Lipstick and Powder

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Extract

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Chapter One

After what had been a run-of-the-mill June day, Anna Watson, who was approaching her twenty-sixth birthday, yawned and stretched as she got up from her comfortable dark red and gold sofa – the sofa that her once caring husband, Frank, had bought her at an antique shop in Portobello Road when she was pregnant with their twins. This chaise longue type of a couch was something that he knew she had always hankered after because, for one thing, it reminded her of her late gran's little two-up-two-down, a few turnings away from where she was now living.

Anna had spent a lot of time with her maternal grandmother as a child, when the quietly spoken woman had looked after her before she was old enough to go to school. And this evening, for no reason in particular, she had been thinking of those early days when her own mother, Ivy, worked full time at the local umbrella factory in Cambridge Heath Road. This work, which had afforded her a decent take-home pay at the time, had been Ivy's saving grace, because not only had she worked every God-given day but had also to take care of her family of three daughters.

Apart from this, the woman had also to endure the stigma of her husband having left her for another. But all this of course was now considered part of a former life, the ghost buried, and Anna, just like her two elder sisters, was looking out for their mother without too much fuss being shown. Back in the early days Ivy had been fiercely independent but now, in the comfort years of retirement, she was content to let her adult offspring feather her nest as and when they felt like it. She had her memories of good times as well as bad. Over Bank Holidays she

had taken her daughters to Margate by train to picnic on the beach, enjoy a little nap on a deckchair, and traipse back home again in the late afternoon. Those had been lovely days out for Anna and her sisters.

In her sitting room, her little comfort zone, Anna had been looking through an Avon catalogue in between thinking about her life and her marriage, and all to the low sound of *Coronation Street* in the background. This evening had been quite relaxed because her six-month-old twins had been – and still were – happy to lie in their playpen enjoying each other's company as well as their attached colourful mobile toy. Their tall and handsome dad, Frank, would be working late as usual, and no doubt coming home after midnight with the smell of drink on his breath and perfume on his shirt.

Glancing at herself in her old wax-polished pine mirror above the Victorian fireplace, Anna ruffled her shoulder-length dark blonde hair and then twisted it into a pleat at the back, wondering if it was time for a new cut and style and maybe a colour tint. 'I suppose you could try being a redhead for a change . . .' she quietly told herself. 'That should go all right with those green eyes of yours.' Then, her smile fading, her confidence on the wane, her shoulders slumped and she sighed loudly as she stared at her reflection and let her hair tumble down. She wondered if it might be time to take her sisters' advice and get out of the house now and then to meet up with old friends. Most of her mates, like herself, were married now, but from the few telephone calls that she had had before they gave up on her it had been clear that, even though they were no longer single, they were keeping in touch with each other. One or two had joined a fitness club and another, who had attended pottery classes one evening a week, was now selling handmade and hand-painted pots from a stall in Hackney market. One of her very best friends during her schooldays had broken a barrier and was working as a part-time driving instructor and was one of the first women to do so.

She glanced across to the small bureau in the corner of the room on which stood a lovely framed photograph of her and Frank on their wedding day, when they had been deeply in love and gloriously happy. Shaking off the memory of that day, she

contemplated the idea of fetching her address book out of the dark and phoning some friends to see what kind of a response she might get after her long spell of silence. It was nobody's fault but her own that the phone had stopped ringing, because she had all but cut her mates dead. When she and Frank were first married Anna had drawn a circle around what had been her wonderful little oasis and, not too long after this, there had been the exciting house-hunting episode which had taken up most of her spare time. Then came her all-consuming desire to have babies – which hadn't been as easy as she thought it would be.

Taking the bull by the horns she collected her address book and a biro and went into the passage to sit on the padded stall next to the little shelf on which the black telephone perched. Flicking through the pages, she couldn't decide who to call first so started at the beginning. Beryl Andrews was the first name and this brought a smile to her face. Amongst other girls, she and Beryl had each at one time been captain of the netball team at both the junior and senior school and, since Beryl had been a bit of a daredevil flirt, it had come as no surprise that she was the first to marry at the age of seventeen having got herself pregnant by a favourite boyfriend.

A touch eager now, Anna dialled her old chum's number and felt a rush of euphoria as she waited for her to pick up the phone. But it wasn't Beryl who answered. It was an older voice. Momentarily silenced, Anna quickly collected herself and said, 'I'm sorry to have troubled you but I think I might have dialled the wrong number. I was hoping to reach an old friend of mine called Beryl.'

'Well, the only way you can do that sweetheart is to go to your local church. My Beryl died from breast cancer three months ago,' said the voice on the end of the line.

Stunned by this news all Anna managed to say was, 'I'm so sorry . . . I didn't know she had cancer.'

'Well, that's probably because people won't mention the word will they. Anyone would think it was some kind of punishment from God for being a devil worshipper. You'd be surprised just how rampant cancer is, and still it's hushed up. I've moved in to look after her little family though, so the kids will be fine.'

Shocked by this news Anna could hardly speak. When she

finally found her voice all she could say was, 'I'm really sorry.'

'You and me both darling. The good Lord is looking after her now. Take care sweetheart.' And that was it. Anna heard a click and then the dialling tone. She had only just recognised the woman's voice from the few times she had been in her house as a schoolgirl, spending time in her friend's bedroom listening to her records and talking about boys and sex. Pushing this horrible news from her mind, she collected herself and turned the pages to call another of her old school friends but there was no answer. She tried another but all she heard was the unobtainable tone. Deflated by her failures she drifted back into the sitting room, sat down on the sofa and shed a few tears. She had never felt as alone as she did right then.

Anna had had a lot of fun with her friend Beryl in particular because in the old days they had been like two peas in a pod. She smiled sadly as she remembered how, when just thirteen, they had wished for each other's eyes and joked about exchanging them via surgery. Beryl's eyes had been big and round and a lovely warm tone of brown but she had longed for them to be like Anna's, wide and sloping and a soft shade of green.

She snapped herself out of this worsening dark mood that seemed to have been dragged into the house, possibly because of the old romance that she had been watching on TV that afternoon while feeding one twin after the other. The film apart, though, worries over her failing marriage had clouded her mind as she remembered a time when her and Frank's world was filled with laughter and socialising, parties and music. A time when she always wore lipstick and powder whether she was going out or not. Slowly shaking her head, she spoke softly to herself. 'You've got to get out more Anna. You're behaving like your own jailer – shutting yourself away. Life is too short and the proof of that is Beryl. She shouldn't have suffered and she shouldn't have died so young. She was full of life.'

The gentle sound of her babies gurgling in their playpen brought a faint smile to her lips. She looked around the room and brought to mind the time when she and Frank had first purchased this house. They had been so in love, content to spend hours together talking about the way they might decorate their nest. They had agonised over things that now seemed trivial,

such as choosing between the Heal's modern Seventies look or keeping the mid-Victorian feel with appropriate replica wallpaper which they had seen when browsing in the Sanderson's gallery off Oxford Street.

Anna had no idea why something so frivolous, compared to what she had just heard about an old friend, should have floated to the surface other than the fact that she didn't want to think about the tragedy. In the early days, furnishing their home had been the most important thing in her and Frank's life and the centre of their little love world. They had enjoyed every minute of window-shopping and delivery once this house, which they had renovated together, was ready. They had stripped dark varnish away from the solid pine floorboards before giving it a coat of wax polish and a good buff so as to match the carved pine fire surround. They had decorated the ceiling and walls a brilliant white and thrown down red and black Afghan rugs, bought cheaply at a warehouse in Aldgate East.

The jewel in the crown for Anna was the brass Georgian companion set and matching fender that contrasted beautifully with the colourful patterned Victorian fireplace tiles. The fender, purchased from a second-hand stall in Whitechapel market, had been black with age before Anna cleaned and polished it until it shone like gold. All of this had, of course, taken place earlier on in their marriage when the inseparable couple loved to curl up by the small coal fire and watch the reflection of the flames on the small burnished copper scuttle while listening to love songs playing on the stereo. One of the best things to have come out of the so-called Swinging Sixties, as far as Anna was concerned, was the trend of mixing new styles with old and, especially, stripped pine furniture.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she looked about the room where she had always felt comfortable and snug and wished that she wasn't spending so much time in it by herself. Pulling herself out of this low mood she turned her attention to the outside world and a heartening smile spread across her face as she glanced through the glass panes of the door that led onto her walled garden. She could just see the head and shoulders of Rachel, her old Jewish neighbour next door, tending to her plants in the soft glow of the light shining out from the woman's

back door, and recalled how neighbourly she had been on the day she and Frank moved into the turning. She smiled again as she remembered Rachel saying, 'These houses might be old fashioned but they are a lot safer than what they build nowadays. Look at what happened to Ronan Point. What a disaster.' The woman had been referring to a brand new high-rise block of flats that had partly collapsed while people were living inside. And during other little chats over the garden fence with her neighbour, Rachel had criticised the government for dismantling London Bridge for dispatch to a tourist park in Arizona and praised Bernadette Devlin who, at the age of twenty-two and the youngest MP, had demonstrated against government trying to remodel union law. Anna was always amazed at how the old woman kept up with everything that was going on in the world.

When Frank and Anna had purchased this late Victorian two-up-two-down terraced house from a private landlord some three years ago, being a local girl meant that Anna's family was not far away. Her grandparents had lived close by to this quiet and scantily tree-lined back street before they passed away and this in itself had been a reason why she wanted to be in this little corner of East London. She felt so much at home here. There had always been a relaxed neighbourly atmosphere, another reason why she and Frank felt that they could not have wished for a better place to bring up children. And as for Rachel . . . she was like an old-fashioned adopted grandmother who upheld an old-fashioned wartime spirit of *one for all and all for one.*

Soon after they were married Anna had wanted to start a family and had often sat huddled up with Frank on the sofa, talking about their future and what it would be like to be parents. As it turned out, she hadn't found it quite so easy to conceive as she first thought and after trying for two years and failing she had been advised by a gynaecologist to take a fertility drug. This had proved successful for hundreds of woman with similar problems to herself and eventually resulted in Anna getting pregnant with not one baby but two. Twin boys. Oliver and James.

Frank had been over the moon at the news of her pregnancy and, protective where his wife and their unborn were concerned,

put caution before passion when in bed for fear of anything going wrong. So, for most of the nine months while she was carrying, Anna did little more in the bedroom than kiss and hug her young husband and satisfy his desires in her own sweet way. She had hardly been able to believe it when, towards the end of her term, every now and then she thought that she could smell a hint of someone else's perfume on Frank's shirts when she was putting them into the washing machine. Why all of this was filling her mind now was no mystery. She knew why she had been thinking about better times and doing her best to force away the dark stomach-churning worries inside. Little cameos of better and worse times had been floating in and out of her mind all afternoon, even though she had tried to lose herself in her favourite serial, *Crossroads*.

And now, in the silence broken only by the chimes of the distant clock tower striking seven, she instinctively glanced at her wristwatch to confirm that it was time for her babies to be fed. She drew the curtains and then smiled down at the twins as they vied for attention, gurgling and kicking their legs excitedly. At least they were happy and content in their unhurried safe little world. Looking from one to the other she felt as though her heart was melting.

'I'll never be able to thank the Lord Jesus enough for you two, will I?' she murmured as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Then, lifting her face, she closed her eyes and whispered, 'Please God, if I am left to look after the twins by myself, help me to be strong.'

As much as Anna loved her twins there were times when she felt as if she could scream with frustration. Times when one or the other or both would cry non-stop even though they had been fed, changed and cuddled. But at least they were there, and one-sided conversations were better than having nobody to talk to. Much better. And now it was time for her to feed and get them ready to go down for the night. She needed a little break from them so that she could think seriously about what she could do to improve her lonely world. She had her future to think about as well as theirs. A future which was looking a touch bleak and one that she didn't think anyone else knew about. She was going through a private hell and had been for quite a while. But it

helped to know that there were others in the same boat, others who were possibly listening to or watching the same programmes and who would understand what it was like to move around in silence or have only the radio and television for company. Earlier that afternoon she had read an article in a magazine about unmarried mothers and how they not only had to cope alone but also live with the stigma of not having a husband.

Anna had been caring for her twins almost single-handed but at least she was married. She had been keeping up the appearance of everything being all right while she went about doing the housework and taking care of the laundry. She glanced across to the Moses basket next to the garden doors and felt anxiety sweep through her for not having done the task she least liked – the ironing. The basket was full to almost overflowing with the white shirts that Frank wore to work, as well as other dry laundry that was ready for a steam press.

Shrugging off her sense of guilt at having watched television for most of the afternoon, she decided to leave the ironing until the next day. In any case she could see that the twins were brewing up for a crying session to let her know they were hungry. Her saving grace this evening was that her neighbours' seventeen-year-old daughter, the lovely Jackie, had promised to call in with her Summer Avon products catalogue and this she was looking forward to. Jackie had said that she would spend time with Anna, enjoying a glass of wine while she chose and placed an order for scented products in pretty pots and jars. Such little interludes as this were important contacts with the outside world because, while Anna had her catalogue, she felt that she was one of a club of hundreds of other housewives who were turning and admiring the same pages and choosing the same products.

Asking herself if perhaps the time had come for her to enjoy more than just motherhood and wondering if she should reinvent herself by going on a little shopping therapy trip, she went into the kitchen to warm the twins' bottles which had been made up earlier and kept in the fridge. She thought about Jackie, the young redhead who was so full of aspirations and dreams as well as a determination to work every hour that God sent so as to save enough money to travel on economy through Europe.

Jackie's dream was to go from one country to the other working in bars, restaurants, or on the land picking fruit crops for a living. This wasn't so out of the ordinary because some young folk had, since the late Fifties, been catching the ferry to France then traipsing around the Continent. It had all been part of a new and growing fad. This ambition of Jackie's was something that had brought her and Anna a little closer than they might have been if all they had in common was the Avon products. Anna had toyed with the idea of travelling herself at the age of sixteen once she had left school but, as with most girls, hadn't done anything about it. The only difference that she could see between the pair of them apart from their age was that, whereas her husband Frank had been her first love, Jackie was enjoying more than one relationship and had said that she had no intention of tying the knot until she was thirty.

In her late teens and already independent the girl didn't seem to give a toss if she was labelled 'spinster' and the irony of this made Anna smile. The word 'spinster' was such an old fashioned expression for a Seventies girl to use. The differences between Anna and Jackie was that Anna had always been a home-girl, with the maternal instinct from as far back as the days when she played with her dolls. But during the Sixties, once she had started to earn a living, she had saved a little each week so as to be able to enjoy one or two annual cheap package holidays on the Costa Brava. This had been more than enough to satisfy any lust for travel. The dream of working during long summers picking grapes in Spain or grafting as a chamber maid in hotels had not been on her agenda. She had loved London all through the Sixties when she was working as a telephonist for an insurance company in Covent Garden. That was when she had really got into fashion and the general swing of all that was going on around her, right through to when Biba in High Street, Kensington in the late 1960s copied the fashion of the Twenties and the Thirties when girls had worn floppy hats and flowers in their hair.

With memories of these times floating through her mind, Anna bottle-fed one baby after the other, enjoying the recall of her teens when she had been as free as a bird to do as she pleased. And now, on the surface, she had little to complain about

because she had her adorable babies and her standard of living was all right. She and Frank enjoyed a good income from Prima Pasta, the restaurant that they had started up four years earlier, and she didn't have to worry about money. Her own mother, Ivy, one of the closest people to her, had not been able to enjoy the small luxuries earlier in her life that Anna and her sisters were now almost taking for granted.

In this somewhat prosperous time though, her mother was enjoying a bit of the affluence that seemed buoyant in comparison to the way it was before, during and after the Second World War. Ivy was more than happy with this bubbling new era – and happier still with a little of her other two daughters' ill-gotten gains coming her way every now and then. Hazel and Linda, Anna's sisters, enjoyed a vibrant lifestyle while running their exclusive brothel in old Bethnal Green.

After the twins had been fed, bathed and were sleepy, Anna thought that she would have little trouble in settling them down for the night but she was wrong. Once in their matching cots in their small shared bedroom, decorated in pale blue and primrose, Oliver, the less contented of the two, began to grizzle, which in turn started James off. Leaving the room, Anna slowly pulled the door shut behind her and went downstairs, intending to pour herself a glass of red wine to take into the sitting room, but one of her babies was not letting her off that easily. Oliver, who was a little more prone to stress than James, was now crying loudly. Doing her best to sit it out and not fall into the trap of spoiling either of them, she pulled her favourite LP from the rack on a shelf and placed it on the turntable.

She wanted to listen to the Beatles and her favourite song from the early Sixties, 'Please Please Me'. This reminded her of the time when she had seen the group at a concert in North London before she had met Frank. A time when she and a friend had tried to pose as staff so as to slip in through the back door and up to their dressing rooms. Of course they were thrown out along with other fans that had had the same idea.

With this and other past events floating in and out of her mind, and with the setting sun casting a warm glow into the sitting room, Anna did her best to try and block out the sound of her babies crying above. Cursing under her breath for having to

look after them all by herself all of the time, she made herself busy by folding their playpen and carrying it into the front of the house to the dining room, which hardly got used now. 'You're a selfish man, Frank,' she murmured. 'You should be here with me taking care of your sons.' She only just stopped herself from throwing the playpen across the room. 'They're your babies as well as mine! You should be here with me!' Drawing a long and trembling breath she then shook her head, saying, 'I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to let you push me to the edge. I *can* take care of the twins. We don't need *you*.' She then slowly dropped to her knees and cried into her hands in the room with the delicate black and white William Morris patterned wallpaper and the red fitted carpet that she and Frank had chosen together. The room where they had once enjoyed so many dinner parties with their friends. She could almost hear the laughter in the now silent unlived-in room.

Their friends who had once been an important part of their lives had gradually fallen away because of Frank having been too busy at work during the week and too tired to entertain or socialise at weekends. And as so often was the case, this evening the house seemed too quiet and empty, her only company her babies howling above.

Tired though she was, she went back upstairs, supporting herself on the old polished pine handrail as she went. Once in the twins' bedroom she picked up Oliver, who really seemed unusually distressed as tears trickled down his face and into the collar of his pale blue babygrow. Pacing the floor with him and patting his back, she smiled down at James who had quietened since she had come into the room. Patting one and soothing the other with a gentle voice she gradually quietened the pair of them and before too long Oliver was asleep, his head resting on her shoulder. To the sound of an occasional sob she gently lowered him back into his cot, which was a touch premature because he woke up straightaway and began crying again. She tucked him in and gently patted his back in case he had trapped wind and this seemed to do the trick. She sat on the chair next to the cots and quietly sang the same lullaby that she could remember her mum singing to her many years ago. Eventually both babies drifted into a contented sleep until she was left

sitting there wondering why she felt so empty when she had them to love.

Glancing from one baby to the other she realised that James was awake again and, in his own sweet way, about to make it clear that it was now his turn. Leaning over his cot, a dull ache now in her back, she turned him onto his side, tucked him in and gently shushed him back to sleep. This done, she crept out of the room and went downstairs only to hear one of them start up again. She told herself to be strong and not go back upstairs and so left him to it, and this as it turned out was the right thing to do. After a few minutes there was silence.

She poured herself a small glass of sherry and went back into the sitting room to put her feet up and relax properly now that she felt sure that they were settled for the night. With the sound turned down low she switched on her old record player – her first record player – one that she had been given as a present when she was fourteen and which she had refused to get rid of. Her taste in music had changed along the way but she loved to listen to her old favourites.

When Frank had brought home his much treasured and brand new Bang & Olufson a few weeks before, he had wanted Anna to pack hers away but she had resisted. Frank's music centre was his prized possession and lately, when he *was* at home, he was often stretched out on the sofa, his head sunk into a big feather cushion, his personal bulky black earphones on. In one hand would be a glass of malt whisky and in the other a small cigar. Here he would listen to favourite tracks from his favourite LPs. He had wanted to shut out all other noises and sounds but Anna felt that his earphones were also a way of excluding her from his private little world of love songs.

Settled in an armchair by the fireplace where no fire burned tonight, she tried to think of where she had gone wrong: why it was that Frank didn't seem to love her any more and how she might win back his affections. She thought about a new wardrobe and whether this would be the answer. Perhaps some new and sexy underwear? A different hairstyle or a new shade of lipstick? Too upset by the cause of having to think like a single person again she glanced at her wristwatch and saw that it was almost eight o'clock. She could hardly believe how quickly the

time had passed and presumed that Jackie had changed her mind about calling in. But then, just as she was resigned to another evening alone, she heard the lovely welcoming chime of her doorbell.

For no particular reason she glanced at herself in the mirror over the Victorian mantelshelf and pushed her dark blonde hair into place as she checked that without make-up she didn't look too washed out. All that was called for was a visit to the hairdresser for that new cut and style which she had been wondering about. The soft chimes of her doorbell went again and she went to let in Jackie, anticipating her smart blue and black Avon case filled with samples. She smiled inwardly as she left the room because this visit was not only going to mean a bit of company for her but a chance to choose whatever she wanted from the new catalogue.

When she opened the front door though, there was no Jackie, but a familiar red Jaguar sports car parked outside, and on her doorstep were Hazel and Linda, her beautiful classy sisters, who shared their stylish converted house in old Bethnal Green from which they ran their upmarket team of attractive and fun-loving prostitutes. When she could, Anna enjoyed herself at their home, sipping champagne with the girls in the gaudy gilt-furnished plush sitting room, listening to their illicit talk about the fun side of the business and the clients.

This evening, looking as stunning as ever in their up-to-the minute designer clothes, the girls were armed with a Chinese takeaway and a bottle of best port, the favourite drink of all three of them. They breezed past Anna, smiling broadly as she gazed back at them, a touch bemused. They looked in the mood for a celebration and were intending to have one by the look of things because, apart from the bottle of port Hazel was carrying, there were two bottles of red wine in an off-licence carrier bag. Too taken aback to think of anything to say, Anna smiled when they joked about the shocked expression on her face. 'We'll 'ave to do this more often,' said Linda with the long wavy brown hair, who was just two years older than Anna.

'Or better still find a reliable babysitter so that we can drag Madam out and about town,' added Hazel, who was the eldest of the three girls at thirty, and had beautiful long black hair.

Following them through to the sitting room Anna wondered why they had come round to see her. She knew her sisters like the back of her hand and to her this buoyant mood was a veneer and they were covering the real reason for this visit. But after just a few minutes of asking no questions and from the expression on their faces she decided that they were simply in high spirits and that was all. She assumed that this was because they had notched up another name to add to the client list of their small and lucrative business – the Call A Girl Company. The highly successful so-called dating agency situated on the border of old Bethnal Green and Shoreditch, in what had once been a small Victorian boot and shoe making factory, was now a beautiful home from which business and pleasure were conducted.

'So . . . what's brought about this little surprise visit then?' said Anna as she collected three wine glasses off the shelf of her pine Welsh dresser. 'Gonna name-drop are you? Someone famous under your wing is there? Who is it this time, a rock star or a notorious villain?'

'This is purely a social call, babe. A night in with good food and wine. We're here to sister-sit.' Hazel smiled. 'Nothing wrong with that is there? You spend too much time on your own, Anna. And besides, we want to see our godsons more often – it's our right. I'm going to go up and look at them in a minute. Might even cough a little so as to wake 'em up for a cuddle.'

'Oh really,' said Anna teasing her sister. 'Do I detect a hint of maternal longing, Hazel? Or have you already gone and got yourself pregnant by one of your millionaire clients?'

'Pregnant? Me? No chance sweetheart. We leave that kind of domestic wonderland stuff for you to wallow in. Keep on churning them out, babe.'

'I don't think so.' Anna went quiet and then said, 'I'm happy with what I've got. I don't need any more.'

'Famous last words!' called Linda from the adjoining kitchen as she opened the cartons of takeaway Chinese. 'I'll put this little lot on the kitchen tray and we'll eat it while it's hot so we won't 'ave to warm the plates up!'

In the sitting room, Anna handed Hazel a corkscrew for the bottle of wine and looked directly into her sister's face. 'So

what's this all about then? This impromptu visit with no phone call first to say you were coming?'

'God – you're a worrier,' said Hazel, shaking her head. 'We fancied having a girls' night in. That's all. Lighten up, babe.'

'Fair enough.' Anna smiled. 'I'm not complaining. I'm glad you're here. I was feeling a bit low as it happens . . .'

'Oh? And why's that?'

Regretting the little slip of the tongue, Anna covered her tracks and showed a smiling face. She didn't want anyone to know what she was going through. 'Time of the month probably,' she said, shrugging it off.

'Oh, right . . . but you weren't hoping to be pregnant again were you, sweetheart?' Hazel asked, with a touch of concern in her voice. 'Because that would be daft and far too soon after our twins.'

'No. No, I don't want any more babies, Hazel. One of you two can deliver Mum with granddaughters that she can hug. I'm more than satisfied with my boys. And let's face it – it wasn't easy for me to fall as it turned out, was it.'

'Will be now though,' said Linda coming back into the room. 'All you have to do is take the fertility drug again and Bob's your uncle. There shouldn't be any stopping you now. If you wanted a bigger family, that is. Or, more to the point if Frank wants another baby – a little girl perhaps?' For reasons of her own, Linda had deliberately brought Frank into the conversation. 'You know what men are like with daughters.'

'Never mind what Frank wants or doesn't want. I might try for a little girl in a few years time. I'm hardly old and I might even be married to someone else later on. Someone who *wants* to spend time with his offspring.'

'Oh dear . . . Frank been neglecting you, 'as he?' said Linda, outwardly smiling but sick inside at the thought of her brother-in-law.

Anna lowered her eyes. 'I suppose he has been neglecting me a bit, yes. But I don't mind. I'm lucky to have my twins; they're as much as any mother could wish for.'

'They're our little miracle babies,' said Hazel, cutting in with a smile and a wink. 'And you deserve them. Let's hope they don't grow up too much like their daddy.'

Anna looked from one sister to the other and after a short pause, said, 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well, I s'pose he's no different from all men in that they can't keep their dick from rising when a tease comes along. And that waitress you both took on is a bit of a tease, babe.'

'Is she? I wouldn't know.' Anna wanted to change the subject. 'Anyway who gives a toss? And getting back to my boys – you're right, they are our little miracle.' She smiled at Hazel as she recollected the many months when she had been disappointed at not having conceived. The day when she found out that she had still had a wonderful magical ring to it. This was when Anna had left the small room of her private gynaecologist in a cul-de-sac just off Harley Street, and had to do her best not to walk along grinning like a Cheshire cat. She had been going to the London Hospital as an outpatient for two years before her GP asked if she could afford to go private. Having said yes without hesitation, whether it meant she would have had to take out a loan or not, she was referred to a specialist, one of the top men in his field who was tall, slim and handsome and turned out to be Anna's knight in shining armour.

'I reckon you deserved a medal the way you just kept on picking yourself up after every disappointment. You were a star then, babe, and you still are.'

'If you say so. I don't think I could go through all of that again though.' Anna slowly shook her head as she remembered the disappointments every month for over two years, before she fell pregnant with the twins. 'I was ecstatic when I got that positive result wasn't I,' she said. 'I don't think I've experienced anything like that before or since. I walked away from Harley Street as if I was on some weird and wonderful planet and was happier than I ever imagined I could be.'

'We know that, babe. You came and told us that same evening if you remember. You were miles of smiles that night.'

'I know. It was incredible,' she said, helping herself to a spring roll. 'You should have seen me when I came out of that little clinic. I had to stop myself from telling complete strangers about it. And before I knew what I was doing, I was pushing open one of the huge glass doors of John Lewis's and heading for the nearest counter. And when the girl offered me a free squirt of the

perfume she was pitching that week, I was so stupidly bowled over that I said, "I didn't come in for perfume. I came in to tell you that I'm gonna have a baby."'

'As if she would 'ave been interested,' said Hazel, quietly laughing at her sister.

'I know, but . . . well . . . on that day I have no idea how many strangers I told.' She slowly shook her head as she remembered it all. Then, her smile dissolving she murmured, 'I was *so* happy.' Shrugging, she let out a little sigh and looked from one sister to the other. 'I've got something to tell the pair of you that you're not going to like.'

'Fire away,' said Hazel as she piled hot food onto her plate. 'It can't be the insurance man you're having a fling with because they don't come door to door to perk up bored housewives any more do they.'

'No,' said Anna, 'they don't. If they did and a handsome salesman knocked on my door I might just drag him in for company though.'

Hazel leaned back in her chair and studied her sister's face, then said, 'That's not like you, Anna. We two old scrubbers might come out with something like that but not you. What's the matter, babe?'

'You're not scrubbers. Don't use that word.' Anna pushed a hand through her hair and drew a trembling breath. She didn't want to break down in tears but there was no denying that they were welling up behind her eyes. She smiled sadly at one sister and then the other. 'I love the twins more than I thought possible and I was fantastically happy when my gynaecologist broke the news to me that they were in there. The two women in John Lewis seemed really pleased for me when I told them.' Then snapping out of the past, she said, 'Frank wasn't as thrilled with the news as I thought he would be though.'

'He looked as proud as punch to me,' said Hazel.

'I know. And I think he was once it really sank in. But I can't forget the response I got when I phoned him from a telephone kiosk in Oxford Street to give him the news. He was short and offhand and this, if I'm honest, knocked me sideways.' Her eyes glazed over a little and she went quiet again before saying, 'Do you know what he said to me when I phoned him after I had got

those results . . . when he was serving behind the bar in our restaurant?'

'No, but you're gonna tell us,' said Hazel.

'I whispered to him – because it felt like our private bit of news of the century – "I'm pregnant, Frank. I'm actually pregnant." And he said, "Great. Fantastic. I'll talk to you later. Gotta go darling. Busy." Then he hung up. He didn't even make the effort to come home from the restaurant earlier that night. One of his brothers would have stood in for him, he's given them a helping hand at Tower Hill enough times. Still does.'

'So Frank didn't come rushing home? No surprises there then.' Hazel drew breath and forced herself to stay on track. She had to get a message across to Anna who she still saw as her baby sister. 'What else did you expect Anna? Frank lives for that place, for the work, the kudos, and the women he loves to flirt with. Flirting for the sake of the business is no bad thing I suppose.'

'He doesn't flirt, Hazel. He keeps the customers happy and that's what brings them back. They're just as bad as he is and it's all a bit of fun. It's ginger-nut Bridget that's the problem. *She* flirts with *him* and in front of customers. Sometimes in front of me for that matter. She hangs over my husband like a dangling scarf. I wish her husband, Trevor, would make her pregnant and cart her back to the country village where she came from.'

Hazel glanced at Linda and gave her a sly knowing wink before topping up Anna's glass. They had got Anna talking much sooner than they had hoped. And getting her to open up about her marriage was the very reason they had breezed in out of the blue. 'She's a good little worker though, babe, isn't she? And that's always good for business surely?'

'Yes, she is a good worker Hazel, but I don't know about her being good for business. Other women who are in for a night out don't want a bloody flirt swanning around the place and teasing their men. It makes my stomach turn over every time I see her up to her tricks on the rare occasions that I do go in these days.'

'The trouble is – with girls like her – you have to watch they don't go too far,' said Linda. 'Before you know it that little tease might well start to lure Frank up into the flat above the restaurant for a cuddle. And men being men, who would blame him if he did follow that pert little wiggling arse of hers up the

staircase to heaven.' Linda already knew that the waitress at Prima was familiar with the flat above the restaurant. She was simply drawing Anna in to see just how aware she was of what was going on. 'At least she keeps the punters happy . . . not to mention Frank.'

'Oh?' said Anna as she leaned back in her chair and stared into Linda's face. 'And you'd go along with that, would you? You'd make allowances if Frank was at it with her in what used to be our little flat when we were first married?'

'Men will be men, sweetheart. But then I doubt that she would do something like that while either of us two is in the restaurant. But there's no telling. I'm just letting you know what I think she's like, that's all. I wouldn't give Frank too much free rein if I were you – that's all I'm saying. Remind him that he's a family man now and then – while *she's* in earshot.'

'Or better still expand your family,' said Hazel. 'Try for a baby girl. You know what men are like with daughters.'

Uncomfortable at the way her sisters were throwing advice at her, which she hadn't asked for, Anna said, 'I'm quite content with my twins thanks. I don't need any more babies. You kick into action, Hazel, or persuade Linda to.'

'You and Frank were over the moon once you'd hit the target, you know that you were.' Linda poured more wine into the three glasses and said, 'Get that down you and don't look so serious.'

'I'm a responsible mother of twins don't forget,' said Anna, still wondering why they had made this impromptu visit. 'I have to take things seriously. It's all right for you two – footloose and fancy free. She sipped her drink and waited. She wasn't daft; there was something on both of their minds and by the look of it, something else was on the tip of Hazel's tongue.

'You know what?' said Hazel as predictable as ever. 'I don't think I've ever seen a happier face than Frank's after you'd told him you had two babies growing and not one. He walked differently after that. Shoulders back, chest out, proud as punch. That soon wore off though, didn't it?' She looked from one sister to the other and sipped her drink.

A touch miffed by this reminder of how happy she and her Frank used to be, Anna felt herself go cold as her stomach churned. Even though she was angry with him she was just as

much in love as she had ever been, but from the way her sisters were talking she could detect a tone of warning. She wondered if both girls knew more than she did. On the surface everything looked rose-tinted and reasonably good when it came to her marriage. She and Frank were seen as the young handsome couple who was able to live a comparatively comfortable lifestyle in the East End. They had their lovely refurbished terraced cottage in a corner of London where they had been born and bred, which was now being promoted as the next best link to the City in years to come. It was also being seen by medical students attached to the London Hospital as an interesting historic place to lodge and this, in turn, was bringing other students attached to various colleges to lodge in the surrounding hamlets.

For others, with ready cash and an eye for a bargain, the area was now reputed to be the place for developers to snap up cheap run-down properties that would soar in price in years to come. With its wealth of history, museums, the Whitechapel art gallery and the vibrant markets, tourists from abroad were also coming into the area, if only to see where the likes of the Kray twins had lived. Similar in a way to 1888, when people from all walks of life poured in after Jack the Ripper hit the headlines.

The pubs down by the river in and around Wapping had long since been the haunt of the young middle and upper class students swigging beer and belting out naughty ballads. But the old East Enders were still thick on the ground and this was why Anna loved living so close to where she was born, in Stepney Green. But now, with this particular impromptu visit from her sisters, she felt that her little world was about to be blown apart.

Bringing herself back to the here and now she spoke quietly, saying, 'I have a feeling that we all know that Frank's not interested in us having any more children . . . don't we?'

'You tell us,' said Hazel, giving nothing away as she topped us Anna's glass of wine.

'You do sound a bit heavy, sweetheart,' said Linda, knowing full well what was wrong. 'What's the matter, babe?'

Anna shrugged as she splayed both hands. 'I'm just being a misery. Take no notice, I won't slit my wrists.'

'Now stop that. That's not what I meant. We just don't think

you're all that happy, that's all. And maybe it's time for you to start going out again? In the evenings? With us, or get in contact with some of your old friends.'

'No thanks. I'm all right as I am. Yes, I will admit that I do sometimes feel a bit low, but it's nothing to get depressed over. I've got my lovely neighbour next door to talk to whenever I want. Rachel's smiling lined face has brought me out of the gloom more than once. Then there's Jackie the Avon girl coming and going with her catalogue . . .'

Her sisters hid their feelings well. Of course they were gutted by Anna's pathetic attempt to make light of what was clearly appearing to be a lonely world that she moved around in. Neither of the girls felt comfortable in the silence that now hung in the air after Anna's back-handed confession. Glancing at each other, they couldn't be sure what was coming next or whether or not Anna knew that her husband was having an affair with his assistant manager, Bridget, the girl with the soulless dark brown eyes who dressed to kill. Taking the bull by the horns, Hazel spoke in a quiet voice, saying, 'We weren't sure what to do about the way things were going, babe. Or whether we were reading things wrongly.'

'With Bridget and Frank, you mean?'

'Well, that's not what I was gonna say—'

'Yes you were. So something is going on then?'

'A bit more than flirting, that's all . . . but it might be the time to nip it in the bud. We don't think it's too serious babe, and we don't think that it's anything for you to worry *too* much over.'

'It's all right, Hazel.' Anna offered a knowing smile. 'You needn't look so worried. Nor you, Linda. I've known for a while what that pair were up to. Well, not *known* exactly, just suspicious – which is worse in a way. But I didn't think that you'd cottoned on to anything going on between them. I would have thought that you would have swung her around by that long curly ginger hair of hers if you had spotted her brushing up close to Frank. Or are you gonna tell me that it's all my husband's doing and that Bridget's just a simple innocent creature that's been lured in by his come-and-get-me eyes?'

'Like hell we are,' said Linda, taking a cigarette from her slim gold case. 'She's lucky I've not scratched her face beyond

recognition. And trust me I would have liked to have done. But that's not the way to go about things is it? We don't want her crying on Frank's shoulder, do we?'

Anna suddenly felt sick. This was all sounding too serious for words, as if a proper affair was going on and not just a bit of flirting. 'So what is it you're trying to tell me?'

Hazel looked from Anna to Linda with no words needed. They had come here tonight to warn their younger sister to watch her step where Bridget, the sometimes coy and sometimes brazen flirt was concerned. 'We're not trying to tell you anything, Anna. We just wanted to make sure that you knew what she's like around men. And Frank in particular.'

'Well, now that you do know that I know, we can drink a toast to it, can't we. I'm glad that you know but at the end of the day it's my problem not yours.' Fighting to control the tears welling behind her eyes, she said, with forced gaiety, 'So . . . let's keep the wine flowing and eat, shall we? And while we do, you can fill me in as to what you've picked up in Prima. Is it for instance a bit of flirting and no more than that? Do they have a secret kiss and hug now and then?'

Hazel reached across the table. She squeezed Anna's trembling hand and smiled weakly at her. 'There's nothing we can tell you that is *fact*, babe. But come on, you're obviously ill at ease with this conversation. It's us you're talking to. Your big sisters. You don't have to cover your feelings.'

'Fair enough. Well go on then. Lay it on the line. But don't tell me half of it because that would be worse than you not saying anything.'

Hazel drew breath and leaned back in her chair. She knew that there was no going back now and she hadn't thought for one minute that they would have got this far this quickly. It was actually going better than she had thought it would. So, with both girls' attention on her she quietly laid the cards on the table. She admitted that she and Linda had seen what had gone on and was still going on between Frank and Bridget. She told of the private little innuendos between them and the knowing looks they gave each other which gave them away. They spoke of the little asides that they shared in between serving the customers and the irritating little-girl laughter from the silly cow when the

pair of them were behind the bar enjoying a drink or two together. And before they had even got round to dropping the bombshell that they slipped upstairs to the flat now and then, Anna gestured to indicate that she had heard enough.

Unable to take any more, she pursed her lips and covered her face with her hands, still trying her best not to break into tears. Then, taking a deep breath, she managed to say, 'I think I realised, if I'm honest with myself, that by keeping his distance Frank's been hiding his guilt for a long time.' She looked from one sister to the other before breaking into a feeble smile as the tears escaped.

'Even though the bastard's got the looks of a handsome movie star,' she said, as she dabbed her face dry with a tissue, 'he can't act to save his life. Guilt's written all over him.'

'I don't know about a movie star, babe,' murmured Linda, gutted to see her sister this broken. 'But I agree with you about the guilt. He blushes deep red every now and then whenever me and Hazel and the boys are in the restaurant. Especially lately.'

'And what about Bridget? Does she blush or just flash her silk knickers?'

'She flashes those all of the time at all the men, sweetheart.' Linda smiled. 'It's that Trevor Plumb, her husband, that I feel sorry for. It's painful to watch sometimes. There he sits in a corner of the restaurant when he's come in to give her a lift home, trying his best not to let on that he sees what she's up to. She only flirts with the attractive customers and hardly gives the plain and ugly ones a glance. I can't imagine what must go through Trevor's mind at times. Poor sod.'

'I couldn't agree more,' said Hazel. 'He seems a really nice guy. And he's got an honest face. I've seen him in there quite a few times when he's turned up to give that cow a lift home in his second-hand Anglia. He's a tall and handsome feller but obviously can't satisfy her lust for excitement. I love that sandy hair and those freckles. He's better looking than your Frank – in a way.'

Anna didn't need them to tell her who Bridget was married to because she already knew. She also knew that Trevor was a lovely guy, a swimming instructor who taught children locally in and around the East End as well as the disabled in the Stratford

East swimming baths. She had found this out during conversations with him when he had dropped into the restaurant when she had been there.

'We don't have much to say to Bridget when we're in Prima,' said Hazel, offhandedly. 'She's makes herself busy coming and going from the kitchen to the tables and the bar when we're in. She's good at what she does when she is in working mode – I'll give her that.'

'I agree,' said Linda. 'But then she would keep busy and out of the way just to keep up appearances. Prima is our sister's restaurant as well as Frank's let's not forget.'

'Exactly,' said Anna. 'She knows when to act as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. But all of this apart I'm still jealous of the way Frank pays her more attention than he does me. And I'm frightened that she's stealing him away.' Covering her face and trying not to break down she shook her head. 'I don't want to lose him. I've never loved anyone else. And I never in a million years thought that he would be taken from me by someone else. Especially not her.'

'Us neither,' said Hazel. 'You were the ideal couple. But don't give up on yourself, babe. After all, what's to say you wouldn't meet someone else and fall in love? You'd have to prise yourself out of this house though and start to socialise a bit. Have some fun perhaps? You never go out in the evenings and you're on duty with the twins practically twenty-four hours a day. Mum would baby-sit, you know she would. You're only twenty-six for Christ's sake.'

'It never occurs to me to go out. I'm a married woman with two babies. I didn't even consider it to be an option.'

'Well, maybe it's time you did start getting back to your old self. Once upon a time there was no keeping you down. Remember that cold day in February in Hyde Park three or so years ago when thousands of postal workers came out on strike in favour of a pay claim for telegraphists? There you were giving support even though you were a telephonist and not a telegraphist. Nothing or nobody could have stopped you from shouting the odds against unfairness once your back was up.'

'*Nearly* twenty-six,' said Anna.

'All right, nearly. And you being *nearly* twenty-six is why

we're here. We want to arrange a night out doing a pub crawl or going up West to a nightclub. Us three and our wayward girls as Mum calls them, and your old friends. We want you to pick up the phone and ring round.'

Anna raised an eyebrow. 'Your wayward girls are prostitutes. What would any of my old friends make of that? In any case that's exactly what I did earlier on. I phoned Beryl. You remember her?'

'Of course we do. She was your best mate when you were at school wasn't she?'

'Yes. And for a little while afterwards.'

'That's right. So what about her?'

'She's dead. Her mum answered the phone. She's there looking after the little ones.'

'Good God,' murmured Hazel. 'I can't believe that.'

'Me neither, babe,' said Linda. 'What happened? Was there an accident?'

'No. She had cancer.'

'Jesus wept.' Linda slowly shook her head. 'Cancer at her age?'

'Yep.'

'Phew . . . that must 'ave knocked you for six, sweetheart, cos it's kicked me in the guts and she wasn't my best friend.'

'I know. Anyway . . .' Anna shrugged and sighed. 'A night out would be great but I don't know about including my old mates.'

'Because of our girls?' said Hazel. 'You don't have to say what they do for a living, babe. And anyway, each and every one is an attractive up-market hostess who sometimes entertains their clients in the classy rooms at the top of our house. They're not common prostitutes. And you know they're a lot of fun to be with.'

'Give me time to think about it. My birthday's not for weeks. Anything could happen in the meantime. I might have kicked Frank out by then or sent Bridget packing so that me and my *husband* can pick up where we left off before *she* came along.'

'Fair enough,' said Linda. 'You've got three weeks to think about where you'd like to go on your birthday.'

'Never mind my birthday. I want my life back. And I want Bridget out of my marriage. I *am* jealous of her – I am. I'm

jealous and I hate the feeling. It eats and eats away at you. It takes you over. Wakes you in the night and stops you from thinking about much else during the day.'

'But you've got nothing to be envious of, sweetheart,' murmured Hazel. She was upset to hear her baby sister talking like this. 'You're much better looking than she is. And no one's taken in by that phoney innocent expression of hers. She's a calculating little cow who's not only interested in getting your husband into bed but most likely had her sights set on owning your half share of the restaurant.'

'She's welcome to it.'

'No she's not. And don't you say that again or it might just happen. You fight for every single penny that's rightfully yours . . . if it should come to that. I've seen women who've been so fucked up by this kind of thing that they've taken a packed suitcase to walk away and end up with nothing. Why do you think that some girls turn to prostitution? Because they decided when they were innocent little children that this is what they wanted to be when they grew up? A good majority of young women have been left high and dry by their husbands who've gone off with someone else.'

'Don't exaggerate,' said Anna.

'Exaggerate? No sweetheart. It's real. Respect and faded love goes right down the drain when it's balanced against money. So don't even think of talking like that again or it just might end up happening to you as well. You've got our twins to think of if not yourself.'

Anna went quiet and leaned back in her chair, looking from one to the other of her sisters. When she eventually spoke it was in a more sensible and calm tone. 'All right. You've made your point and it's a good one. Enough said. I know what the pair of you are trying to do. And I *will* pick myself up. I *will* get the old Anna spirit back. And if necessary I'll fight for Frank with both fists and my feet because I want my husband back. I want us to be the way we were.'

Downing her wine in one, Anna reached for the bottle to top it up again. 'I suppose I've been partly to blame for the flirting that's been going on. Frank's been lying through his back teeth as to why he's late home every night and deep down I think I

knew why but I didn't want to believe it, never mind face up to it. I was too scared to ask what was going on between him and her if you want the truth. Too scared to ask because I was dreading the answer. Because, after all, what could I have done if he openly admitted it? If he said that he wanted to be with her and not me? I can't nail 'is feet to the floor can I?'

A silence filled the room until Hazel quietly said, 'I know what you mean, babe. This is more or less what we were worried about. We've seen the chemistry that's developed between the pair of them. And thinking about it, ginger-nut might well have *wanted* us to see it.'

'You could be right there, Hazel.' Linda leaned both elbows on the table and cupped her face as she looked into Anna's. 'She might well have been hoping for this. Hoping to push Frank into telling you. Which, after all's said and done, was not all that bright was it? But never mind, at least we're ahead of the game now. All three of us. She won't have a leg to stand on if she carries on the way she's going. A broken knee cap can be very painful.'

'Oh stop it,' said Anna, 'stop talking like that. I don't like it. But I have taken on board all that you've said. Now I just need to sit and think about things quietly. I can look at it in a different light now that we've talked. I don't feel as if I'm on my own now. I'll do what I think is best for me and the twins.'

Hazel gave Linda a look to let her know that enough had been said and they had achieved what they had set out to do. She then helped herself to a prawn cracker and shrugged. 'It's the same old story every time. And who is it that gets the blame? The wives at home, getting on with all the drudgery and all the while they haven't got a clue what their old man's getting up to.'

'Tell me about it,' said Anna. 'Tell me about it.