lying to me Iris?’

‘No.’

He shook his head.

‘You're beyond me, you are. I'll see myself out.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Away from you. You either let me tell Annie and she sacks her, or we keep her on. But either way, I don't want you stealing from my club again, and I want the money back. Every penny of it.’

He walked out and Iris sat shaking and shocked. She didn't even have the strength to run after him. If he really cared about her, he would have stuck up for her and understood how upsetting it was for her to be around Norma once again. It wasn't as though she stole the money for herself. She'd given it to the Sally Army.

Iris knew she had to face the fact that Patrick didn't love her. She was nothing more than a trophy on his arm when he went out, and a good time in bed. She knew she had no choice now but to abort the baby, and she wished she'd kept that bloody money and used it for that. She had no spare cash of her own – it'd all been ploughed into the business. There was only one person she could think of turning to; and with a sad and heavy heart she went to her phone and called Leo's house. She crossed her fingers and hoped that he was in, and was so grateful when he picked up.

‘Chelsea 29402,’ he said.

‘It's Iris. Can I come and see you?’

‘I'm just popping out darling. Felix Donohoe is taking me for drinks at French's.’

‘Who's Felix Donohoe?’

‘Literary agent. I was at Harrow with him. He wants me to write a chapter in a book about my time in Egypt in the war. Good money for a load of old crap.’

‘I see. I'll see you another time.’

‘No. Come along in a couple of hours. I’ll get rid of Felix and we’ll finish the evening on his tab. How about it?’

‘Okay. I’ll come over at about seven.’

‘Great. See you then.’

Even though she was feeling awful – both physically and emotionally, Iris knew she’d better get dressed up if she was going to French’s. It was a pretty exclusive bar in South Kensington and they wouldn’t appreciate her in her Capri pants and shirt. She bathed and changed into a burgundy two piece she’d picked up on the one day she and Leo had gone shopping in Cannes. She did her hair and put on her make up and left the flat. She didn’t even have enough money to pay for a cab to take her into town and instead had to catch a 49 bus. She concentrated on anything rather than think about her conversation with Patrick. If she thought about how heartless he’d been - not understanding how she didn’t want to know the mother who’d abandoned her when she was just thirteen; she would start to cry and her mascara would run.

She made it to French’s at just gone seven; and seeing as it was a Sunday evening, it was half empty and she immediately spotted Leo sat at the table in the middle of the floor. There were two wine bottles on the table and the white table cloth had a red wine stain on it. He was so debauched, but she couldn’t deny that she felt more comfortable with him than she ever did with Patrick.

‘Iris darling,’ he said, standing up and staggering a little as she joined him. He kissed her on both cheeks and ushered her into her seat. He pointed to the bottles on the table.

‘Red or white?’ he asked.

‘Red please,’ she replied.

‘Red it is.’

He poured her some red wine in a glass that was stained with fingerprints – she presumed belonging to Felix Donohoe. But Iris didn’t care. She picked it up and gulped it down; hoping drunkenness would take away her misery. But instead it made her feel sick.

‘You alright Iris?’ Leo asked, reaching out and stroking her face. ‘You look pretty peaky old girl.’

‘I need to borrow some money off you Leo,’ she said quietly.

‘How much?’ he asked, reaching for his wallet in his inside pocket.

‘Probably more than you have in your wallet.’

A waiter came up to the table and before he could speak, Iris waived him away.

‘I’m pregnant,’ she whispered once the waiter was out of earshot

‘I see,’ Leo said. ‘Am I the one?’

‘To be honest, I don’t know. It could be you or Patrick. I’ll pay you back, I promise.’

‘How far gone are you?’

‘A couple of months I’d say. I was pregnant years ago and I went to this woman who almost killed me. I want it done properly this time.’

‘You could always keep it. How do you think Patrick would feel?’

‘Patrick’s got no time for me. I did something stupid. I tried to get rid of Norma by robbing the club and framing her. But Pat had given her the day off and he found out it was me. I had to tell him the truth as to why I did it.’

‘Everything? About Annie and Kenneth too?’

‘No. I couldn’t go that far. I just said I couldn’t bear her being around. But he wouldn’t budge. He reckons to sack her he’ll have to tell Annie.’

‘What a pickle,’ Leo said, laying his chin on his hand and giving her a hapless smile. ‘Tell you what. Why don’t we spend the money on a honeymoon instead?’

‘What?’

‘Marry me. I can’t promise you I’ll be faithful or if it’ll even last. But we could have some fun until we start hating each other.’

‘Are you serious?’ Iris uttered. ‘You want to marry me?’

‘Why not?’ he shrugged. ‘I’ve done wilder things.’

‘You’re only saying it because you’re drunk.’

‘Maybe I am. Maybe I’m not. I like you a lot Iris. I have fun with you. You’re dark, like me. You’re not scared of the seedier side of life. Muriel was never like that.’

‘Muriel?’

‘My first wife. Have I never mentioned her? Sorry old girl. Yeah, we were married for a few years just after the war. I was a bit battle scarred and thought the old ball and chain would be the thing to tame me. By 1950 I was bored and I divorced her. She’s married to a high court judge now.’

‘I don’t know what to say,’ Iris said. ‘No one’s ever proposed to me before. But what about the baby? It might be Patrick’s?’

This was met with another of his shrugs.

‘Father was always convinced my sister Lavinia was the gamekeeper’s, but he still brought her up. I guess I could do with an heir. Even if it is ginger.’

He laughed but Iris didn’t. A part of her wanted to say yes. Leo was rich and funny and cared for her more than Patrick did. But he was also drunk and spontaneous and what he meant tonight, could be completely different to what he intended tomorrow. Could he really love Patrick’s child? Strangely, she could imagine he would be more accommodating to another man’s child than Patrick would. He might have been a gangster’s son, but underneath it all he was so bloody straight-laced and wouldn’t appreciate a kid who wasn’t a proper little Collins in his family.

‘I’m going to have to think about it,’ she said. ‘And ask you if you mean it when you’re sober.’

‘Not a problem. And of course if you can’t face the prospect of being Mrs Andersson, of course I’ll pay for you to have that little trip to Harley Street.’

‘Thank you Leo,’ she said, swallowing her tears. ‘I’m so glad I’ve got you in my life.’

The following day was Iris’s last day working for Annie as a shoe model. From then on, she was going to work with Ralf over in Mile End. It wasn’t exactly Regent Street, but at least she wouldn’t be treated like a brainless mannequin and spoken down to by her own sister. What was worse today was that she was modelling for her own cousin. She’d discovered that the man who’d accompanied Alice to the party had been Max Tanner, Alice’s son. His daughter Lauren, or Tawny as she was known, was starting Rodene, and Max wanted Annie to make her a pair of shoes she could wear for special occasions. Max Tanner was very good looking, but his wife Miriam was an overweight Jewish woman with curly hair and bad skin, and Tawny had taken after her. The child was at least two stone too heavy and sat awkwardly, chewing gum and fidgeting whilst Iris paraded up and down in a pair of dainty peeptoes that would look ridiculous on the end of her fat, sausage-like legs.

It was strange knowing that she was related to three of the people sitting there, looking at the shoes and going on about them, but treating her as if she didn't exist. She hated the thought of having a child as ugly as Tawny and was grateful that either of her baby's potential fathers was good-looking.

'What do you think of the shoes?' Alice asked Tawny.

'I hate them,' she moaned in her annoying, Californian drawl. 'I want sneakers.'

'You can't wear sneakers to Rodeane honey,' Max laughed nervously, in that same mid-Atlantic accent as his mother. 'You need to start dressing as a lady.'

There was a knock on the door of the salon and Annie got up to answer it. As soon as Iris heard Patrick's voice, her heart leapt into her throat. She wished she could stop having that reaction when he clearly cared so little about her.

'Hello Patrick,' Annie said. 'What can I do for you?'

Iris crossed her fingers and hoped he was going to say he'd come to see her. They hadn't spoken since the row the other day and she wanted to tell him she was sorry. Deep down it was Patrick that she wanted. Not Leo. While they were more compatible, Patrick was her chance at leading a more decent life.

'Dave managed to get those tickets for My Fair Lady,' he smiled. 'Four front row seats.'

He came into the salon and gave Iris the briefest and coldest of smiles; before turning his attention to the others, as Annie introduced them.

'Patrick this is my cousin Max Tanner, his wife Miriam and their daughter Tawny. Everyone, this is my business partner Patrick Collins.'

They all shook hands and Iris was left standing like a spare part. Until Annie remembered she was there and looked at her.

'Could you get everyone a cup of tea please Iris?' she asked.

'Of course,' she smiled politely. As she went she heard Patrick say to Annie.

'Can we have a quick word in your office?'

Iris didn't hear anymore. She just went into the dressing room and put on her own shoes before going into the kitchen. As soon as she entered, she could hear Patrick's voice coning from Annie's office. The two rooms backed onto each other, and the window was open, so Iris could hear every word that was being said.

'I thought you felt the same way,' he said to Annie. 'It was me who played it cool the next morning because I didn't know what I wanted. But I do now. I want you Annie. I don't love her. She's cold and twisted. And I'm sure she's a liar.'

Every word was like a knife to Iris's heart. She'd had no idea that Patrick had slept with Annie. And how could he talk about her like that? The bastard. She'd told him why she was bitter. She'd told him what Norma had done and still he had no sympathy.

Heartbroken and unable to hold it back any more, Iris put down the kettle and stormed round to Annie's office. Patrick and Annie both looked up and gasped in shock as she entered the room and slammed the door behind her.

'Iris!' Annie cried 'This is a private meeting.'

'I heard every word you said!' she yelled to Patrick. 'You bastard. You went to bed with her!'

'This isn't the place,' Annie sighed. 'Lets talk about it later.'

Annie's coldness just enraged Iris all the more. But her hormones made her anger turn to tears. It wasn't that Patrick had been unfaithful to her - after all, she'd been seeing Leo. It was who it was with. She knew Annie had always had his heart, and now he had given her his body.

‘Isn't it enough that you got everything?’ she sighed. ‘You had everything handed to you on a plate and never had to want for anything and I had to suffer.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Annie asked arrogantly. ‘I'm nothing to do with you.’

‘Oh how wrong you are,’ Iris laughed wanly. ‘You're my sister you stuck up bitch.’

‘Get out Iris,’ Patrick said. ‘I've had enough of your lies.’

‘How can you be my sister?’ Annie uttered. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Ask Norma,’ Iris said. ‘She'll tell you everything.’

‘That's it,’ Patrick said, grasping her arm and man-handling her out of the room. His grip on her arm was painful, and the more she tried to wriggle free, the tighter he gripped her.

‘Why have you chosen her?’ she cried. ‘Why don't you love me anymore?’

‘Because you're sick in the head. Why are you lying and saying you're Annie's sister?’

‘Because I am. Norma's our mother.’

Patrick ignored her and threw her into the revolving door, squeezing in behind her to make sure he pushed her out onto Regent Street.

‘Now get out, and if you ever come here or to Bruno's again I'll call the police.’

Iris stood up straight, composing herself and ignoring the stares of the people walking past. She wondered what she was going to do now. It felt as though her whole life was disintegrating around her. She didn't even have her handbag - she'd left it in the dressing room. But she dare not go back in. Patrick would call the police. Her legs ached too much to even think about walking all the way back to Streatham. She needed money and fast, and so walked all the way to Oxford Street, tears streaming down her face; hurt by the people who passed her but didn't stop to ask her what was wrong.

She made it to Levine's, a little pawn shop on Argyll Street, and took off the only thing of value she had – the gold locket she wore around her neck that an old madam called Bessie Kelly had given her when she was fifteen. Bessie had been the person to rescue her from Maurice, her mother's pimp, and even though she put Iris to work in her brothel in Drury Lane. She always made sure only the young, nervous lads went to her, and if anyone ill-treated her they were banned for life. She was the nearest thing Iris had to a grandmother and it broke her heart to part with the present Bessie had given her for her sixteenth birthday.

Old Levine, the pawnbroker examined the locket several times before tutting and shaking his head.

‘It's very dented,’ he said. ‘I can offer you eleven and six for it.’

‘Is that all? It's twenty four carat.’

‘I can't do you any more than that.’

With a sigh she agreed and signed the docket. Making up her mind that once Annie had paid her what she was owed in wages, she would go back and get it.

She left the shop and went onto Oxford Street and caught a taxi to take her back to Chelsea. When she got to Leo's house, and he opened the door. Iris laughed to see he wasn't even dressed and was wrapped up in his tatty dressing gown. It was so typical of Leo. But he smiled warmly on seeing her and that was something she could do with right now.

‘Hello my love,’ he said. ‘I thought you'd be at work.’

‘I've been sacked,’ she said, pushing past him into the flat. She entered the scruffy front room and went and stood by the fire, trying hard not to tread soot into the cream carpet.

‘Did you mean what you said yesterday?’ she asked.

‘Of course I did,’ he replied, lighting a cigarette with the ivory lighter that was carved into the shape of a naked woman. ‘We make a good team you and me.’

‘In that case I accept,’ she said. ‘As long as you promise me you’ll stick by me even if the baby’s Patrick’s.’

‘I don’t care if it’s Patrick’s, mine or the Count of Monte Christo,’ he said, shoving his fag in his mouth and coming over to her, and grasping her shoulders. ‘I’m rather keen on you Iris, and I think we should get married.’

‘So do I,’ she smiled. ‘We will be happy won’t we?’

‘Course we will Baby,’ he said, pulling her close to him. She could feel the heat of the cigarette above her hair and hoped ash wouldn’t fall onto her head. ‘We’ll have so much fun.’

Chapter Fourteen

Annie wanted to dismiss what Iris had said about them being sisters, and put it down to her bitterness over what she'd heard Patrick saying and so was doing it to get her own back. But it was eating away at her. Everything was so complicated at the moment. Patrick had suddenly declared his undying love, saying what a mistake he'd made in choosing Iris. On top of that she'd had to entertain her family, and now she had Iris with this absurd claim about them being sisters. Annie didn't understand it. If Iris had said they shared the same father than it would be believable – Annie didn't even remember her father. But it was Norma. How could Norma be their mother when her mother had been called Zena Brady, and what memories Annie did have, they were of an older woman and Norma would have been so young back then?

Her curiosity got the better of her, and that evening she pulled off of a family dinner with Alice, Max, Miriam and Tawny, and instead took the chance to return Iris's jacket and handbag to her, along with her wages. The bus journey from Central London to Streatham was long and it gave Annie the chance to think. Patrick's visit had come like a bolt out of the blue. Relations between them had been strained since they spent that night together, and then all of a sudden he turned up, saying he was sick of Iris and wanted to make a go of it with Annie. It couldn't have come at a worse time. She was engaged to Eddie. They had equal shares in the factory in Barking. She was also planning on telling him - any day soon - that she was pregnant. Already she was praying the baby wouldn't come out with red hair - telling herself that if it did, she would have to play up the fact that she knew very little about her birth family, and put it down to it being a throw-back to some distant, ginger relative.

As she looked out of the window and the bus crossed Westminster Bridge, making its way over to grimy South London, Annie thought about her real family. Who were they? Who were these Bradys of Battersea and were any of them still there? It was ironic that Iris should come out with this today, as just lately - being pregnant - Annie had been thinking about her blood relatives. Her baby would be her only link to them. Of course it would never know about the Bradys. To 'Baby Glass' its family would be the Glasses, Holland's and Tanners. Its great Aunt would be the glamorous Alicia Bloom, its cousins Max and Alana. Eddie had even hinted that he'd like Annie to convert to Judaism before they married. If she did that, the baby would be Jewish and she herself would have to adapt to a whole new way of living. But it was all too much to take in at the moment.

She'd found Iris's address in a little notebook she kept in her handbag. Annie wasn't very familiar with Streatham, and whilst it wasn't exactly shabby. It was very working-class and pedestrian. The houses all looked the same on Iris's street. It was hard to equate someone who craved glamour being content with such drab surroundings. She reached the tall, terraced house in which Iris lived, and rang the bell for flat C. She waited and listened to the dull thud of steps down the stairs.

The door opened and Iris stood there, that miserable and bitter expression on her face.

'What is it?' she asked.

'I've brought these for you,' Annie said, holding out the jacket and handbag. 'And I think we need to talk.'

'Come in.'

Iris turned and walked up the stairs that was covered in tatty carpet. Annie followed behind, and by the time she got to the top, she was quite tired. Three flights of stairs certainly wouldn't have exhausted her before she was pregnant. She was quite shocked when she noticed

that Iris also had gone puce and was clinging onto a chair for support. Surely she wasn't pregnant as well....

'Do you want a drink?' Iris asked.

'A cup of tea would be nice.'

'Sit down.'

Annie chose to sit in the armchair by the door – the settee on the other side of the room looked as though it had too many springs sticking out of it. Iris went off to the kitchen and as Annie looked around the shabby room, it reminded her of that horrible flat in Fulham. There were no family photos or anything that looked remotely valuable. This was a different side of Iris. A part of her that she liked to keep hidden. In truth, Annie knew very little about her. She'd just thought her another glamour puss on the make.

Iris returned with two cups of tea and sat on the settee. From the front room door, Annie could see into the little bedroom next to it, and saw there was an open suitcase on the bed.

'You going somewhere?' she asked.

'I'm moving out,' Iris said. 'I'm moving in with my fiancé.'

'What?'

Iris held out her left hand, and upon her ring finger was a rather old-fashioned emerald ring on a gold band. It looked too tight and was making her finger swell up.

'Who on earth are you marrying?' Annie asked.

'He's called Leo Andersson,' Iris smiled smugly. 'I've been seeing him for a while now.'

'But you were seeing Patrick.'

'Maybe I had to hedge my bets because Patrick always had his eye on the main prize. After all, Patrick wants to be a top film producer. Who better to chase after than the niece of Alicia Bloom? You're rich and you've got connections. As you can see, I'm as poor as a church mouse.'

'I'm not rich,' Annie protested. 'You know how much debt Mario left me in. I've ploughed all of my money into Holland's. How am I rich?'

'Your family's rich. They'd never see you go without.'

'Well according to you, my family are your family too.'

'Don't sound so unconvinced. I've known about you and Kenneth all my life.'

'I don't understand. Why on earth do you think you're my sister?'

'My real name is Iris Brady. My mother's name when I was born was Norma Brady. Before she married Samuel Brady...'

'My father...'

'Yes, your father. Before she married him, she was called Norma Higgins. Daughter of Desmond Higgins. Niece of Alice Higgins. Or should I say Alicia Bloom.'

'You've gone too far now,' Annie laughed. 'This is just getting silly.'

'Go and speak to Norma tomorrow morning,' Iris said excitedly, sitting forward. 'Don't you think it's ironic? All those years you called Alice 'Aunt' and she really was, and you didn't know it.'

'But my mother's dead. I have vague memories of her.'

'An older woman called Zena Brady?'

'Yes.'

'She wasn't your mother. Zena was the woman your father moved in after he kicked our mother out, when he found her in bed with another man.'

'But Norma's so young, and Kenneth's twenty-seven.'

‘They married when Norma was sixteen and pregnant for Kenneth. When Samuel kicked her out, she was too ashamed to go home, so she went to live in a bedsit in Hammersmith. Stupid cow ended up on the game. Then she had me and that was my life. Moving from pillar to post with my whore of a mother. Being molested by the filthy punters she brought home, or else having to stand outside at one in the morning, ready to call up to her if the police were coming along. Then when I was thirteen, we were living in Cricklewood and she was involved with this pimp called Maurice. She started seeing another pimp behind his back and he came after her. She ran off and left me alone. Maurice didn’t care. He just got me to pay her debt off by whoring myself.’

‘Did you ever see her again?’

‘Not until she reappeared the other month. She saw me in the papers and thought she’d come and see what money she could get out of me. I’ve been trying to get rid of her. That was why Pat and I fell out. I tried to frame her for stealing money out of the club. I didn’t realise he’d given her the morning off.’

‘I’m still so confused. How did you know about me and Kenneth?’

‘Because she used to crow about you,’ Iris hissed spitefully. ‘It was always her little golden-haired Kenneth and her beautiful baby Annie. She went back to Battersea one day after the war and was told by an old neighbour that Zena had died and Kenneth and Annie had been adopted by a Sir and Lady Holland and were now living in Oxfordshire. Mum would get pissed and go on about you both. Imagining what a posh little pair you’d be by then. Nothing I ever did was good enough. I know if she could have swapped me for you two she would have.’

Iris paused to regain her composure and Annie felt the room around her start to swim. Only this time it wasn’t her pregnancy causing it - it was shock. Iris was so convincing it was hard to doubt her. And the strange thing was, she’d always felt akin to Norma – like she could talk to her about anything. Now she just felt horror. Who were these people....?

‘Did you come into my life deliberately?’ she uttered. ‘Did you do it on purpose?’

‘Of course I did. I got Arthur Hatfield to take me to Bruno’s that night. I wanted some of what you and Kenneth had. I’m your sister at the end of the day. Don’t I deserve some happiness?’

‘But you’ve gone out of your way to be nasty to me.’

‘I hate you. I always have. I hate both of you. But you more so. Kenneth is at least grateful for what he’s been given, but you swan around as though you were born to it. And you get it all handed to you on a plate. The handsome husband. The family. The hotel. Another handsome, rich fiancé. Finally, my boyfriend.’

‘You’ve been seeing someone else behind his back.’

‘Only because I’m second best to Patrick. It’s always been you. See, trouble is, Pat may have been to public school and have money. But he’s like me, he’s from the gutter and he’s always been convinced he’s too good for you. Whereas I know I’m not good enough for him. Leo’s like me – carefree and without morals.’

‘How can you hate me that much?’ Annie uttered. ‘It wasn’t my fault Nesta and Michael took me in. I was five years old.’

‘Because you’ve been like a spectre in my life. I’d hear Mum at night when she’d come home pissed, after selling herself, lying in bed, wailing. Begging God to bring her back her Kenneth and Annie. Never any prayers for me. She never did anything to make my life more bearable.’

‘And I’m sorry about that, but it’s still not our fault.’

‘How can you be so arrogant? Even Kenneth has no time for you. He thinks you’re a spoilt brat. I get on quite well with Kenneth as it happens.’ She smiled smugly. ‘We have a mutual enemy.’

‘Kenneth isn’t my enemy,’ Annie sighed. ‘He just doesn’t understand me. He’ll always take my side at the end of the day.’

‘Why do you think he lent me the money to invest in Ralf’s company? It was to have a dig at you. He’s still angry with you for not signing the hotel over to him. He would have done good with it. Kenneth would have made it into flats for people with nowhere to live. Not a fancy salon selling horrible shoes.’

‘Modelling my horrible shoes has kept this roof over your head for the past few months hasn’t it?’ Annie cried. She felt so wounded by it all. She didn’t know what to believe or what to do or anything. If Iris had intended to make her suffer then she’d fulfilled her brief.

‘Well I don’t need you any more. I’ve got a business and a wealthy husband to be.’

‘Leo Andersson...’ Annie uttered, the penny suddenly dropping. ‘Kenneth’s friend?’

‘Yes. We met through Kenneth.’

‘Well that’s all very cosy isn’t it?’ said Annie, and to her consternation, she started to cry. She stood up and had to steady her shaking legs. ‘I want you at Bruno’s tomorrow morning at ten. We’re going to talk to Norma.’

‘Be my guest,’ Iris said arrogantly. ‘She’ll only tell you lies.’

‘Maybe so. But I think she’ll be more honest with me than you ever have.’

Annie walked out, holding on tightly to the banister as she walked down the stairs. Her head spinning. Iris’s story was fantastical, but the bit that jarred with Annie was that she knew Alice’s real name. There had never been any sort of biography written about her. Even Annie only knew scant details, like she’d been born in Battersea, her real name was Higgins, and like Nesta she’d survived the sinking of the Titanic - that was how she’d got to New York and became a star. She never really liked talking about her life prior to going to America. Annie couldn’t deny that people had always commented on how similar they were. But everyone had put it down to coincidence. She wished this had all come out earlier, she could have asked Nesta when she went to see her the other week.

Somehow, she stumbled onto the main road and found a phone box. As usual it had that horrible aroma of urine and cigarettes, but she had to stifle her nausea and get on with the matter in hand.

She called Kenneth’s home and was a little shocked when a very young-sounding man picked up the phone.

‘Can I speak to Kenneth Holland please?’ she asked, wondering if she had the wrong number.

‘One minute.’

He put the phone down on the side and Annie heard him call Kenneth. She wondered who he was. Kenneth rarely had visitors and when he did, it was unlikely he’d let them answer his phone.

‘Who was that?’ she asked when he finally picked it up.

‘That? Oh it was just Billy. He’s helping out at the Tanner Beresford offices for a while. I’ve put him up.’

‘I see. Well, could you come to Bruno’s tomorrow morning at ten o’clock? It’s very important.’

‘What is it?’ he snapped. ‘I’m busy.’

‘Please. Just do this one thing for me Kenneth. I don’t ask much of you.’

‘Alright. Well don’t keep me for too long, I’ve got meetings.’

Annie had no desire to make conversation with her brother and put the phone down. She then put another penny in the slot and dialled Alice’s house in Belgravia where she stayed when she was in town. It was picked up by Jenny, her aunt’s personal assistant, and Annie hoped she was in.

‘Could I speak to Aunt Alice please?’ Annie asked.

‘One moment Annie,’ Jenny said. ‘She’s just having her supper.’

There was a click and Alice picked up the phone.

‘Hello Annie,’ she said. ‘Are you alright?’

‘Not really. Could I possibly ask a favour of you? Could you come to Bruno's tomorrow morning at ten o'clock?’

‘Oh yes? Have you something going on there?’

‘There's someone I want you to meet. Can you come?’

‘Of course, sweetheart. You’ve got me intrigued now.’

‘It’ll become more clear tomorrow. I’ll see you in the morning.’

Annie ended the call and found she couldn’t move from the phone- box. She was so utterly exhausted, and her hormones made her cry at the slightest provocation. She wasn’t even sure why she was so upset. So what if she and Iris were half-sisters? Kenneth was her proper brother and they couldn’t stand each other. What had shocked her most was the sheer hatred in Iris’s voice. As if she blamed Annie for something that wasn’t even her fault. It was totally unjustified and if she’d only known it, as a little girl, Annie had dreamt of having a sister. Under different circumstances they could have been friends.

Pulling herself together, she stepped out of the phone-box and looked around for a taxi. She then remembered that it was South London and taxi drivers never came this way – it was considered too dangerous. She saw a bus go past that went into town and she hopped on that. Eddie would be at home waiting for her. She’d go in and he’d pour her a drink and run her a bath and she’d tell him all about her day and he’d listen and be sympathetic. But the thought of it made a knot of dread form in her stomach. The simple truth was, she didn’t love him. And she knew that if she split up with him, it would cause all sorts of problems, seeing as they were business partners.

As soon as the bus crossed Westminster Bridge, Annie got off and walked to Parliament Square, where she hailed a cab.

‘Where to love?’ the driver asked.

‘West Hampstead,’ she replied. ‘As fast as you can.’

By the time she reached Patrick’s flat, she was shaking. She didn’t know how he was going to react to her turning up on his doorstep. She’d been so nonchalant with him earlier on when he’d told her how he felt, it would be so typical of a man to go off in a sulk and find some girl to go to bed with - just to get back at her. But Annie loved him. That was all there was to it and even though it was madness, she wanted to be with him.

When he opened the door to the flat, he looked frazzled. His tie was undone and he was holding a tumbler of whisky.

‘Miss Holland,’ he smiled bitterly. ‘Come to tell me you want nothing to do with me?’

‘No,’ she sniffed, those uncontrollable tears slipping out. ‘I’ve come to tell you I love you. I love you. I always have. I don’t love Eddie.’

‘Well,’ he smiled. ‘This is a turn up. Come in.’

Annie stepped into the flat and went into the front room, she saw he had a bottle of whisky open on the coffee table.

‘Can I get you one?’ he asked.

‘No, I’m funny with booze at the moment,’ she said quietly.

‘Why’s that?’

‘I’m pregnant.’

He turned and looked at her.

‘What?’

‘I haven’t had it confirmed but I’m nearly two months late.’

‘Whose is it?’

‘I always used my cap with Eddie. I didn’t with you.’

‘Is that the only reason you want to be with me?’

‘No! I slept with you in the first place because I love you. You pushed me away the next day if you remember rightly.’

He laughed and put down his glass and came over to her, stroking the side of her face.

‘You do realise that if you call off the engagement, Eddie will probably withdraw his money from your business?’

‘I realise that,’ she said. ‘And it’s probably the worst thing I could ever do. But I can’t stand being with him any longer. I’ve just had a terrible time with Iris, and when I came out, I couldn’t bear the thought of going home to Eddie. He’d be so sympathetic and nice to me and I find it all so stifling. I just wanted you to put your arms around me.’

And he did just that. Wrapping his muscular arms around her narrow shoulders and pulling her to him. It felt so natural to be close to Patrick. To smell his musky aftershave, and feel his heart beating against her cheek.

‘What? Like this?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ she whispered. She pulled away and looked up at him.

‘What will you do if the baby’s Eddie’s?’ she asked.

‘How will I know? Just cos I’ve got red hair, doesn’t mean my baby will. I love you Annie. I was a fool to think I belonged with Iris. Maybe I’m an idiot, but because of where I come from, I always somehow felt you were too good for me and that I deserved someone like Iris. But she’s twisted and spiteful. What was all that about her being your sister?!’

‘I think she might be telling the truth.’

‘What?!’

‘Oh Patrick,’ she sighed, laying her head on his chest. ‘There’s so much I have to tell you. Life’s so strange for me at the moment.’

Chapter Fifteen

When Annie woke up in Patrick's bed the next morning, suddenly feeling sick; everything came back to her. Eddie would be at home, wondering where she was. She hadn't even had the decency to call and tell him she was staying out all night. She just hoped he'd had enough of waiting for her and had gone back to his own place. She turned over, swallowing down the nausea, and looked at Patrick. He was asleep but had a huge smile on his face, like getting with her had finally made him happy. Annie felt so scared of what the future held but she had to follow her heart and be with the person she loved. But this didn't stop her feeling guilty. Eddie was a nice guy and he didn't deserve this.

Annie got out of bed and had to sit for a moment to quell the sickness. She felt Patrick run his hand down her spine, and while the sensation was pleasurable, at the same time there was too much sensory stimulation going on and she had to rush into the toilet to be sick. She went back into the bedroom and found Patrick sitting up, rubbing his eyes. He then ran his hand through his tousled, ginger hair.

'We'd better get you to the doctors,' he laughed.

'I'm too embarrassed,' she fretted, sitting on the bed. 'My doctor knows I'm not married.'

'He's a doctor. He's got to be discreet.'

'And I suppose I am engaged...' she looked down at the ring Eddie had given her, and she felt that awful sense of dread again. 'Oh for God's sake let me get this morning out of the way, then I'll deal with the rest of my life.'

Patrick took hold of her left hand and manoeuvred the ring off. Laying it on the bedside table.

'There. You're not engaged now. Do you want me to go and talk to Eddie?'

'No. I've got to do it.'

She looked at Patrick and stroked his face, where the auburn stubble had started to sprout on his chin. He looked so young and boyish compared to Eddie. But she had no regrets. Whatever happened, he was the right person for her.

'You do still want me don't you?' she whispered.

He grasped her hand and kissed her wrist.

'More than anything,' he said.

Annie realised she had to face going home before going to Bruno's. She hated wearing underwear for two days in a row and needed to freshen up before dealing with her family. Patrick dressed and drove her into town, dropping her off outside Holland's.

'Are you sure you don't want me to come in with you?' he said. 'Just in case Eddie gets shirty.'

'He won't,' she replied. 'I'll be fine.' She kissed him on the cheek. 'I'll call you later.'

Taking a deep breath, she got out of the car and went into the building. It was early morning and no one was in yet. She guessed that Lillian and Dawn, the two front of house girls she'd employed to deal with the few customers they had each day, were probably only just getting out of bed after sleeping off the excesses of the night before. How she envied them their carefree lives.

As she rode in the lift, up to her flat, her heart raced. She crossed her fingers and toes, hoping Eddie had gone home last night. She knew she would have so much to deal with at Bruno's, she didn't need to start her day with an argument as well.

As soon as she opened the door and smelt cigar smoke, and heard the wireless in the kitchen playing, she knew she was out of luck. As she shut the door he came running down the hall, just dressed in his trousers, vest and braces, his hair dishevelled.

‘Are you okay?’ he gasped. ‘I didn’t know where you’d got to last night. I called the club and you weren’t there. I called Mandy’s and she said she hadn’t seen you. Where were you?’

‘With Patrick,’ she replied, looking down.

‘What?’ he uttered.

She looked up into those beautiful blue eyes and she’d never hated herself more. It was like kicking a dog when it was down, and she wished she could rip out the part of herself that loved Patrick, and devote herself to Eddie.

‘I can’t talk about it now,’ she said. ‘I’ve got to be at Bruno’s at ten. I’ll come back here afterwards.’

‘Well I won’t be here,’ he said cockily. ‘You don’t expect me to be hanging up behind the door waiting for you all the time do you? One night was enough.’

‘I’m sorry Eddie. I really am. At least give me the chance to explain.’

He glanced down at her hand, then grasped it tightly, yanking it up.

‘Where’s your ring?’ he hissed.

‘In my handbag,’ she replied, wriggling her wrist away. ‘I should have never agreed to marry you. I’m sorry Eddie.’

He turned and walked off down the hall and Annie followed behind him, running to keep up with his step.

‘Eddie you’ve done nothing wrong. I don’t want you to think that. But I guessed you knew all along that I love Patrick.’

‘What about Iris?’ he asked, going over to the wireless and switching it off. He picked up his cigar, put it in his mouth, and stormed out of the room, going into the bedroom, where his tie and jacket lay draped over a chair. He didn’t bother to put them on, just hung them over his arm and went to head out of the flat.

‘Patrick doesn’t love Iris,’ Annie said. ‘But I’ve got to go and meet with her because she’s telling me now that she’s my sister.’

Eddie turned around and looked at her, furrowing his brow.

‘What?’

‘She reckons we’ve got the same mother. Norma, the cleaner at the club.’

‘Has Patrick been giving you drugs?’

‘Of course not. It’s all true. I’ve got to go and sort it out. Then I’ll come back and we can talk. I don’t want there to be bad feeling between us. We are business partners after all.’

‘Are we?’ he said cryptically, raising one of his bushy eyebrows. ‘Maybe I’ll have to see about that.’

He stormed out of the flat, slamming the door behind him, and Annie was left feeling a little out of body. Up until yesterday, she’d been convinced she would be spending the rest of her life with Eddie; and now everything had turned on its axis, and they were no longer together. Right now, she felt as though her whole life was a weird dream and she’d wake up soon and be back in that crummy flat in Fulham, getting ready to go out on New Year’s Eve.

She had a quick bath, fixed her hair and changed into a navy two piece she’d had from back when she was married to Mario. She was a little alarmed to find the side zip barely did up, and was frightened that if she sat down, the whole skirt would rip. But it was too late to worry about that, and instead she left the building and walked the short journey to Bruno’s. She got

there to find the door open and as she entered, she realised her legs were shaking. She got in and saw that it was Kenneth and Alice who'd arrived. Kenneth looked most disgruntled to be here, and Alice looked bewildered.

'There you are,' she said to Annie. 'What's going on?'

'We've just got to wait for a couple of other people to arrive,' Annie said. 'Can I get you both a coffee?'

'I'd love one please my darling,' said Alice. She looked at Kenneth. 'What about you?'

'No,' he said snootily. 'I don't want to get comfortable. I just want to be in and out of here as quickly as possible.'

Annie went into the little kitchen area and made herself and Alice a cup of coffee, and when she returned to the front of the club, she saw that Norma had arrived, all dressed up in her overall, ready to work.

'Don't worry about that Norma,' Annie said. 'Can you join us in the booth?'

As soon as Annie clocked the knowing expression on the cleaner's face, she realised Iris was telling the truth. Shaking, she slid in beside Alice, feeling her waistband digging into her body and making her catch her breath. Norma sat beside Kenneth and took out her cigarettes.

'Is this about something Iris has said?' she asked as she lit her fag.

'Yes,' Annie replied. 'But I think we should wait until she gets here.'

'Iris?' Alice said. 'Is that the blonde girl I met at your party? The one who models for you?'

'That's her, yes.'

And as if the devil himself had heard his name, the door opened and Iris walked in. She looked classy for once, with her hair rolled up and a scarf tied around her neck. Leo Andersson was clearly wielding his influence already - or maybe all Iris had ever wanted was to be a rich man's wife and was more than happy to jump head-first into the role.

'Oh what a lovely family gathering,' she said bitterly.

'I don't understand,' Alice said. 'What's happening?'

Iris sat beside Annie and she guessed she must have hated her mother a lot to choose to sit beside her rather than Norma.

'Iris reckons that you're her mother, Norma,' Annie said. 'Is that correct?'

'Yes,' Norma replied.

'And she also claims that you're my mother as well.'

Alice gave a theatrical gasp, which almost made Annie laugh.

'Oh it gets better Alice,' Annie said. 'She also reckons that Norma here is your niece. Which apparently makes you my real aunt.'

'It's true,' Norma said quietly.

'What?' snapped Annie.

'All of it's true.'

'Is this some sort of scam to make money?' Alice uttered. 'How could you possibly know you're related to me?'

'Because my father used to go on about you,' Norma said. 'He always told me how his baby sister had been taken by their aunt and brought up by her. The aunt, Bella, was a singer and actress and taught little Alice how to dance, Little Alice Higgins.'

'How did you find out these things about me?'

‘What? Like how you were born in January 1892 in Tennyson Street? That your father was called Alfred Henry Higgins and your mother was called Eliza but she died when you were little. Your father couldn't cope with you so your Aunt Bella from Ireland took you.’

Annie sat enthralled. Even she didn't know these facts about her aunt. If they were true that is.

‘Whose daughter are you?’ Alice asked.

‘Desmond.’

‘My oldest brother,’ Alice said softly. ‘He used to carry me on his shoulders while he went up and down Prince of Wales Drive, knocking at the posh people's houses....’

‘Asking for rag and bone,’ Norma smiled.

‘Yes!’ gasped Alice. ‘You’re Desmond's daughter?’

‘I am.’

‘I've learnt something new about you Aunt Alice,’ Annie said bitterly. She felt jealous of Iris being Alice's proper niece. She still refused to believe she and Iris were sisters.

‘I don't like talking about my past,’ Alice said. ‘It is true, Aunt Bella did take me away from Battersea and she taught me all she knew about performing. She died when I was a teenager and that was when I entered the music halls. When I was nineteen I met a bounder who called himself Robert Fairfax. He had dreams of going to America and starting a new life as a property magnate. He stole a ring from the family he claimed to be from and planned to sell it in America. I was pregnant and he promised to marry me as soon as we got to New York. But when he got us tickets for The Titanic, he got me to pose as his sister, Lady Alice Fairfax as that was who the ring belonged to. The day we sailed I gave birth to a little boy.’ She gave a painful sounding gasp, and Annie rubbed her shoulder.

‘You don't have to go on if you don't want to,’ she said softly.

‘No I want to. I've kept this secret from you and Kenneth all your lives. You deserve to know. When the ship was sinking, I couldn't find Robert anywhere, so I waited for a lifeboat to come. There was room for one person on the lifeboat and the woman in front of me offered to take my baby on for me. Her name was Nesta Villiers.’

‘Nesta!’ gasped Annie. ‘Aunt Nesta?’

Alice nodded.

‘She took Bobby, my baby, and said she'd bring him back to me when we were rescued. I watched her take him and then in the mayhem I was knocked unconscious and injured my head quite badly. Then when I came round, I'd been rescued by Richard Bloomberg and you pretty much know the rest.’

‘But I've never known Aunt Nesta with a son called Bobby. Her son David died in the war.’

‘David *was* Bobby. Nesta kept him for herself and pretended that she was his mother. I met James by chance, and when I realised who his sister was, I made it my mission to infiltrate the family and get Bobby back. But I never did. David didn't find out who I was until he was a grown man and it was too late. Anyway, it all happened a long time ago.’ She composed herself and looked at Norma. ‘So you're my niece,’ she smiled. She then looked at Iris. ‘And you're my great niece.’

‘So is Annie,’ said Norma. ‘And Kenneth's your great nephew.’

‘This is pointless,’ Annie said. ‘You can't be my mother. I can remember my mother.’

‘She's telling the truth,’ Kenneth suddenly piped up.

Annie looked at him.

‘What?’

‘All my life I had vague memories of someone else other than Mum. I can remember being with a young girl with long blonde hair. Our mother - who we remember - had dark hair. But the girl went away when I was tiny and I’ve always thought I dreamt it.’

‘Why did you never tell me?’

‘Because I thought I was imagining it.’

‘Annie you were born on the second of January 1934 in number seventeen Silver Street in Battersea,’ Norma said. ‘You were the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen. Black hair and big dark eyes. Most babies are born with blue eyes but yours were black like coal.’

‘Okay,’ Annie said, still refusing to believe it. ‘What is my birthmark like and where is it?’

‘It’s shaped like a strawberry and it’s at the base of your spine.’ Norma laughed and looked at Alice. ‘She was conceived when we went strawberry picking in Kent and I was always convinced that was why she had that birthmark.’

Alice chuckled, but Annie wanted to scream. She couldn’t take this all in. In her mind she ran over all the people who’d seen her naked. Who could have told Norma this?

‘Did Patrick tell you that?’ she asked. ‘Or Eddie?’ She looked at Kenneth. ‘Did you tell her?’

‘I’d forgotten all about your birthmark,’ he said arrogantly. ‘Besides, this is the first time I’ve ever met Norma.’

Annie was speechless. All these years she’d thought she and Kenneth were orphans. They had no idea where their father had gone and she thought her mother – Zena Brady, was dead.

‘Who was Zena?’ she asked.

‘Some woman your father took up with after he kicked me out,’ Norma said. ‘I found out that he then walked out on her too. Leaving her with you two.’

‘But you must have been so young,’ Annie said. ‘Kenneth’s twenty-seven and you must be about forty.’

‘Forty Four. I was sixteen when I married Sam Brady.’

‘Why did you leave us?’

‘Sam kicked me out. You’ve got to understand Annie, your father was a brutal man. He hit me and hardly ever gave me any money to feed and clothe the pair of you. There was a local money lender, Ernie Boots. He had a henchman called Manny Eckstein, who used to come round and collect the money I’d borrowed off Ernie, and he was always nice to me. I was nineteen years old and lonely and upset, and one thing led to another. Sam came home one day and found us in bed together. He beat me up and kicked me out. I was too ashamed to go home to my parents, so I told them I’d got a job in a theatre in Hammersmith. In reality I moved into a bedsit and went on the game.’

‘You were a prostitute...?’ uttered Alice. ‘I was living the life of luxury in London, and my own niece was a prostitute.’

‘Oh don’t feel sorry for her,’ snarled Iris. ‘She did pretty well from it. And guess who was the one who had to suffer because of it. Not Lord Kenneth and Lady Annie. No, it was me. I was the one acting as her look out. Or nursing her wounds when some punter beat her up. I was the one she abandoned at thirteen.’

‘And I’m sorry,’ Norma stressed. ‘I was frightened of Maurice, and Lila said she would take care of you.’

‘Who’s Lila?’ Annie asked.

‘My best friend,’ replied Norma. ‘She promised me she’d take care of Iris. Little did I realise that the night I left, she was arrested and ended up in prison. By the time I came back to look for Iris, she’d gone. I hoped that the social workers had got her and put her in care. I didn’t realise she’d become a prostitute as well.’

Kenneth gasped and looked at his sister, and Annie couldn’t help but revel in the expression of horror on his face. He usually thought so highly of Iris.

‘You were a prostitute?!’ he cried.

‘I had no choice,’ she replied. ‘You’ve got to understand.’

‘I understand that I’ve given money to a prostitute. Is that why you’ve come here? To get money from me?’

‘No. I just wanted some of what you and Annie had. Especially Annie. I used to see her in the papers with Mario Stefani, and they would always go on about how she was the little Battersea orphan who’d been rescued by Lady Nesta Holland. Mother found out about you two years before she left me, and she was so proud of you going to a rich family. I hated the pair of you. But at least you want to do something worthwhile Kenneth. That’s why I became friends with you. Annie’s not grateful for what she’s got.’

‘You don’t know anything about me,’ Annie replied.

‘I know enough.’

‘Stop it you two,’ said Alice. ‘This is quite a development, I have to say. So the both of you really *are* my niece and nephew?’

‘At least we know now why you and I look so alike,’ Annie said to her aunt.

‘The first time I ever saw you, I was taken by how much you reminded me of myself as a little girl. Such a precocious little thing you were. Singing and dancing and putting on a show.’

‘I don’t want to hear any more,’ Kenneth said, standing up.

‘Stay Kenny,’ Norma pleaded. ‘I want to get to know you.’

‘My name’s Kenneth,’ he said. ‘And you mean nothing to me. Please, let me go.’

Reluctantly Norma stood up and Kenneth passed her, marching out of the club without saying another word.

‘Ignore him, he’s always like that,’ Annie said to Norma. ‘I can’t believe you’re my mother. Is that why you came to work here? To get close to me so you could get money out of me?’

‘I don’t need your money Annie,’ Norma said. ‘I’ve got money.’

‘You’re a cleaner,’ Iris snarled.

‘I’m married to Philip Francis, the artist,’ she said matter-of-factly. ‘I don’t need money from you Annie. I just wanted to see my children again. I came to the club one night, but madam here threw me out. So when I saw the card in the shop window, advertising for a cleaner, I decided to apply.’

‘How come you’re married to an artist?’ Iris scoffed. ‘What would an artist see in you?’

‘I left the game five years ago. The girl who lived in the flat downstairs to me owned a café. It was a sort of Bohemian place, full of artists and writers and things. She offered me a job. Philip was a regular. We got chatting and it went from there.’

‘Does he know you were a prostitute?’

‘Philip knows everything,’ Norma said smugly. ‘So don’t think about blackmailing me Iris.’

Annie suddenly felt very sick and dizzy. The enormity of it all - as well as everything that was happening with Eddie and Patrick - got to her and she couldn’t cope with it. She needed air.

It was as if someone had blocked all the air vents and was slowly suffocating her, and if she didn't escape, she'd die.

She stood up, asking Iris to get up, so she could leave the booth and run out of the club, up the stairs and out into the street. To her embarrassment, she dry-wretched into the road like some sort of drunk. She suddenly felt a pair of hands clasp her shoulders and immediately recognised the Shalimar perfume. She turned around and threw her arms around Alice's neck and started to sob.

'It's all so horrible,' she cried. 'I don't understand any of it.'

'It's a lot for you to take in,' Alice said, rubbing her back. 'I'm pretty shocked myself.'

Annie pulled away and wiped her eyes.

'It doesn't change anything between you and me. You were always my aunt anyway. But it's Norma and Iris. I've suddenly got a mother and a sister. And I hate Iris.'

'It doesn't mean anything!' Alice laughed. 'Norma may be your mother, but Nesta brought you up.'

'How can you forgive Nesta for stealing your baby?'

'It's all water under the bridge,' Alice replied. 'Poor David is gone now. We've got to concentrate on looking after you.'

'I've split up with Eddie,' Annie said. 'Patrick and I are making a go of it.'

'But I thought Iris was with Patrick.'

'He's had enough of her. Besides, she's been seeing an old friend of Kenneth's behind his back, and she's got engaged to him.'

'I can't keep up with you young people,' Alice tutted. 'And I thought my life was complicated as a girl. What are you going to do now?'

'I don't want to see either of them again. I can't stand Iris and I don't know Norma. What sort of mother leaves her thirteen year old daughter?'

'I don't know,' sighed Alice. 'I'll go back in there and give her my contact details. She is my niece after all. But do you want me to see you home or something?'

'No. I'll go back to work for a while. It's my sanity.'

'Alright,' Alice smiled, stroking her face. 'But if you need anything, just call. You know you're always welcome in New York don't you? You can come over any time.'

'Thanks Alice. Maybe Christmas. While I can still travel.'

'What do you mean?'

'Any later and I'll be like you. Sailing on a boat whilst heavily pregnant.'

'You're kidding?'

Annie shook her head.

'Eddie's or Patrick's?'

'Patrick's I think. I'm not sure. But he's willing to take me on anyway.'

'Will he marry you?'

'I hope so. It won't be very good for business if I have a baby out of wedlock.'

'Oh Annie what am I going to do with you? Thinking about it, it's always been obvious you're related to me. I'm forever getting myself into scrapes and it clearly runs in the family.'

Annie was glad to return to Holland's and decided she would spend the rest of the day at her drawing board, coming up with some more designs for Fiona. She wanted flatter shoes for the latter stages of her pregnancy and Annie looked forward to coming up with something

practical but pretty; and concentrating on this was preferable to worrying about her absurd family.

As she walked along the corridor, she was met by Clarissa. She came in a couple of days a week to work on her bag designs, and just the other day they'd sold one of her handbags – Melissa – to Sheree York, the actress. Clarissa had big plans for Holland's – luggage, travel accessories, everything. But Annie would always rein her in and remind her that for now they were still small fry.

'You've got a visitor,' Clarissa said quietly. 'What have you done to Eddie? He's got a face like thunder.'

'Oh that's all I need,' Annie groaned, tempted to turn and run back out. But she knew it was pointless - she'd have to face Eddie eventually. 'Okay, thanks Clarissa.'

'A girl came in this morning responding to the advert for the new model. I told her to come back later. Do you want me to deal with her?'

'Yes, why not? She can't be any worse than that witch Iris.'

Annie walked off and went into her office. She found Eddie at a filing cabinet, going through her ledgers.

'Been playing happy families?' he asked, not even bothering to look at her.

'Not at all,' Annie replied, putting her handbag down on her desk. 'But she is my mother and that creature Iris is my sister. Still, just because they're family, it doesn't mean I have to have anything to do with them.'

'No, you're good at cutting people off aren't you Annie?'

'I said I'm sorry. But it's better we split up now, rather than when we're married.'

'What's he got that I haven't?' Eddie asked, finally turning around. 'What is it? Is it because he's younger? Better in bed? A bit of rough? Oh I know I haven't been to posh school like him have I? But at least my dad's not a villain.' 'It isn't anything in particular,' she sighed, rubbing her aching temples. 'I just don't love you. I've tried. You're a lovely man and you've treated me so well. But I can't be with someone I don't love. I've already had one disastrous marriage. If Mario hadn't killed himself, we would have ended up divorcing anyway. I don't want to enter into the wrong relationship again.'

'But you have!' he shouted, waving one of the ledgers at her. 'You were happy to take my fucking money weren't you?'

'That's not fair. I didn't want you to buy the factory, you just did it off your own back.'

'Yeah, well I'm pulling out.'

'What?'

'I want you to buy me out. From Monday I'm withdrawing my workers from the factory.'

'Don't be stupid Eddie. We can still be business partners.'

'No we can't. Maybe you're cold enough to behave like that, but I'm not. I happen to love you and I can't just sit back and watch Patrick Collins take my place. You're going to have to fend for yourself Annie.'

'I don't have that sort of money,' she cried. 'I'll have to sell Bruno's.'

'Sell it then. What do I care? You can rot in hell as far as I'm concerned.'

He put the ledger back in the cabinet, slammed it shut and went to walk out. He then stopped and thought better of it, turning around to look at her.

'And don't just think I'm saying this because I'm hurt. You'll be hearing from my solicitor in the morning.'

He walked away and Annie knew he meant every word he'd said. Eddie wasn't one for saying things for the sake of it. She had wounded him deeply and she hated herself for it. She shut the door to her office, kicked off her shoes and sat at her drawing board. It was hard to concentrate on work, knowing that by Monday, just a fifth of the workforce at the factory in Barking would be her employees. She'd taken on five machinists since they bought it, and they were paid out of her money. She knew she really didn't have any choice but to sell Bruno's. All the people who worked for her needed their wages and she had to keep production going, and what she was going to do with all the surplus space and the spare machines, she didn't know.

The phone on her desk rang and she was tempted not to answer it, but there was a chance it was Eddie's solicitor so she had no choice. Taking a deep breath, she picked it up, bracing herself for an onslaught.

'Hello, Holland's,' she said.

'Annie it's me,' said Alice. 'How are things?'

'Eddie's withdrawing his investment in the factory. I'm going to have to sell Bruno's just to keep production going. What have I done?'

'Followed your heart. Do you want me to lend you some money? I don't mind.'

'No. You've done enough already, giving me this place. I need to stand on my own two feet. I'll manage somehow.'

'Well you know the offer's there. Anyway, I was going to say, how would you like to come over for dinner? I've had a chat with Norma and she'd like to see you again. Without Iris there.'

'No, I can't,' Annie snapped. 'I can't face that woman yet.'

'Are you sure? I think she needs to have her side of the story heard.'

'To you maybe, but not me. I can't forgive her for leaving me and Kenneth with our father. She could have taken us with her.'

'And you'd have both ended up like Iris. You were better off in the end. At least you went to Nesta and Michael.'

'I suppose. But I can't deal with it now. I'm too preoccupied with getting my finances sorted out at the moment.'

'Okay. Well if you change your mind, just come round tonight at about eight o'clock.'

'Thanks Aunt Alice.'

'You're welcome. And I'm glad to find out you're my real family. I couldn't wish for a better niece.'

Oswald Lincoln, Eddie's solicitor called just after three p.m. and confirmed to Annie that Eddie wanted her to buy the factory off him. He was asking for two thousand five hundred pounds, money Annie didn't have unless she sold Bruno's. She had until November the first to pay up, which gave her around six weeks to find the money. But despite it all, Annie couldn't blame Eddie for behaving like this. He was hurt. If she'd been in his shoes, she'd have probably reacted in the same way.

She was just fishing around in her handbag, looking for his engagement ring so she could send it back to him, when the door to her office opened and Patrick came in, wielding a large bouquet of white roses. They were beautiful and filled her office with the most wonderful, fragrant smell.

'I thought you might need cheering up,' he said.

‘Thank you,’ she replied, taking the flowers off him and kissing him on the lips. Just being with him again made everything seem right again. Whatever happened, she could face it with Patrick by her side.

‘Are you busy?’ he asked.

‘Yes. No. Sort of. I’ve got to get onto Lewis Finkel to do another valuation on Bruno’s. Eddie wants me to buy him out of the factory.’

‘You’ve told him?’

‘He was waiting for me when I come back this morning. If I sell Bruno’s and buy the factory, I’m going to be saddled with a huge factory that’s going to be half empty. I don’t get enough work to justify having such a big manufacturing base. This could ruin me.’

‘Oh darling!’ he sighed. ‘I wish I could help you, but I’ve ploughed all my money into the film, and this.’

He put his hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out a box with a *Stotts of Hatton Garden* stamp on it. She looked at Patrick and smiled, then opened the box. Inside lay a beautiful engagement ring - a white diamond surrounded by a row of garnets.

‘Garnets are my birthstone,’ she said.

‘I know. Annie Holland, will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?’

‘Yes!’ she gasped. ‘Yes.’

She threw her arms around him once more and hugged him tightly.

‘I love you,’ she said. ‘Of course I’ll marry you.’

She looked up at him.

‘But can we marry soon? I don’t want to be a fat bride.’

‘I thought a special licence. Maybe a quiet little registry office do somewhere....’

‘Sounds perfect,’ she purred. ‘You’re perfect. As long as you’re beside me, everything will be okay.’

Chapter Sixteen

Three Weeks Later

When she was a little girl, Annie never imagined a wedding day like this. Her first wedding to Mario had been a lavish affair. Even though Nesta and Michael hadn't approved of her marrying at such a young age, they made sure she had the best. But this one was very different. It was at Marylebone Town Hall and she was wearing an ivory two piece she'd picked up from C&A on Oxford Street for ten shillings and there were only a handful of guests.

Because it was a Wednesday and at short notice, even Bernie, Patrick's dad hadn't been able to make it back from South Africa in time. He was there 'on business' and seeing it through was more vital than attending his son's wedding. And so the only guests were a couple of Patrick's friends and his Aunt May who apparently never missed a wedding, and on Annie's side there was Alice, who was sailing back to America the next day; Mandy and Clarissa. Max and Miriam had returned to America, and Tawny had only recently started at Rodeane and wasn't allowed a day off, and that was it. But Annie didn't care. She was marrying the man she loved, and her baby would at least have a name. The pinched waist of her outfit highlighted the fact that she now had curves, and before they'd gone into the registry office, Mandy had asked her if she was expecting. She'd confided in her friend that she was, but begged her not to tell a soul.

In a ceremony that lasted five minutes, she became Mrs Patrick Collins and felt like the happiest girl in the world. She was determined to make the most of her day, because from tomorrow, things would turn decidedly unpleasant. She was yet to find a buyer for Bruno's and had made the decision to sell the building on Regent Street instead. She would make enough money to pay Eddie off and have some left over to set up a little workshop somewhere cheaper. It meant she would have to let some of the staff go, as she couldn't afford to have three showroom models, and would have to do the administration herself. She hated the thought of giving people the sack, but she had no choice. Eddie had forced her hand.

Alice had paid for them to have a reception at The Birdcage in Baker Street. It was a beautiful restaurant that looked like a Victorian tea room, with birds in cages, and a water feature in the middle of the floor. Alice had given them enough money to close for the afternoon so the newlyweds could have their celebration un-interrupted. It had been laid out in the traditional style, with two tables pushed together at the end of the room, so Annie and Patrick could have a 'top table'; but there was no father of the bride to make a speech, so instead it was left to Alice to make a toast to her niece. Then Patrick gave a speech, thanking Annie for being beautiful and kind and his favourite person in the world, and Annie blushed and tried not to cry.

She was glad once all the formalities were over, and someone put a Julie London LP on the gramophone and the room was filled with light jazz. Lillian, Dawn and Lexi, her models, turned up after they'd finished work, and so did Sandy, her secretary; and while Annie gave them a glass of champagne and smiled sweetly, she felt terrible knowing ultimately that she was going to sack two of them.

She quickly returned to Patrick at the top table and sat beside him, taking hold of his hand.

'That was horrible,' she whispered. 'How am I going to let them go? I've never fired anyone. Not even at Bruno's. Mario took care of that sort of thing.'

'It can't be helped,' he replied, squeezing her hand. 'Some might say that Eddie could have been more professional and kept a working relationship with you.'

‘No one can blame him. He’s hurt. I should never have led him on. But I thought you loved the other witch.’

‘We don’t talk about her,’ he laughed. ‘She was a mistake.’ He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it. ‘I wish we could go on honeymoon.’

‘I need to sort this all out,’ she sighed. ‘I can’t just leave people hanging on. I’ve got three weeks to find a buyer, and that doesn’t seem to be happening. Who wants to own a nightclub on Wardour Street? They’re ten a penny. The Fortune is going to have to go.’

‘I wish I’d been able to convince dad, but he’s obsessed with golf clubs. He reckons this one in South Africa will make him millions. When he comes back, he’s going to go around buying up the country houses that are going cheap and turn them into golf clubs too. Can’t see how that’s going to make him any money. Not that many people play.’

‘It’s okay,’ she smiled, squeezing his hand. ‘I’ll be fine. I just want Eddie paid off.’

‘Do you want me to talk to him?’ he said. ‘See if I can get him to back down. At least until the baby’s born.’

‘Don’t,’ she groaned. ‘I don’t even want to think about the baby.’

He looked down at her stomach and smiled.

‘Well he’s certainly starting to make his presence known.’

‘I never thought I’d be a shotgun bride.’

‘You’re a beautiful bride.’

He kissed her nose, but as he pulled away, he spotted something, and looked rather disturbed.

‘We’ve got a visitor,’ he said quietly.

Annie looked up and her heart sank when she saw Norma heading towards them. It was the first time she’d seen her mother since the showdown at Bruno’s, and she hadn’t wanted to see her again. Norma looked different today,^{9*} and dressed in her smart tweed suit, her blonde hair curled perfectly, it was evident she was married to a rich man. Annie couldn’t help but admire her acting skills – she for one had been taken in by her act that she was a poor woman forced to do cleaning.

‘Who told you about this?’ Annie snapped, as Norma reached the table.

‘Alice. She thinks we should try and be friends.’

‘That’s for me to decide,’ Annie replied.

‘Well, whatever you want, it’s up to you. But can I at least talk to you in private and give you your wedding present?’

‘I don’t want anything from you.’

‘You might want this.’

Annie looked at Patrick.

‘I’ll be back in a minute.’

She got up and walked to the back of the restaurant. There was an area that was roped off, that would normally be part of the dining area. Annie lifted one of the velvet ropes and slipped through, followed by Norma. Annie sat down at an empty table and her mother joined her. It was as though Norma had been playing a part all these months and the real her had emerged and she was the sort of classy, attractive mother Annie would have wanted. But it didn’t get away from the fact that she was a former prostitute who had walked out on Annie and Kenneth when they were little, and had also been terrible to Iris. And horrible as she was, no thirteen year old deserved that.

‘So you’re a married lady,’ Norma smiled. ‘That was all a bit quick wasn’t it? Seems you were with Eddie five minutes ago.’

‘It’s none of your business,’ Annie snapped.

‘It is if I’m going to be a grandmother.’

‘Shhsh!’ Annie snapped, scared someone could hear. ‘How did you guess that?’

‘I’ve been around the block Annie. I know the signs. How far gone are you?’

‘Three months.’

‘Is it Patrick’s?’

‘I think so. He’s willing to take a chance anyway.’

‘He must love you.’

‘He does. I know you must resent the fact I stole him off Iris.’

‘You can’t steal people, they go of their own accord. And that little bitch was seeing Leo behind his back anyway.’

‘You can’t blame her for being a bitch. You walked out on her when she was thirteen.’

‘She’s always been a little madam. I didn’t treat her well, but I did my best. And I really did think my friend was going to take her in. I made a lot of mistakes Annie and I know I’m to blame for how she is, but I don’t like her. I’m her mother and if she needed me I’d be there for her. But you’re a different kettle of fish. I’m hoping I can build bridges with you.’

‘And Kenneth?’

‘I haven’t approached him yet, but Alice tells me that he’s quite religious and won’t approve of my former lifestyle.’

‘So you thought I’d be a soft touch.’

‘There’s kindness in you Annie. I don’t know where you get it from, maybe it’s Alice. It’s certainly not me, and your father was a bastard.’

‘I barely remember my father. I have only vague memories of my mother...Zena.’

‘I don’t even know who she was. There was no Zena around our way when I lived there.’

‘How did you meet my father?’

‘At a dance. He was so handsome. Dark hair and eyes - he looked like a film star. I was a silly sixteen year old and I had my head turned. We married within three months of meeting and Kenneth was born seven months later. So yes, I was a shotgun bride too.’

‘Why did you leave me and Kenneth with Dad and Zena? Why didn’t you take us with you?’

‘I had nowhere to go. I couldn’t go back to my parents. They’d hated Sam from day one and I was determined to make good for myself and come back for you two. But I didn’t make good for myself, I ended up on the game. Within a couple of months, I was pregnant. I always told Iris her father was a Swedish sailor but I’ve no idea who it was. I tried to abort her by taking these powders one of the other girls recommended, but they didn’t work, I just threw up for a couple of days. So there I was, twenty-one, a whore and the mother of three. I made a mess of my life and Philip’s been my salvation. For my birthday last year he gave me Charmaine, the first ever painting he did. It used to sit over our mantelpiece, but when I explained to him I needed a few thousand pounds, he told me to sell it, so I did. I got three thousand pounds for it.’

‘Good for you.’ Annie replied sarcastically.

Norma opened her handbag and took out a heavily stuffed envelope, which she passed across the table to Annie.

‘And I want you to have it.’

‘What?’

‘I want you to have it as a wedding present. I want you to buy Eddie out with it. Alice has told me all about it.’

‘But you don't know me. Why are you doing this?’

Norma smiled warmly.

‘When that little one's born and you hold it in your arms for the first time, you'll know you'll love it forever - no matter where you are or how old it is. I love all three of you, but I don't like Iris, and doesn't want to know. But you're the kind, beautiful girl I always thought you'd be. And I want to help you.’

‘I don't know what to say,’ cried Annie. ‘Thank you. I'll pay you back.’

‘I don't want you to pay me back. You don't even have to talk to me again if you don't want to, but at least I'll know you're okay.’

Annie was too exhausted to fight. Norma was a stranger to her. Nesta had been her main mother figure. But with Nesta ill in Switzerland, and Alice so frequently in America, she did miss having an older woman to confide in.

‘Maybe we can be friends,’ she said. ‘It takes me a while to trust people but I guess you deserve a chance. And thank you so much for this money. You really didn't have to.’

‘It's nothing compared to what I owe you.’

They returned to the party and Norma went to talk to Alice - leaving Annie and Patrick alone. Annie was still clutching the envelope and Patrick looked at it in puzzlement as she sat down.

‘What's that?’ he asked.

‘Three thousand pounds.’

‘What?!’

‘Norma sold one of her husband's paintings and has given me the money to buy Eddie out.’

‘How did she know about it?’

‘Alice told her. This means I can keep the factory. I was thinking maybe we could rent machines out to other companies and get money that way. What do you think?’

Patrick smiled and kissed her.

‘I think you should pay off your old boyfriend. Get your business sorted out and then, before you blow up like a barrage balloon, let me take you off to the South of France for a week.’

‘Sounds wonderful. Things aren't going to be easy for us when we get back. I've upset a lot of people and something tells me they won't let it lie.’

Chapter Seventeen

December 1959

Iris couldn't believe what a year it had been. Just twelve months ago, she'd been a high-class hooker, with nothing to look forward to except eventually losing her looks and being thrown on the scrapheap. She never imagined that she would end the year as Mrs Leo Andersson. Her new husband may have been twenty years older than her, a divorcee and totally without morals; but she was very fond of him. He was rich and he was willing to take a child on that he didn't even know was his.

As well as this, Iris was the part owner of a burgeoning fashion house. Whilst Ralf still made dresses for the daughters of East End gangsters, and the odd starlet on the lower end of the variety bill; they were getting regular commissions and had a steady, if not small, income; and for the first time ever, she didn't have to compromise herself to earn a living. Sometimes being spoken down to by Annie was just as humiliating as the way some of the punters had treated her when she was a hooker.

She couldn't have been happier as she and Leo held court at their wedding reception in the ballroom of The Stables Hotel in Knightsbridge. They'd got the room for free because the owner went to school with Leo. That was how Leo got most things – from his family connections. Now she was part of that family and she still couldn't quite believe it. The ballroom was filled with his rich, influential pals. Most of them as corrupt as he, and even the ones with uptight, respectable looking wives - according to Leo - got up to all sorts behind their backs. There was also Mary, Leo's mother, a formidable lady in her late sixties, who was very glamorous, and her Spanish origins were evident in her black hair and olive skin, although Iris guessed the hair was probably died. Mary was here with her latest beau, a rather portly, jowly man called Hector. Leo explained he was only one in a long line of many beaus, and it seemed Mary was a bit of a 'goer'.

Iris had very few guests – friends weren't something she'd collected over the years. But there was Ralf, and he'd brought Rosemary and Eileen, their models and that was it. But Iris didn't care. She felt as though her life was starting today. This time next year she'd be a mother as well as a wife, and she couldn't wait. Her baby was going to have everything she never had.

The corset she was wearing under her white, lace suit was pressing on her baby bump and made her keep wanting the toilet. She made her leave, kissing her new husband goodbye once more, and went into the toilets. When she came out, she got the shock of her life to find Kenneth at the top table, sitting next to Leo, chatting to him. Iris hadn't seen her brother since the mighty showdown at Bruno's. And whilst he'd never asked her for the money that he'd invested into the business back, she got the feeling he didn't want to know her because of her past. She wondered if she should leave them to it, but as she looked over at him, he gave her a slight smile and nodded, and she saw this as an olive branch.

Iris walked up to the table and sat down on the other side of Leo.

'Congratulations,' Kenneth said.

'Thank you,' Iris replied. 'Can I get you a glass of champagne?'

'No. It's okay. I'm on my way to a meeting. I just thought I'd pop in and wish you both well.'

'What are you doing for Christmas old chap?' Leo asked. 'The wife and I will be spending it down at Calderwood House. I wondered if you fancied joining us. Unless you're spending it en famille of course.'

‘No I’m not,’ Kenneth replied snootily. ‘I can’t believe Annie has welcomed Norma into the family. How can she forgive her after all that she’s done? She was a prostitute for God’s sake.’

‘I see you haven’t changed,’ Iris said.

‘It’s different for you,’ he said. ‘The way I see it, she forced you into doing things you didn’t want to do. At the end of the day you’re my sister and it would be nice to see you over Christmas.’

‘Thanks,’ Iris smiled, genuinely touched. Deep down - just like anyone else - she wanted a family, and since getting to know the Holland’s, she’d felt closer to Kenneth than Annie. ‘It means a lot to me.’

‘Me too,’ he smiled. ‘Anyway, I’ve got to go. Are the pair of you honeymooning?’

‘Yes, I’m taking this beautiful creature to New York for a week,’ Leo said, putting his arm around Iris. ‘Pooky Sissons has arranged for us to fly first class on one of his old man’s planes.’

‘I’ve never flown before,’ Iris shivered. ‘I’m nervous.’

‘I’m sure there’s nothing to it,’ Kenneth replied. ‘Maybe we could have lunch when you come back.’

‘I’d like that,’ she said. ‘I’d like that a lot.’

Kenneth shook hands with Leo, kissed Iris on the cheek and left. Iris felt strangely emotional. Something that had happened a lot since she’d got pregnant. She wiped a tear away.

‘That was nice,’ Leo said to her. ‘It’s good for you to have family.’

‘And I have now,’ she replied. She ran her hand over her rounded stomach. ‘Viva’s going to have the best life. I’m going to give her all things I never had.’

‘Viva?’ he laughed.

‘Years ago I shared a flat with a drag act called Viva Prowse. I thought it was the best name. I want to call my daughter Viva.’

‘What if it’s a boy?’

‘It’s a girl, I can sense it.’

‘Well my grandmother’s name was Victoria, so maybe she can be called Victoria and Viva for short.’

Iris laughed and looked up, and got the shock of her life to find Eddie Glass striding through the crowd, Ralf running along at his side to try and keep up. Iris hadn’t seen Eddie since before he split up with Annie, and she didn’t think she’d ever see him again.

‘Hello Eddie,’ she said as he reached the table. ‘This is a pleasant surprise.’

‘Hello Iris, Leo,’ he smiled, and all Iris could take in was how handsome and rugged he was and wonder why Annie couldn’t have been happy with him, and left Patrick to her. ‘Congratulations.’

‘Thank you,’ Leo replied. ‘Have we met?’

‘Leo this is Eddie Glass,’ Iris said. ‘He used to go out with Annie.’

‘Oh *that* Eddie,’ Leo said, offering him his hand. ‘Nice to meet you old chap. Champagne?’

‘In a minute. Could I have a quick word with Iris and Ralf?’

‘Of course, of course,’ Leo said, standing up. ‘I should go and mingle anyway. Go on, take my seat.’

Eddie did as he was instructed, and Ralf sat in the seat that Kenneth had been on. Iris wondered what the hell was going on.

‘I’ve come to make you both a proposition,’ he said. ‘I’ve finally settled the sale of the factory today and I’m two and a half thousand pounds better off. I was wondering how you’d feel about branching out into shoes Ralf.’

‘Shoes?’

‘Yes. I’m buying another factory in Stratford. I was wondering if you fancied designing shoes and bags.’

‘I’ve never done it before. I’ve always designed dresses.’

‘Well you could always take a shoe designer on. My cousin Luke is at St Martins. I’m sure he knows a few young shoe designers.’

‘Is this about you getting revenge on Annie?’ Iris asked wisely.

‘Of course it is,’ Eddie said. ‘That bitch shafted me, and I’ll do anything to bring her down. She shafted you too Iris. She stole Patrick off you.’

‘You’re not wrong there. I’m not bitter. I’m more than happy with Leo.’

‘Doesn’t matter. She crossed a line and she’s got to pay for it.’ He put his arms around the back of their chairs.

‘So?’ he smiled. ‘What do you both say? I invest my money and we make House of Silver the biggest design house in the country?’

‘And we get Annie back in the process?’

‘Absolutely.’

Iris picked up her half empty champagne glass and raised it in Ralf and Eddie’s direction.

‘I’d like to raise a toast,’ she said. ‘To the House of Silver and Glass.’

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