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Chapter One

February, a raw Saturday afternoon – not a day to choose to go up to the West End, more one for huddling by a nice, warm fire, with her nose in the romance she was currently reading, *Drifting Petals*.

Today, though, Geraldine Glover had a purpose in mind. Time was running out, cold weather or no. In four weeks her older sister, Mavis, was getting married to Tom Calder. Three months had passed since the Armistice. Young men were still coming home, couples were making up for lost time and all a man wanted after maybe four years of hell in the trenches was to get married to the girl who had waited for him. Mavis and Tom wanted the same thing: to get married, settle down and forget the war.

It wasn't as easy as it sounded. Men coming home in droves to no jobs, and with little money to find the rent for somewhere to live, usually ended up living in one room in a parent's house. This was what Tom and Mavis were going to have to do. With no room at home with Mum and Dad, who had two sons and three daughters

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crammed in a shabby East End terraced two-up two-down in Burgoyne Road off Grove Road, they'd go to his parents' house.

It would be a frugal wedding with no frills or flounces. With food shortages the wedding breakfast would be made up of whatever the family could bring. At least Dad had work at the docks and there was the promise of a job there for Tom if Dad could pull strings, so Mavis would have her trousseau.

Even so, Geraldine envied her sister, wishing it was she who was getting married and leaving her cramped home where three girls had to share one bed, while her brothers, one older, one younger, shared a single bed in the back room where the family ate. It meant they couldn't go to bed until everyone else did or went off into the front room, normally kept for best.

Some families around here had even more kids and heaven knows how they coped. But all Geraldine ever dreamed of was one day having her own room to do what she liked in, as Mavis would four weeks from now. But as yet she didn't even have a regular boyfriend, let alone one to marry. There were plenty who fancied her and whom she'd been out with, but none she'd want to marry. The only one – Alan Presley from Medway Road – was married although going through a divorce and had no interest in other girls these days – a case of once bitten twice shy.

When she was fifteen and he was seventeen they'd gone around together in a group and he'd been sweet on her, but they'd lost touch when he went into the Army in 1917. Writing letters was a chore and later she heard that he'd found a girl from the next street to hers while

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home on leave. The girl had got pregnant and on his next leave they had to marry, but a year later he'd come home from France to find her in bed with another bloke and that was it. Even so, you can't start making eyes at someone still married, if separated and waiting for a divorce. Wouldn't be appropriate. But he was a handsome-looking bloke and her heart still went pitter-pat for him.

Standing in the bus queue outside Mile End Station, Geraldine eyed the clock outside a watchmaker's opposite: ten to two. If a Number 25 didn't arrive soon she'd end up frozen stiff. Huddling deeper into her thick jacket with the wind pressing her heavy hobble skirt against her ankles, she sighed.

The queue was growing steadily as there had been no bus for nearly fifteen minutes. The first one along would no doubt be full by now, not even standing room, and would probably sail right by, though it might be followed by another after all this delay – buses seemed to love keeping each other company.

Geraldine turned her mind to signs of life from the London & General Omnibus Company. She was partially correct about buses keeping each other company as finally two 25s appeared, the first doing exactly as she'd expected, the driver looking smug as it trundled straight by.

Crinkling her pretty face into a wry grin as she took her turn boarding the second bus, she managed to find a seat on top where at least she could have a smoke. Lots of girls doing men's jobs during the war had learned to smoke and it had become accepted. She didn't smoke all that much herself, but the odd puff helped a girl of

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eighteen get through a humdrum week as a machinist on piecework in a clothing factory where utility dresses, blouses and skirts offered very little variety of design. Anyway, she was tired having worked like mad all Saturday morning and a cigarette helped to perk her up.

Today, however, she felt perky enough, eagerly looking forward to what she had in mind to do once she'd alighted on Oxford Street. She'd done it many times before but today was special for she needed to look good at her sister's wedding, and for someone on a meagre wage there was only one way to do it.

She found little in Oxford Street to tempt her even though London's West End had all the newest fashions. Moving on to Regent Street, there was nothing there either that really caught her eye. Disappointment growing, she found herself wandering down New Bond Street. If there was nothing here she'd be properly stuck. There was such a scarcity of fabrics even though the war was over, and unless you could afford to pay something like ten or twelve guineas, which for her represented nine to ten weeks' earnings, a really stunning dress was out of the question. But what she was looking for had to be extra special to make her stand out at this wedding, though she always aimed to stand out anywhere.

True, for most of the time she and her fifteen-year-old sister Evelyn would be wearing bridesmaid's dresses – skimpy things in cheap rose-pink cotton that would make them look like a pair of candlesticks following the bride up the aisle. Tom's six-year-old cousin Lily, in pale blue, to Geraldine's mind would just about put the kybosh on the whole ensemble. Though it was all Mavis could do on so little money, she'd never had any dress sense.

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How they could have ever been sisters was beyond Geraldine.

‘Let me make the dresses,’ she’d implored. ‘I’m a good dressmaker, as good as anyone.’

But Mavis had been adamant. ‘I want ter buy them ready-made. That way I can be certain of ’em.’

‘I could make them all at half the price.’

‘I want proper ones.’

‘And I don’t know how to make proper dresses, I suppose!’ she had stormed at Mavis, getting angry. ‘Look at what I make for meself – everyone thinks they’ve been bought. And I save loads of money.’

‘I don’t care!’ Mavis had stormed back. ‘It’s my day. And I decide what I want and ’ow I want it.’

‘And end up makin’ a pauper of yerself!’

‘No I won’t! Cos I’ve bin puttin’ by fer ages for a decent weddin’ dress.’

Mavis and Tom had been saving for this for two years but still hadn’t much to show for it, with Tom away in the Army while she had got herself a job in a munitions factory, though now she worked in a local bread shop.

‘All I want is a decent wedding,’ she’d gone on. ‘And I’m buyin’ me own dresses.’

‘Sewn tergether with cheap cotton what breaks as soon as you stretch a seam by accident, you wait and see. And, I’m sorry, Mave, but I think that rose pink you want us to wear is an ’ideous colour.’

Mavis had yelled at her again that she liked pink and it was her day and she’d do what she liked, walking off close to tears, leaving Geraldine to give up on her. Mavis was getting more uppity and highly strung the nearer her big day came and was best left alone. She would put up

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with the horrible colour as best she could and anyway, it would only be for a couple of hours.

Thinking of it, Geraldine wandered on down New Bond Street, gazing in the shop windows she passed. Moments later all other thoughts were swept from her mind at the sight of the most beautiful dress she had ever seen.

Mesmerised, she stared at it through the window. Draped tastefully on a graceful papier-mâché manikin was an ankle-length afternoon gown in pale-blue silk with separate dark-blue velvet panels. It had a square neckline and was cut in the latest barrel line, loose panels of velvet falling from the waist back and front with a square, tabard-like silk overbodice from shoulders to hips.

Real silk! It could be seen at a glance. She could never afford *real silk*. But artificial silk like Courtauld's Luvisca and a cheaper velvet would look every bit as good.

It took some courage to push open the boutique door. Usually she'd aim her sights lower. Big London stores held no fears for her, nor did most high-class shops. But this place – the opulence of it, the perfume wafting out of it crying, 'Nothing under fifteen guineas!' She was stepping on hallowed ground.

Clenching her teeth and trying to look as though fifteen guineas was nothing to her, although her beret decried all that, she approached another manikin draped in an identical dress to that in the window. So at least the outfit wasn't exclusive. Even so, she needed time to browse, to study the garment and make mental notes of every stitch, the cut, to see how the material fell. Real silk always fell beautifully. Would cheaper artificial silk do the same?

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‘May I be of assistance, madam?’ The measured, almost sarcastic, cultured tone right behind her nearly made her leap out of her skin, as though she was already being accused of stealing.

Gathering her wits, she turned to the voice, immediately aware of the haughty, intimidating frigidness on the face of a woman neatly clad in a black dress with white collar and cuffs, her hair pulled back from her brow and not a trace of powder on her face. There was no warmth in her enquiry such as she might have used to a valued customer. The way it was couched practically screamed her opinion of a common working girl trespassing on her domain, riff-raff needing to be got out as quickly as possible and without fuss.

Steeling herself, Geraldine stood her ground, putting on her best high-class accent, which she could do when needed. ‘I am browsing at the moment.’

She knew immediately that the sort of patron who entered here did not *browse* but would make straight towards an assistant to state what they had in mind and request to be conducted and advised.

The woman’s face was vinegary. ‘I should not imagine we have here anything that would suit madam.’ In reality she was saying that would suit her pocket. ‘Perhaps if madam tried one of the large stores.’

Geraldine ignored the broad hint. ‘No, thank you,’ she replied in her best West End voice, though even she was aware that to an ear accustomed to such there was no disguising a trace of flattened East End vowels.

‘This caught my eye,’ she went on, ‘and I felt I needed to decide as to whether it would suit me or not.’ She was overdoing the accent a bit.

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The woman, thin, middle-aged and no doubt a spinster, was shorter than her, which gave Geraldine some feeling of advantage.

‘I will let you know what I decide,’ she dismissed her as haughtily as she could.

But still the woman hovered, saying nothing, her mien one that announced she would be keeping her eye on this intruder. It was humiliating but there was nothing Geraldine could do except turn back to the garment on the pretence of being deeply interested in buying it. All the time she could feel those eyes boring into the back of her neck lest she made off with something without paying for it. Suspicious old crow, trying to make her feel she was the lowest of the low.

There was no ticket on the gown – a place like this would never stoop to such practice. The type of customers who frequented here probably took it for granted that they’d be able to afford it whatever the price. Rude even to ask and she for one wasn’t going to lower herself to ask either.

How exactly did they handle themselves, these people who frequented places like this? She could still feel those eyes burning into the back of her neck.

But there, it was done – every stitch, every fold and tuck, every line committed to memory. Turning back to the hovering assistant, she smiled.

‘Thank you for your assistance, but I don’t think this will suit me after all.’

How delightful, seeing the look on that prim face at being robbed of its triumph of catching her out for a tea leaf or turning her out as a common time-waster.

Even so, it was a relief to be away from those peering eyes. What she had selected was etched in her brain as

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clearly as though she still circled it – now to find the material as near a match to those lovely blues as possible.

A week perhaps to make it, meticulously copying the design now fixed in her mind, and then on the evening of the wedding, once out of that awful bridesmaid's gown, she'd have all eyes on her. And on her the next day too, compliments from all the family at Mum's – aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents – as they gathered around the big table in the front room for Sunday dinner to round off the celebration, the newly-weds having gone off on honeymoon to Eastbourne.

In her fifteen-guinea outfit – it had to be at least that, though hers would cost not much more than fourteen shillings at the most, still a whole two weeks' pay – she'd be the talk of the family. She could hardly wait to seek out just the right stuff that would make her look like a lady of means.

It was in triumph, if very wearily, that she made her way back home, the parcel she clutched containing material from Selfridges in nearly identical colours to those she'd seen in New Bond Street, together with poppers and buttons that nearly matched, a spool of light-blue cotton and one of dark blue.

She'd need a nice row of beads to set it off, stones of rich sapphire blue – not the real gems of course. And she knew just where she could get something exactly like that, made and strung especially for her at nothing like what the real gems would cost.

Perhaps she would put in her order right now. Oddly, the thought of doing that, of going into the shop and speaking to its proprietor, made her heart step up a beat, and not just because of a mere necklace.

Chapter Two

It was well dark by the time she reached home, walking through the streets from the bus stop. Ten to five. The jewellers near the corner of Grove Road and Burgoyne Road where she lived was already closed. She'd have to wait until Monday, calling in on her way home from work, which was a nuisance.

Geraldine itched to secure just the right sort of necklace for the gown she would make. On the other hand she ought not be too impatient – better to finish it properly before looking for jewellery. She'd know by then what she really wanted and it would only take three or four days to do. Best to wait until then. But it would have been nice to pop in there now, if only to tell the proprietor what she was looking for.

She'd been in there a couple of times for cheap Christmas presents for her mother and sisters. The goods being cheap were an attraction and she'd found him very polite and helpful; being young and nice-looking was an even greater attraction to someone her age. The name above the shop said Hanfords and she assumed he was

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the Hanford who ran it but she didn't know his first name and she longed so much to know, especially as just lately she'd been seeing him in her dreams.

He'd only set up in the shop a couple of weeks before Christmas. Before that the place had been a store for clothing until the small factory renting it had closed a year ago. Its windows gradually became begrimed from neglect and it had stood there all forlorn among other busy shops.

Then last December there had been signs of work being done on it. Some evenings as she cycled home from work, she'd seen the young man supervising the refurbishment, her mind already rushing ahead of her.

As soon as the shop had opened she had gone in on the pretext of looking for Christmas presents, but while busily inspecting affordable trinkets laid out on the counter and in glass cabinets, her eyes had been on him. He'd seemed more interested in selling than returning her gaze, which was a pity, but after her third foray – she making sure to buy only one present at a time – he appeared to recognise her and she was sure there had been appraisal in those dark-grey eyes. She hoped so. It hadn't progressed any further so probably she was wrong. Since Christmas, though, she'd not had cause to go in there. She was not so well off that she could go buying things willy-nilly, even to get a glimpse of the proprietor who'd had the ability of making her heart do a little flip when he'd looked at her.

She noticed that he always closed his shop a little earlier than most on Saturdays. Perhaps he could afford to. He did seem to take more satisfaction from making jewellery than selling it. Even coming up to Christmas,

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a busy time, he'd never been in the shop when she'd gone there, the tinkle of the doorbell bringing him hurrying from the back, dragging off a heat-soiled blue apron as he came. And he sold only jewellery made by himself. That wasn't any way to make a living unless he was well off. Perhaps he'd find out soon enough and close up and go away and she would never see him again. Geraldine's heart sank at the thought.

Not all that many people appeared to go into his shop despite what he sold being cheap. Not cheap and nasty – cheap and nice, attractive, different. The stones were only semi-precious – garnets, tiger eye, moonstones, that sort of thing – and the metal was silver rather than gold, but his workmanship was wonderful, delicate and unusual, attractive to those with little money to spend on expensive stuff. It was still early days of course. Surely in time he would make a real living and stay on. Life would be bleak if he were to pack up and go.

She spent as much time as she could gazing through the tiny window at rings, pendants and brooches, always hoping for a glimpse of him. Not earning enough to keep forking out on jewellery, she couldn't keep on going in on the pretext of buying, but next week she'd have a legitimate excuse to be there, wouldn't she?

The Glover family always used the back door of the house. The passage from the front door was an assault course, with bicycles, tools, household bits and pieces not immediately needed, and what her younger brother Fred called *his stuff* – old toys mostly, toys he'd grown out of as he was now thirteen and due to leave school soon, but was still loath to part with. So with no access

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by the front door everyone went round to the back to get in.

Every house in Bow, like everywhere in the East End, was identical to the next – row upon row of two-up two-downs in an unbroken terrace, back to back but for a small backyard; every street was the same, in a grid pattern without a tree or one touch of greenery, not even a bend in any of them to break the monotony.

The streets were playgrounds for the kids – cobbles, broken kerbs, bucked pavements, scuffed doorways and the peeling paintwork of windows bravely cleaned of East London's incessant smoke and grime were witness to every game a child could devise.

Of course there was always Victoria Park, that huge expanse of open space that was the nearest East London dwellers got to accessible countryside. But that was quite a traipse up Grove Road. It was easier playing in the street where a kid could be home in a second if hurt or upset, or wanting a wee or a skipping rope, or whatever. Victoria Park was for Sundays. Take sandwiches, a bottle of drink and spend a whole afternoon there feeling as though it was miles away from London.

Geraldine's house being an end terrace on the corner of Burgoyne Road and Conyer Street had an opening dividing it from the backyard of the end house in the adjoining street. But to come in by the back way had its unsavoury moments. As she came in, Geraldine wrinkled her nose in distaste at the smell of pee that wasn't coming from the outside lavatory. Each house had its outside lav. Mum kept hers scrupulously clean; some didn't. Brick-built, it was stuck on the back of the house, had a concrete floor and a wooden door, was dark, cold,

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uninviting and noisy when the chain was pulled, enough for all to know every time someone went, so that their next-door neighbours were starkly aware of Dad's weak bladder.

'Mum, it stinks out there!'

In the kitchen Mum was unwrapping newspaper containing fish and chips bought on the way home from the flicks. She, Dad and Fred went off regularly on Saturday afternoons no matter what films were being shown. Mum, not being much of a reader, had young Fred read the words out loud to her while the pianist gave it his all as drama or comedy unfolded.

Young Fred was hovering with his mouth watering but the walk from the fish shop on a cold evening had taken the heat out of the food and it needed to be rewarmed for a few minutes while Dad was upstairs taking off his suit and getting into something more comfortable.

'Mum, has Dad been peeing outside the door again?'

Her mother looked up from inserting plates into the warm gas oven, her face registering defence of her husband. 'Yer dad was busting and Fred was in the lav, taking 'is time as usual.'

'It weren't me,' protested Fred. 'It was 'im in there and me what was bustin'. I 'ad ter go.'

'Then you're a dirty little sod!' his mother rounded on him.

Young Fred looked belligerent. 'If 'e can do it, why can't I?'

'Because yer dad's got a weak bladder. He can't always wait, that's why.'

'But 'e does it in the night too, an' no one's in there.'

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Ignoring the fact that as a mum she ought not let herself be drawn into argument with a thirteen-year-old, she said, 'I don't like yer dad usin' a po and it stinking the bedroom out all night. I'd sooner 'e goes downstairs. But sometimes 'e can't hold it and 'as ter go as soon as 'e gets out the back door.'

'It's only a couple of blooming yards away,' retorted Fred. 'It ain't the other end of London! It ain't the other end of Timbuctoo, is it?' he added, pleased with himself at the extent of his geographic knowledge.

Now she was cross. 'You mind your lip!' she shot at him. 'And wipe that grin off your face or I'll wipe it off for yer.'

'Don't matter who did it,' cut in Geraldine, 'it still stinks out there.'

Mum ignored her, her glare riveted on her son. 'What your dad does ain't nothink ter do with you, yer cheeky little bugger. He's excused if he can't make it to the lav in time with 'is waterworks. He's got an affliction – you ain't. An' I won't 'ave you piddling anywhere yer fancy. I don't care if you are leavin' school soon, I won't 'ave that sort of behaviour in me own house.'

Another slow grin spread across young Fred's face despite her earlier warning. 'I didn't do it in the 'ouse,' he sniggered, the snigger sharply cut off by an aggrieved yelp as a clout caught him across the back of his head.

'Get up them stairs,' his mother exploded, and as he made his escape she yelled after him, 'Gettin' backchat from you – a bloody kid! And don't come down again till I say. I might even sling your fish and chips away.'

'Aw, Mum?' came the protest from the top of he stairs. 'I'm starvin'.'

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‘Then serves yer right fer being so cheeky,’ she called up then, turning to Geraldine, now taking off her jacket in the warmth of the kitchen, added angrily, ‘He’s a little sod, that Fred. I won’t ’ave him takin’ after ’is dad. Yer dad’s got trouble.’ There was apology in her tone now. ‘I’d sooner ’e do it out there than the chain going a dozen times a night and the neighbours ’earing it. He can’t ’elp leaking, there’s somethink wrong with ’im. He should see the doctor but that costs and we can’t afford ter fork out just to ’ear he’s got a weak bladder. Poor bugger, it’s rotten fer ’im at work. Them dockers can be cruel and if they noticed it they’d be the first to take the piss out of him.’

Geraldine ignored the unwitting pun and went to hang her jacket in the passage, negotiating the four bicycles leaning one against the other to do so.

They all used bicycles – she to get to the clothing factory, Fred to get around with his mates, and a battered, second-hand old thing it was too, Dad to go to work at the docks, and Wally her older brother also to the docks, Dad being fortunate enough to have got him a job there after coming home from the war.

Reaching over them to get to the coat hooks on the wall, she heard Mum call to her, ‘While you’re there, Gel, call your dad down for ’is tea.’

She hated being called Gel. Her workmates called her Gerry, which wasn’t too bad. But Gel! It was East End practice to shorten a long name. You couldn’t do much with Fred, but Mavis was Mave and young Evelyn was Evie. Dad called Mum, Hild. But why give someone a decent name if it was going to be shortened to something horrible or ridiculous? Saying Hilda in full wouldn’t take

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all that much more energy, but no, it was Hild. She called him Jack, because not even God Himself could shorten that name any more.

Dutifully she yelled up the stairs to Dad. ‘Mum says your fish ’n chips is ready.’ His okay floated down from behind the bedroom door.

Fred adding his plaintive voice to it called, ‘Can I come down too?’

‘I don’t know. Better asked Mum.’

‘M . . . u . . . m!’

‘You stay where you are, you little bugger,’ came the responding yell. ‘I don’t want no dirty little devil sittin’ at my table.’

Mum, skilfully carrying cutlery, salt, vinegar, a jar of pickled onions and several large, white, somewhat chipped plates passed her on the way from the tiny kitchen where you couldn’t swing a cat, let alone feed a family, to the back room. The flap-leaf of the table had been raised to accommodate them all, a cloth spread over it, a loaf waiting to be cut into slices and spread with dollops of margarine.

The back room was where the family ate, despite Fred and Wally’s bed in one corner. With just two bedrooms it was the only place for them, the main one being Mum and Dad’s, with the girls in the other one, it being unthinkable for them to sleep downstairs and their brothers accidentally seeing them in their nightdresses or worse, in their underclothes. Boys were different – sharing a bed downstairs, it didn’t matter them being seen in their vests.

Even upstairs all three sisters shared one bed, it practically taking up the whole room with just enough space

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for the wardrobe, chest of drawers and a board they called a dressing table that housed a sewing machine belonging to Geraldine, but shared by all three. How families with even more children managed was a mystery to Geraldine, though friends had at times mentioned four or more to a bed. After evening meals, if not going out, everyone would end up in the front room, most of which were spent around the gramophone, allowing the boys to go to bed when they were ready.

‘Mum, let Fred come down,’ pleaded Geraldine, following her mother into the back room.

‘It’ll do ’im good ter stew up there for a bit,’ said Mum, laying out plates. ‘Teach ’im a lesson.’ By this, she knew Mum would relent before the meal was finished.

Mum turned to her as Dad came creaking downstairs. Every stair creaked, as did the beds, chairs and cupboard doors. There were no secrets in this house.

‘I didn’t get you any fish ’n chips, Gel. Didn’t know when you’d be ’ome. I could take a bit off each of ours if you like.’

‘No, I’m fine, Mum. We ’ad a big dinner, remember. I’d much sooner ’ave a sandwich. Fish and chips make you fat.’

Her mother smiled, glancing at her daughter’s slim figure, still in the best dress she’d put on for going up West, one she’d made herself in slate grey some while back. Geraldine had more dresses than most, being skilled on the sewing machine, artistic. She was proud of her.

‘I got some in for Evie. She’s at ’er friend’s ’ouse down the street – should be ’ome any minute now. You could ’ave a bit of ’ers.’

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‘No thanks, Mum.’

‘Well if yer don’t want any there’s some cheese in the larder. Yer could ’ave that. I weren’t sure when you’d be ’ome, that’s why I didn’t get yer any.’

She eyed the parcel Geraldine had put down on a chair on coming in. ‘Is that what yer went up the West End for? Spending yer ’ard-earned money on more stuff ter make. What yer goin’ ter make now, as if you ain’t got enough?’

This at least was a secret. No secret that she’d gone off up the West End – it was a rule of Mum’s that her family always said where they were going in case they were needed urgently at home or had an accident out. Though how they’d have contacted each other if there had been any trouble had never been explained. The police coming round, she supposed, or some messenger from a hospital.

But the dress was a secret, at least until she had it all finished or the moment she started treading away on the machine, the noise rumbling all over the house and Mum coming up to see what it was she was doing. She’d want to know all the ins and outs of what she was making, and in the end when it finally came out, she would inevitably say, ‘Yer’ll be wearing a bridesmaid dress, so why make somethink else? Yer’ll upset Mavis thinking yer don’t like what she got yer.’ Though Mavis knew that already. She’d told her so, that she hated rose pink.

‘Did yer go with a friend then?’ Mum was asking.

Geraldine shrugged. ‘No, on me own.’

Her mother moved past her to get the food from the oven as Dad went into the back room to seat himself at the table. ‘’Bout time you got yerself a boyfriend,’ she said.

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‘I’ve got boyfriends.’

‘I mean a real boyfriend, someone steady. You’ll find yourself left on the shelf if you ain’t careful.’

‘Mum, I’m only eighteen. I’ve got time.’

Not bothering to reply to that, Mum hurried off into the back room, each hand now carrying a loaded plate, a tea towel protecting her skin from the oven’s heat. ‘Fred!’ she called out as she went. ‘Yours is on the table.’

As Fred came thumping down the stairs, all forgiven, the back door burst open to admit Evie. ‘Blimey!’ exploded the twelve-year-old. ‘It don’t ’alf stink out there!’

Her mother gave her a warning look as she returned to the kitchen to get two more plates from the oven. ‘That’s your sweet brother!’ she said, her tone sharp. ‘’Cos he’s leaving school this summer, he’s feeling ’is feet and thinks he can get away with murder. I wish you lot wouldn’t keep blaming yer dad for everything.’

‘I never even mentioned Dad,’ protested Evie hotly, dropping her coat on a kitchen chair and following her mother into the back room.

Left alone in the kitchen, Geraldine heard her mother call out one more request. ‘You sure yer don’t want some of ours divided up for yer?’

‘No, Mum,’ she called back. ‘I’m getting meself a sandwich. I’m going out again in a little while.’

In fact she was seeing Eileen Moss, who she worked with. They were going to see the films her parents had seen this afternoon. They’d sit eating peanuts as fast as they could shell them and stare at the silent drama of Gloria Swanson’s *Male and Female* and laugh at Charlie

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Chaplin's slapstick comedy, *Sunnyside*, both of which Mum had said were very good.

Though it was nice going to the pictures, she'd have rather stayed at home this evening to start on her dress, itching to see how it would turn out, but she'd promised to go with Eileen, and anyway, there were too many at home tonight no doubt wanting to know what she was doing, what she was making, and what for.

Sunday was quieter. Dad was down the Working Men's Club with his mates this morning and Fred was off somewhere – God knows where – with mates his own age. Wally, mad keen on football, his team Tottenham Hotspur, was on the other side of the fence this morning coaching a local boys' club team. He'd got involved with them because having stepped in as a temporary coach a couple of months back when the previous one left, he'd noticed that the girl helping with refreshments was very attractive. He was now thinking seriously about asking her out and that meant staying on as coach until she accepted.

Evie was at her friend's house again down the road. Mavis was out somewhere with her Tom, probably enjoying getting all lovey-dovey. Mum was next door having a cup of tea, a biscuit and a chat with Louis Golding, a woman her own age, whose husband always seemed to be away somewhere.

Geraldine had the house to herself. By the time they all came trooping back she'd have had the pattern she'd retained in her head cut out of newspaper, the material shaped and pinned and much of it tacked together ready for stitching.

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The garment needed lots of concentration. She started on the dress first. The panels would come later but she was skilled and quick and accurate – a girl on piecework needed to be – and the design was clear enough in her head. She reckoned on two hours for cutting out and tacking and just hoped Mum wouldn't come back to start putting her nose in before she'd got a good way through it.

The two hours slipped by so quickly she hardly noticed the time going; the sleeves fitted in wonderfully and hung well, the back and front panels draping just like the real silk creation in that boutique. She couldn't help smiling every time she recalled that woman's face, all prim and proper and stuck up and suspicious – she ought to know what was going on. She ought to know how that exclusive gown displayed in her shop was being copied in cheap material and looking every bit as expensive as the original. The only thing Geraldine had conceded was to reverse the shades, making the dress in dark blue and the panels in a lighter blue instead of the other way around as she had seen it on the manikin. If anything it was an improvement and she grinned again at the woman's mortification if only she could see it looking even better.

The seams were setting perfectly, pressed under a damp ironing cloth at various stages, being tried on frequently to see how it hung. The loose long sleeves had set into the cuffs a treat. Tomorrow she would start on the panels of the removable tabard-like overbodice and the front and back panels that would fall from the waist to finish off the fashionable barrel line.

Mum came in as she was draping the almost complete

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gown on a hanger, hooking the hanger on the bedroom picture rail, pleased with the way it had gone together and how quickly it was shaping up.

Mum was in the room before she knew it. ‘Sorry I was a bit delayed, leaving you ’ere all on yer own. Hope you weren’t bored. Mrs Golding was telling me about . . .’ She stopped, her eyes on the lovely garment hanging from the rail.

‘What’s that? Not something yer bought yesterday? Wasting yer money again.’ It was then she noticed the machine and the offcuts and cotton littering the room. ‘Oh, you’re *making* it. It’s a nice colour. Making it fer going out somewhere special?’

Geraldine suppressed a smile. Mum’s idea of *somewhere special* was hopefully a date with a young man – a young man who one day might be *the* one! Mum waiting and hoping, concerned about a daughter coming up to nineteen and still without a regular boyfriend to introduce to the family.

‘It’s ter wear for Mavis and Tom’s wedding.’

‘But you’ll be a bridesmaid.’ Mum was engrossed inspecting the gown, turning it this way and that on its hanger and making faces of approval at the workmanship even though there was still a lot to do to it.

‘I don’t want ter be a bridesmaid the entire evening,’ said Geraldine.

How could she tell her that she abhorred the thing – was going to feel a right idiot in shocking pink? All right for Evie who was looking forward to it all.

‘I ’ope Mave and Tom won’t be upset, you wearing something else in the evening.’

‘They won’t know. They’ll be gone off on their

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honeymoon by the time I put this on,' said Geraldine firmly and ushered her mother out of the bedroom so she could put everything away before Mavis came home for Sunday dinner and asked her share of questions, and put Geraldine in an awkward position in trying to answer them.

Monday morning – again! Apart from bank holidays, she said this to herself every Monday along with millions of others as she cycled off to work.

This Monday, however, wasn't followed by the word 'again'. This morning passed in a stir of anticipation and excitement, her eyes fixed on the fast-moving machine needle with its bursts of deep-throated whirring as she thought of where she'd be at lunchtime. Not much time; she'd have to cycle like fury to get to Hanfords and back and have time to look for her necklace. It was no use waiting until after work – he shut at six.

As soon as the buzzer went for the three-quarters of an hour lunch break, she was up and ready to leave, aware of her friend Eileen looking at her. She'd already said she had to go out instead of eating sandwiches at her bench as always.

'You ain't even said where you're going,' came the complaint. 'What's so secret?'

'Tell yer later,' said Geraldine and dashed off to gather up her coat and handbag from the cloakroom before any more questions could be fired at her.

He was serving some woman when she walked in. He looked up casually and smiled. 'Be with you in a tick.'

Was that smile not quite as formal as he might use for anyone else? Did he recognise her? She hoped so. It

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had been a couple of months since coming in here at Christmas, but she hoped so.

The woman, having chosen a bargain pendant, was having it wrapped and Geraldine noticed with a little thrill just how skilled his hands were at wrapping the purchase in bright fancy paper. The woman departed, leaving Geraldine to approach the counter displaying a shining array of beautiful things beneath its glass top.

‘Right, can I help you?’

The voice was deep, smooth and brought a delicious shiver to her.

‘Yes please,’ she managed.

Quickly she explained what she was after, bringing out two offcuts of the material to show him. He came round the end of the counter to take a closer look at the shades. His head seemed very close to hers as she held the material out for his inspection and the fragrance of brilliantine wafted to her. His hair was dark, very luxuriant and wavy. She’d never been this close to him before. When she’d come into his shop those few times before Christmas he’d always been on the other side of the counter.

He looked up suddenly, catching her in the very act of gazing at his head. Almost as though divining her thoughts, he smiled.

‘I’ve seen you in here before, haven’t I?’

She stared at him. ‘I love looking at jewellery,’ was all she could think to say. It sounded so inane and she was sure her voice had trembled. She needed to say something else, but sound more confident.

‘I’m really glad you’ve opened up here. I live round the corner. Well, a couple of streets away. It’s so convenient

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coming here.’ She was trying to put on the nice talk, but she was gabbling on. He didn’t seem put off.

‘I’ve noticed you several times looking in the window.’ He spoke well and had a nice accent that put her efforts to shame.

‘They fascinate me. I think it’s ever so clever being able ter . . . to make lovely things like you do. Did you ’ave . . . have to learn how to do it at school or something, or is it just a sort of talent?’ Trying so hard to sound nice she was making a mess of it, but if he noticed he gave no indication.

‘Thanks for calling it a talent. People usually come in here and never give a thought to the joy I get from making these things. No, I never went to school for it. I’ve read plenty of books on it, and when I came home from the war I started experimenting, as a sort of hobby.’

Geraldine was nodding to every word, her eyes trained on his face, taking in every movement, every small contour. She still had hold of the pieces of material and was conscious of the faint pull of his fingers also still clinging on to it. He was smiling, a crooked sort of smile that made the right corner of his lips tilt upwards a little.

‘My father wanted me to continue practising law with him when I came home,’ he went on, speaking as though he had known her for years. ‘He’s a solicitor with a good practice. I didn’t wish to upset him but I find law boring. It didn’t seem so when I started back in 1913 but since the war I just couldn’t settle. I took up this as a kind of hobby, a healing process, I suppose, being that I was a bit . . . well, they called it shell shock. Not too bad but

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I decided on this as a way of settling myself down and I became absorbed by it. My father wasn't too pleased when I told him what I really wanted to—'

He broke off abruptly, a look of apology in the dark-grey eyes that, so close up, were like velvet. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to go on so.'

Abruptly he let go of the piece of material, the release making her start. On an impulse she leapt at what threatened to be a lost opportunity.

'I'm Geraldine Glover,' she burst out, instantly feeling an idiot. People didn't normally introduce themselves to shopkeepers, but his response was far from discouraging.

'My name's Hanford. Anthony. Tony to my friends, but since leaving my parents' home in Berkshire I've lost touch with friends.'

He sounded suddenly very lonely. 'But you've got friends here?' she asked in an effort to comfort him.

'Not really. I've lived above the shop since opening up. Most evenings I keep occupied making this stuff.' He glanced around with a proud, somewhat loving glow in his eyes, then brought them back to her, the glow fading. 'To be truthful I make more than I can sell. It's become an obsession.'

'It must be very absorbing.' She felt pleased with the word absorbing, it sounded learned. She hoped he thought so too. Anthony – Tony – such an attractive name, for an attractive man, a young, unattached, attractive man. Having mentioned living with parents told her that much. And telling her all about himself was encouraging – he must like her. Thoughts were pounding in her head like an express train. 'You must have a real gift for it,' she said.

He shrugged briefly. 'None of it is expensive stuff.'

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I don't think I'd be clever or brave enough to use expensive materials. This way if I make errors I haven't wasted much. But I'm learning all the time and one day, who knows, I may hit the big time – a jewellers in the West End. That's what I'd like.'

Geraldine fixed her eyes on him. She wanted to hear more but time was rushing on. She suddenly hated her work, not just because it would take her from the conversation they were having but that what she did was humdrum and repetitive and demeaning compared to his, having studied law while she was just a machinist on piecework in a clothing factory.

'I've got to go soon,' she cut in, hating to. 'Do you do necklaces?' He became business-like, put in his place. She'd spoiled everything.

'Sorry, I've been taking up your time talking about everything but what you came in for,' he was saying formally. 'Now, let me see.' He looked again at the material she held. 'Something dark blue.'

She watched him retreat behind the counter to survey the rows of beads hanging on hooks behind him. She could see the time on the large clock over the door. Angry again, she knew she must cut this trip short and would now have to explain why to him, or otherwise look churlish. And that was the last thing she wanted, creating a bad impression.

'Perhaps if I come back,' she said feebly and had him turn to look at her. Did he detect the regret in her eyes? Perhaps he did for he gave her a bright, friendly smile.

'I tell you what, Miss . . .'

'Gerry,' she broke in, unable to curb the sudden impulse.

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His smile seemed to light up the shop. ‘Gerry. Tell you what. I’ll spend this evening fashioning something for you. I’ll have it ready by tomorrow – lunchtime? You don’t have to have it, but I’m sure you’ll like it. How about that? Would that suit you?’

‘Oh, yes.’ Despite all her efforts, the words gushed out of her in a sort of feeling of relief and ecstasy. ‘I’ll come in around twelve or just after.’ It would only take her eight minutes if she cycled fast.

‘I’ll be open,’ he called after her as she rushed out to reclaim her bicycle propped against the shop front, her heart pounding fit to bust.

Chapter Three

Her mother, not in the best of moods at the moment, looked up from darning one of Dad's socks to glare at Geraldine wandering aimlessly about the room.

'Why don't you sit down and find somethink ter do? Honestly, you've bin moping around the 'ouse ever since you got 'ome from work. What is it, someone at work upset yer or ain't yer got nowhere ter go tonight?'

'No one's upset me,' returned Geraldine. 'And I've me dress ter make.' Somehow interest in finishing it had waned, unable to get her mind off Anthony Hanford and the way she had interrupted their conversation. It had probably squashed her chances for all he had been so nice about it, apologising and all that. But it had clutched at her heart, him apologising.

'Then go up and get on wiv it,' continued Mum. 'I don't want you 'anging around us all night with that face long as a kite. Life's miserable enough without you adding to it. Weather's making us all more fed up than we already are, blooming freezing draught coming

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through all the blooming cracks, and now yer dad laid off work again.’

Mum, leading off, looked older than her years in a wide, brown skirt to her ankles dating back to an earlier decade, her once flaming auburn hair, now streaked grey, scraped back into a bun. The brown, full-sleeved blouse too was dated, high collar fastened by a jet brooch that had been her mother’s and which she wore day in day out, enough to make Geraldine swear it must be fastened to her flesh as well. Her hands were red from her usual Monday washday. In fact the whole house smelled of washday.

She had once been exceedingly pretty, judging by photos of her. She still retained traces of that prettiness and spruced up in something a bit more fashionable, her hair bobbed in the current style and with a dab of face powder on her cheeks, she’d look half her age. But money to spruce herself up was needed to feed a family and even if she could have afforded it she wouldn’t have. Women like her abounded in the East End. Marrying meant the end of gaiety; raising a family was a responsibility, it made them old before their time, and that was that.

As she spoke Mum glanced at her husband sitting staring into the fire but he didn’t respond to her words, his mind no doubt on tomorrow, ‘on the stones’ as waiting to be called for dock work was termed. At present he had no gang. A gang would always be selected above men on their own and it was every docker’s quest to be in one, the ganger being an expert at keeping his nose to the ground to sniff out anything going before others did. A man in a gang got good work and food in his

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family's stomachs even if ships coming into dock were a bit thin on the water since the end of the war. Every nation had been pulled down by it, every nation struggling to recover, the working man along with them.

Being without work since last week was Dad's fault this time. He'd had a shouting match in the pub where dockers would gather for breakfast and a pint while waiting to find out any news of a ship coming in. A mate had chuckled at the times Dad had gone off to the carsie. Sensitive about his affliction, Dad had almost come to blows and when his ganger had tried to reason with him he'd told him he could stuff his bloody gang. So now he was on his own until the wounds healed, but meanwhile he had come home seething and full of complaint. He'd been going on about it since teatime until a few minutes earlier when Mum snapped that she too wasn't in the best frame of mind with no money coming in.

Her darning needle had fairly flown across the hole in the heel of his sock. 'I ain't runnin' an 'ome fer moanin' minnies, y'know. What with Evie moaning about 'ow much she hates that new job she's got. She's lucky to 'ave one, gettin' it straight after leavin' school. But now she wants ter find somethink else!' Mum waggled her head in sarcasm. 'Fred's gone off in a temper 'cos 'is mates ain't knocked for 'im, and Mavis is upstairs staring all moony-eyed at her Tom's picture 'cos he don't see 'er on Monday nights. That just leaves Wally. He ain't 'ome yet, but there's still time.'

She continued to hold Geraldine in her glare. 'So what's up with you?'

How could she tell Mum what was up with her? She was sure Mum's eyes wouldn't light up all that much at

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the mention of her falling head over heels for some shop owner, someone right out of their class. She knew exactly what Mum would say: ‘Aiming a bit ’igh, ain’t yer, yer silly bitch, making eyes at a bloke what ain’t going ter give yer the time of day? Why don’t yer find a proper bloke what’s got ’is feet on the ground?’

No, she wouldn’t tell anyone about him, not even her best friend. Not until he responded. Even then she’d have to give it some thought because they’d still poke fun, calling her a jumped-up snob, thinking herself above everyone else.

‘Nothink’s got into me,’ she told her waspishly and more in defiance than anger took herself off to her bedroom to finish the rest of her dress. It would at least help take away this wistful feeling.

Mavis was sitting on the edge of their bed. In her hand was the framed photo of her husband-to-be. She was all dewy-eyed as she gazed at it. But now, with her self-imposed solitude shattered – she had plenty of friends she could have gone to see but of course she preferred her little drama – by her sister bursting in on her, she turned on Geraldine in anger.

‘Can’t any of you leave me alone? What d’yer want?’

‘I want to finish me dress,’ Geraldine snapped back. ‘It’s my bedroom as well. You ain’t got first claim on it.’

For an answer, Mavis threw Tom’s picture onto the eiderdown and leapt up as though the bedsprings had broken through under her bottom and made for the door. ‘There ain’t never no peace in this rotten ’ouse! I’m going round ter see my Tom’s mum and dad. I might find some peace there!’

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‘I thought you don’t see each other on Monday nights.’

‘Well, tonight’s different, ain’t it?’ came the parting shot.

Left to her own devices, Geraldine began clearing the clutter from the top of the sewing machine stand, that when not in use served as a dressing table, lifted off the mirror and opened the top flap to ease the heavy machine into its position. With the bed as a seat, she sat down to refill the shuttle with blue cotton and threaded the needle.

All else forgotten, she worked steadily for the rest of the evening with no interruptions, thank goodness. By the time Mavis came home looking a little more disposed and eager to get to bed and dream of her Tom, the dress was more or less finished. All that was needed was a final pressing but, with no chance of going downstairs to press it on the kitchen table with everyone about to go to bed, it would have to wait until tomorrow.

Tomorrow gripped her with excitement the second she opened her eyes to realise it was today. For once she actually looked forward to going to work, but especially to lunchtime.

The moment the buzzer went she was up from her bench, rushing to the grubby, smelly little cloakroom for her coat and handbag. It was always a jumble of coats, bags, wet boots if the weather was bad and a variety of shopping bags holding food for lunch. It was a scramble to find her own things from among it all, with other girls coming in to get theirs, having first rushed into the single, somewhat mucky lavatory before anyone else could to empty out before leaving. Needing to go would spoil

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even the briefest chat with Anthony Hanford and she would have rather died than ask to use his toilet.

‘You ain’t off out again!’ admonished Eileen who had followed her in to pick up her flask and sandwiches. ‘Yesterday, now today – where d’yer go?’

Geraldine gave her a grin. ‘Tell you later, but not now, I’m in a hurry.’ Already she was guarding her diction, preparing for her conversation with Anthony Hanford.

Eileen began to grin too. ‘Secret, eh? Seein’ a boyfriend?’

‘Tell you later,’ Geraldine shouted over the babble of voices around them and hurried away before any more questions could be asked.

‘Don’t be late back,’ Eileen called after her as Geraldine squeezed herself out of the door between several other girls coming in. ‘Greenaway’ll ’ave your guts for garters if you are!’ Mrs Greenaway was their forelady, those beady eyes behind her pince-nez never missing a trick.

All morning Geraldine had itched to tell Eileen Shaw of the man whom she was – she had to admit it – chasing after. Eileen would have burst out laughing, saying, ‘Who d’yer think you are? Lady Jane? A bloke what’s got a shop ain’t even goin’ ter look at you.’

But he had looked at her, and his eyes had surely glistened.

They glistened now, she was certain, as he came from the back room on her entering the shop. And so they ought. She’d done herself up for this occasion – under the wrap-around apron she used for work she’d worn her best skirt and blouse. The apron now stowed under

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her bench back at work, the skirt and blouse were having their moment of glory. Not that he'd see much of them with February necessitating a winter coat, but it made her feel better dressed and that must surely show on her face. Having added a touch of face powder, she knew she looked good without his eyes telling her as his smile widened in welcome.

'Hullo, I did wonder if I'd see you this lunchtime.'

'It's the only time I get off during the day.' She wasn't yet prepared to tell him what she worked at though he would know sooner or later if things got more serious.

'Do you work far from here?' he asked, obviously happy to make conversation.

'No, not far,' she obliged.

'What do you do?' Heartening that he should be interested, on the other hand alarming that she must now lie, or dare she tell the truth? She decided to prevaricate.

'I'm a . . . a high-class dress machinist,' she stammered. 'My work goes mostly to the West End.'

What a fib! Rubins' garments mostly went to shops in Petticoat Lane and Roman Road markets. She did intend one day to go in for better-quality work – she was up to it. Even at Rubins she was always given all the better garments to do. Leaving there to better herself would of course mean saying goodbye to her mates, especially Eileen. Eileen, not all that skilled – a moderately fast worker but happy to tick along and draw her pay packet on Friday – would never be accepted by people like court dressmakers such as she herself hoped to be employed by eventually.

'I mean to do even better,' she went on, hoping she didn't sound too boring, but he looked interested and

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she was encouraged. 'Have a business of my own one day – do what I've always enjoyed most.' Thoughts of it were beginning to make her speak better. 'Creating my own designs.'

'I understand what you mean,' he returned. 'There's something very satisfying about working with one's hands. I never really felt fulfilled by what I did prior to the war. I told you, my father is a solicitor. Wanted me to continue in the legal profession. But it never appealed to me. I hated to disappoint him and joining up helped me escape, so to speak. I suppose I've come back a different person though the process isn't quite what I would recommend.'

Geraldine devoured all that he was saying, seeing for the first time the haunted expression behind his eyes, wondering what sort of war he'd had, what might have happened to him, though like a lot of men back from France, if that was where he'd been, he'd never say even if it was there in his eyes. But there was no time to dwell on it. Time was flying by. She dare not be late back to work, yet dared not make the same mistake she had made yesterday.

'But you would recommend making beautiful things,' she prompted. It had the desired effect, bringing him back to the present.

His eyes lit up. 'Ah, yes, your necklace. Just a tick! I hope this is just what you had in mind.' Making for the back room, he reappeared moments later with an oblong velvet box.

'I spent last night on this,' he announced, unwrapping it as though it were as delicate as spider silk. 'I hope you like it.'

Geraldine gasped as the box was opened to reveal the most delicate thing she had ever seen – a string of small,

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rounded, dark-blue stones, each one separated by a tiny seed pearl that glowed with such lustre that it seemed impossible they were merely artificial.

‘They look so real,’ she sighed. God knows what this was going to cost. Now she’d have to tell him it wasn’t quite what she wanted, to save the humiliation of having to admit she couldn’t afford such a thing.

He was smiling. ‘The blue ones are meant to be lapis lazuli, not real.’ She’d never heard of lapis lazuli. ‘I’m afraid the pearls are also artificial.’

How could she tell? The tiny pearls in particular had such a soft delicate glow about them that they could easily have been real. There was a look in his eyes when she looked up at him suddenly that made her feel that he wasn’t in fact telling the truth.

‘How d’you make beads like this?’ she burst out in admiration and again he smiled. It was such a lovely smile.

‘Secrets of the trade.’ He sounded teasing. ‘I buy them and string them.’ He pointed to the blue stones. ‘Lapis lazuli has gold flecks in it, so a little gold colour dabbed on makes it look authentic. The pearls are glass and lined with the material that comes from the inside of oyster shells, called nacre.’

From the seemingly diffident young man he had now assumed a voice of authority that rather surprised and somewhat overawed her. All she could say was, ‘It’s lovely. And I do like the pretend silver clasp.’

‘It’s not pretend,’ he said, ‘*it is* silver.’

Geraldine stared at him in alarm. ‘I didn’t ask for real silver. I really can’t . . .’

She was going to say she couldn’t afford real silver

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but stopped in time. Dare she ask the price? But he must know what she was about to say and, telling her the price, he would grin in amusement at her horrified expression. She'd put her foot in it yet again. What man who had a solicitor for a father, who had pots of money, or at least whose father had, and who could turn down a promising career to play at making cheap jewellery, wouldn't be turned off by a girl who earned a living slaving away at a sewing machine and couldn't afford anything more than half a crown at the most for a row of beads? She earned seven shillings and sixpence a week: two and six was a third of a week's wages.

Instead of grinning, he was surveying her in all seriousness. Gone was the efficiency that had awed her a moment ago, replaced by uncertainty that instantly melted her heart and took away all her earlier dismay.

'What would you say to two shillings? It's not as expensive as it looks.'

With an effort she regained control of her emotion and gazed down at the necklace. 'I can't believe it.' Was he merely being charitable? She didn't want him treating her as though she were unable to pay her way. 'I must give you more than that.'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' he replied quickly. 'It didn't take that long to make, nor did it take up much material. A bit of silver I had by – see, it's quite thin.' He turned the clasp over for her to see the hollowness on the inner side. 'The beads I already had in stock. As for the blue ones, a dab or two of colour cost me nothing.'

It seemed to Geraldine that he was using the term 'beads' deliberately. Most jewellers would automatically say stones. Was it in order to come down to her level,

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or minimise the real value of the necklace? She wanted to think it was the latter though either way made her uncomfortable. If it was the latter why didn't she believe him? He'd admitted that the clasp was real silver. Why silver if the stones were fake? Any old metal would have done for just 'beads'. It didn't make sense.

'You don't have to have it if you don't want,' he was saying.

'No!' she burst in, mortified that she could think bad things of him. 'It's lovely. I just thought . . . No, it's lovely.'

That seemed to satisfy him. 'You should have earrings as well,' he said, immediately alarming her. 'I took the liberty last night of making some. Of course, if you don't like them they can go in the window.'

The suggestion was almost apologetic and she found herself hastening to reassure him. 'I ain't . . . I've not had my ears pierced so I don't wear . . .' She let the explanation die. It was hard keeping up the nice accent, her mind in a whirl of mixed feelings, but he shouldn't have assumed she'd want them. It put her in an awkward situation, hating to admit that she couldn't afford earrings on top of a necklace, even though he'd said only two shillings. Two shillings! She still couldn't believe that, not for a necklace of this beauty and length.

He was still looking at her intently. 'I was wondering,' he said, 'if you'd accept them as a . . . as a gift.'

A twinge of wariness, alarm even, welled up because he was trying to get friendly with her in a way she hadn't expected. 'I don't . . .' she began then paused.

She'd been about to say she didn't want his gift but

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it would have sounded hurtful. She should explain that a girl didn't accept presents from a man she hardly knew. Yet if she said that, he might take it as an insult and she'd never be able to bring herself to go into his shop again. Then she would never get to know him.

Muscles taut, one hand clutching the edge of the counter, the other clasping her handbag handle as if both hands were glued there, she began again.

'I mean, I don't know you well enough for you ter give me presents. It ain't right.' Head down, she let go of the counter to fish into her handbag for the required money. 'I'll just pay for the necklace, if you'd wrap it up. Then I must go. But thanks.'

It had to cost more than he'd asked but she was too confused to query it, handing the money over, knowing she'd made a proper mess of things.

She stood dumbly aside as the till rang and he wrapped the box in pretty paper; she took it from him not daring to lift her eyes to his, managing to mumble, 'Thank you,' and made for the door.

As the shop bell tinkled, she heard his voice. 'The earrings will be here if you want them.'

In a flurry of confusion she nodded vaguely and bolted, practically cannoning into a passer-by as she grabbed her bicycle. In no manner could she ever go back into that shop. She'd made a fool of herself. She'd insulted him, spurned his generous offer, or that's how it seemed.

All day it stayed with her. She couldn't even confide the event to Eileen for all her friend was burning up with curiosity. 'Tell you tomorrow,' was all she said as she bent her head to her work, machining away furiously