

Fashion Victim

Sam Baker

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Part One



Chapter One

'What I don't understand is why?'

Annie Anderson took a deep breath and began to reply.

'Well, the thing is, Mum—'

'You get bored too easily, that's your trouble.'

Same conversation, same chance of coming out on top.

'Mum! I'm not *bored*.'

'Why can't you just stay put? You've hardly been there five minutes and now you're chucking it all in to work on one of those magazines that make women anorexic.' The horror with which her mother said this made Annie wince.

'And what about money?' her mother continued, barely pausing for breath. 'You always said magazines paid less than newspapers.'

'They're paying me the same. Not a penny difference.' It was Annie's first truthful comment since her mother called. Staring at the scruffy reflection that stared back from the rain-spattered office window, Annie scowled, her short dark curls looked like she'd just got out of bed, and not in a good way.

'So why are you leaving, if they're not even paying you more?'

Too late Annie realised that a bigger salary might have given her mother a reason for accepting the change. Damn it, why hadn't that occurred to her ten seconds earlier? Holding the phone away from her ear, Annie began to count slowly: one ... two ... three ... four ... five ... six ...

'Annie,' came the voice, 'are you there?'

Annie forced a smile onto her face in the hope it would carry through to her voice. 'Mum,' she said patiently, 'this is a great opportunity. And you know I always wanted to

work on a glossy. *Handbag* is really well respected and I'll get to travel all over the world. New York, Paris, Milan . . . Just think, I'll see all those amazing cities and it won't cost me a penny. Anyway, you're always saying how much you worry about me being lonely since Nick left, now you won't have to. Maybe I'll find a good-looking Italian . . .'

It wasn't hard to interpret the silence swirling down the telephone line. Annie had played the wrong card and she knew it. She could almost see her mother's face, tight-lipped with disapproval, as she sat at the kitchen table, the six o'clock news playing in the background, one eye on Dad's tea bubbling on the cooker, the other focused inwards on the mess her younger daughter was making of her life.

Disturbed only by the distant murmur of Trevor McDonald, Annie decided to quit while she wasn't ahead and took advantage of the lull.

'Got to go,' she said hurriedly. 'Can't be late for my own leaving do. Call you Sunday.'

Annie pressed the button to kill the call before her mother could object and slumped back in her swivel chair, tossing the mobile onto her now empty desk. Without the usual wad of newspapers, Post-it notes and random cuttings to block its fall, her Nokia bounced away, landing on the industrial grey carpet in the middle of the five desks that made up *The Post's* investigations department.

Everyone knew the end of January was a lousy time to change jobs, the worst. Right up there in the Top Ten things everybody knows. It's inevitably born of the post-Christmas blues, and Annie's festive season had been enough to give anyone those.

Oh, there were countless reasons why she was doing the wrong thing. And Annie had heard them all over the past month. Heaving herself out of her chair, Annie trawled round to the other side of the desk to retrieve her mobile. Everything ached, from her brain downwards, with the exhaustion of having to listen to other people's opinions – about her life in general, about resigning from *The Post* in

particular. Except everyone was wrong, because Annie wasn't leaving, Ken had talked her out of that. She was taking the easy option, going undercover on a soft job.

Ken's idea, their secret.

Crouched by her phone in the half-darkness, Annie was randomly punching buttons in an attempt to resurrect its ominously blank screen, when a voice from behind almost made her drop the thing again.

'What the hell are you doing here, Anderson? Everybody's waiting for you down The Swan.'

Her boss, news editor Ken Greenhouse, leant against a filing cabinet, shirtsleeves rolled up, tie half undone, his heavy eyes troubled. 'Sure you want to go through with this *Handbag* thing?'

As she checked her mobile was working, Annie nodded. 'Yes,' she said, glancing up. 'You know why.'

The Yorkshireman shrugged. 'You couldn't have saved Irina, you know.'

'Then I shouldn't have started,' said Annie, pushing away the memory of a teenage girl, large eyes dark and haunted, devoid of trust. 'Saving her was the whole point, surely?' They were talking about Annie's last story, and not for the first time.

Ken allowed himself a small sigh, deciding not to go there. Instead he summoned a half smile. 'Get a move on, love,' he said.

'Five minutes,' said Annie. 'Let me put my face on.'

'Five minutes.' Collecting his jacket from the back of his chair, Ken Greenhouse strode across the office, stopping off briefly at the night editor's desk as he passed. At the lift he turned and glanced back to where Annie stood.

'Anderson!' he yelled, showing her the spread fingers of one hand. 'The Swan. In five.'

Annie nodded and watched him thin to nothing as the lift doors closed.

Her face would have to wait, she decided. That glimpse of her reflection in the office window had already confirmed that her pale skin and eyes rimmed grey from lack of

sleep needed more than a simple touch-of-mascara-and-dash-of-lippy repair job. And she could always do that in the pub loo, use it as an opportunity to escape.

Not that it would make a blind bit of difference. Annie without make-up looked much the same as Annie with, except for the bright red lips; a shortish woman in her late twenties, not bad-looking but for the scowl and a mouth she'd learnt the hard way to keep in check.

Annie's PC blinked reproachfully as she clicked on *Shut Down*. Its dark screen and her desk, empty save for several years of coffee rings, brought home the enormity of her decision.

She'd always had a desk at *The Post*, always known she wanted to come back. But this time was different, and besides, she had to be seen to resign. She could hardly expect to be welcomed with open arms at *Handbag* if there was any suggestion she was still working for *The Post*.

Aware that she'd undoubtedly exceeded her five minutes, Annie grabbed her coat from the stand behind her desk and made herself turn slowly, taking in the entire floor. It was half empty at that time of night. Sky News was playing in the background and Derek, *The Post's* night editor, was giving some junior hack hell for whatever he had or hadn't done. No change there then.

Rain was sheeting against plate glass as Annie stepped into the foyer. Was it worth bothering with an umbrella? She decided against – her coat already bore the signs of a hard winter and there was little about today's very bad hair worth protecting.

'Bye, Joe,' she called, as she walked past the security man on night shift.

He beamed. Joe was her favourite, a vocal old Irishman with strong opinions on everything and a willingness to share them with anyone who'd listen. His all-time favourite was that the Westbourne Grove end of Notting Hill, Annie's stomping ground, was an over-priced hell hole and no amount of money could induce him to live there.

Apparently the council had tried to move him there once, about thirty years earlier, but Joe was having none of it. He was right, of course, Notting Hill was a hell hole, just not for the reasons he thought.

Be nice to Joe, Annie had long ago discovered, and you had an ally for life. Consequently, there were many times he'd helped her 'borrow' her colleagues' pre-booked taxis when she had been running late. She owed him. Big time.

'Ah, bye, Annie. You'll be back, surely.'

'Maybe, who knows?' Annie said and bundled herself through the revolving door.

Turning left, Annie headed down Old Street, clinging as closely as possible to the walls in the hope of gaining shelter from any overhang. She could have run there in seconds, but Annie wasn't ready to face her colleagues yet. Walking slowly from one doorway to the next, she watched the windows of The Swan grow closer. It was one of those renovation jobs that fancied itself more wine bar than pub and as a result almost everyone on the paper professed to hate it. But everyone still went there, convenience getting the better of stylistic preferences.

Ken had hired the upstairs bar; a Victorian room that retained traces of the nineteenth-century pub The Swan had once been. Doubtless the brewery would get around to ruining the first floor too, but they hadn't yet.

From where she stood in the rain, Annie could see enough shadows reflected against the upper windows to make her feel sick. Parties were OK and she liked free alcohol as much as the next person – that was practically a prerequisite for the job, at least it was if you worked for Ken Greenhouse. Birthdays, engagements, promotions and leaving dos . . . All were fine with Annie as long as one crucial box was ticked: they belonged to someone-else.

By now she was standing in the door of a twenty-four-hour newsagent, scarcely ten feet from the pub, rain dripping onto her head and trickling down the side of her face.

Come on, she told herself. Usual rules: get in there, get it over with, get out again.

Annie was about to follow her own advice when the pocket of her coat vibrated against her hip. It took a few seconds to untangle the Nokia from the used tissues and taxi receipts that filled her pocket. Two words flashed on its screen: *Jane, Home*. For all of a second Annie contemplated answering, then she punched the red button to reject Jane's call. Her elder sister would already be leaving a message on Annie's voicemail and her voicemail would call and then text Annie to inform her of that fact. It was a system designed to persecute call-evaders and Annie didn't need to play back any message to know exactly how it would go. She'd heard it all before.

'Anderson!' Ken bellowed, and every head in the bar turned towards her. 'Call that five minutes! It's a wonder you ever met a fucking deadline!'

There was a ripple of laughter as Annie's colleagues readied themselves for one of Ken's stand-up specials at Annie's expense. But it never came.

Struggling out of her coat, Annie dumped it on top of a precarious pile of about fifty others on a table just inside the door and fixed her air hostess smile firmly in place as a photographer from the sports desk pushed a glass of lukewarm Sauvignon Blanc into her hand. As she took it, Annie noticed his hand lingered on the stem a second longer than was strictly necessary. She looked at him enquiringly and then remembered. He'd emailed her several times a day afterwards, seemingly unable to read between the lines of her non-existent replies. Annie had been bloody glad to be sent to Glasgow after that. By the time she'd returned he'd been in Tokyo for the World Cup and that had been the end of it.

'Come on, Anderson, get over here!' Ken was gesticulating wildly from his position by the bar.

Annie flashed him the grin he was expecting and

burrowed through the crowd. She knew what was coming, better let him have his fun.

'Oi, you lot!' he yelled into the racket. 'Shut the fuck up! I've got a few words to say.'

To Annie's astonishment, everyone did.

'Right, everybody here knows Annie. And if you don't, get out 'cause you're not having another round at my expense.'

There was a polite smattering of laughter.

'I won't keep you long, because as you all know I'm not given to flowery words.'

More laughter, far less polite.

'I want to pay tribute to one of the best chief investigative reporters I've ever had.'

Thrown, Annie caught the smile before it dropped from her face. She'd been expecting ten minutes of Ken's gags about her appalling time-keeping, non-existent tea-making skills and weird dress sense, those she could cope with. Plaudits weren't part of the deal.

Christ, she thought, not the unedited highlights, please.

'I remember Annie's first day,' Ken started. 'We thought we'd give her a girlie job, see what she was made of, and sent her out in a skirt that looked more like a belt, told her if she wanted to be an investigative journalist she could investigate a few building sites. A few of you will remember that feature. And Annie, the boys from the sports desk have asked me to give you this.'

It was a card, mocked up by one of the designers. A very much younger and slightly plumper Annie stood next to scaffolding, a yellow hard hat crammed onto unruly curls. She wore a child-size Bob the Builder T-shirt so tight that even her breasts looked large in it and steel-capped boots several sizes too large. Annie was 5 ft 4, not exactly stumpy, but next to the foreman - 6 ft plus and 16 stone - she looked tiny.

There were snorts of laughter and Annie felt her face grow warm. Of course she remembered that bloody feature, how could she forget? It had been pinned on

the production editor's wall for years afterwards. Annie Anderson in a skirt so short you could practically see her knickers, scowling for the camera.

'Annie soon proved she had real balls and over the years she's made me proud I took a punt on her. Thanks to Annie, cowboy cosmetic surgeons have been struck off, premiership footballers out on the shag before a big match have been caught with their pants down and a top London hotel that best remain nameless found itself in very deep shit for employing illegal immigrants. And let's not even mention how Glasgow City Council feel about us after Annie's investigation into homelessness in their fair city . . .'

'Yay!'

'Go Annie!'

'Good one!'

The news desk contingent had clearly been drinking a little longer than everyone else. Grateful for the momentary diversion, Annie took the opportunity to tear her eyes away from her feet and glance around. Almost everyone was looking at her, some staring, others whispering.

Get a move on, Ken, she thought, for Christ's sake.

'But that's not all,' Ken continued on cue. 'Because Annie's last story for *The Post* was her greatest coup yet.'

Annie's eyes returned to her feet.

'The rumours had been circulating for months. We had a pretty good idea Eastern European kids were being imported straight into prostitution under our noses, right here in King's Cross. Could we prove it? Could we fuck? Plenty of far more experienced journalists than Annie tried and failed. Even the Met couldn't get the evidence they needed, until we put Annie on it. Annie and her team blew it wide open and saved a few kids' lives in the process. I think we all know this is where *The Post's* next British Press Award is coming from.'

Ken looked genuinely proud as he stared at her, like Annie's father had looked the day he'd walked up the aisle with his eldest daughter wearing a dress like a meringue.

Annie, on the other hand, really did not want to think about those damaged teenagers, not now, not at all.

'So, Annie . . .' Ken was smiling warmly, 'even though you're abandoning us, sodding off to some bloody pony magazine to teach them about proper journalism, better known as putting your feet up and pocketing the freebies—'

More uproarious laughter and Annie joined in, confident that the worst was over. 'We've got a little something for you to remember us by.'

Reaching behind him, Ken took a large flat parcel from where it had been lying, face down on the bar. Annie knew what it was, she'd been to enough leaving dos over the years and it was always the same: a couple of fake headlines, her face imposed on someone else's body. The usual.

Only it wasn't.

Ripping off the paper, Annie found a framed page from *The Post*. A front page from the previous October dominated by one haunting image. The face of Irina Krodt, barely sixteen but looking far younger, devastatingly pretty with sallow skin and dark hair. It was Irina's eyes that haunted Annie, dark and dead, staring flatly out of the page, making everyone who looked into them culpable.

Exclusive! screamed the tag. *Post smashes child prostitution ring!* Underneath, the by-line read *Another Post Exclusive by Annie Anderson.*

Innocent life lost in process, Annie thought bleakly. Funny how they hadn't mentioned that on the front page.

A Post-it note stuck to the back of the frame read, *I'll be here, call me* – and then Ken's home number scrawled in blue biro.

As if she didn't already know it by heart.

'Speech!'

'Yes, come on, Anderson, speech!'

Clinging to the frame as if it was all that held her up, Annie gazed around, searching for something to focus on. Anything would do. Fifty-odd faces were turned towards her, all willing her to speak. Annie swallowed hard and

settled her gaze on an old beer poster above the heads of the people at the back. As she did so, she caught the eye of *The Post's* fashion editor, Lou McCartney, who winked and gave Annie a supportive wave.

Lou, as ever, was immaculately dressed, her Prada coat perfectly off-setting thrift-shop boots. Anyone else would have looked like a bag lady but Lou just looked, well, like Lou . . . It was Lou who had helped Annie get an in with *Handbag* magazine.

'Th-thanks,' Annie stammered. 'I've, uh, had a wonderful time at *The Post*. It's been fantastic. I've loved every minute of it. Well, not *every* minute obviously . . .'

She knew she should be gushing Oscar-style about her talented team, the fantastic paper, those career-making awards, how much she owed Ken Greenhouse. She'd had a speech all planned in her head before she even entered the pub, but now she couldn't think of anything but Irina, couldn't see anything but Irina's haunted eyes. In the absence of any better idea, Annie opted for humour.

'Er, I'll miss you all more than you can possibly realise. Even what's-his-name on the sports desk.'

'Yeah right!' muttered a girl in the corner and there was a burst of relieved laughter, the tension subsiding as quickly as it had surfaced.

'Sure you will!' yelled another woman.

'You know where to find us when you can't fit any more free gear in your wardrobe?'

Raucous chatter filled the room.

'Attention span of gnats, that lot,' Ken said.

'Let me put this somewhere safe for you.' He eased the frame from her fingers, as he did so he gazed down at the page.

'Good story that,' he said. 'And for the record, Anderson, what happened wasn't your fault. Whatever you think.'

Annie wished she could believe that.

For the first time since entering the bar, Annie was no

longer the centre of attention. She took in the faces around her, the last five years of her life were in this room.

A news desk hard-core were propping up the bar, knocking back bottles of Beck's with Bell's chasers and irritating everyone in the immediate vicinity by re-enacting old snatches from *The Office*. Only their choice of sketches had changed in the time Annie had known them, one year it had been *League of Gentlemen*, another *The Fast Show*.

'Annie . . .' A hand settled on her shoulder and she turned to find Al, her partner on the investigations team, standing so close she could feel his breath on her face. Carefully she inched away.

'There's still time to change your mind,' Al said. 'I mean, why would anyone give up all this . . . ?' He gestured to the pile of damp coats steaming gently in one corner, the alcohol-slicked floor, steamed-up windows, raised voices and drunken laughter.

'Why would anyone give up this for posh frocks and champagne parties in the fashion capitals of the world?'

It was disconcerting, she thought, how you can have a passing acquaintance with every single person in a room and still not have anyone to talk to. There was barely a face Annie didn't recognise, but scarcely one she felt she really knew, except Ken. And Lou.

Lou and Annie had joined *The Post* in the same month and were the same age. Only their star signs and hair colours were different, Annie's dark brown hair had always resisted her half-hearted attempts at DIY bleach, Lou's came out of a professional's bottle and was topped up every six to eight weeks. They'd hit it off instantly, a rare occurrence for Annie and one that hadn't been repeated since. She could count the people she regarded as real friends on less than one hand, life was easier that way.

Making a beeline for the spot where she'd last seen Lou, Annie saw the top of her friend's blonde head, damp hair piled haphazardly on top, soggy tendrils hanging down her neck. Lou hadn't moved from beneath a real ale poster, where she was locked in conversation with a sub-editor

Annie couldn't put a name to and one of the senior reporters, Colin Green.

'I mean, it's obvious, isn't it?' Green was saying. 'The woman's got a messiah complex. It's never just a story to her, oh no. She's got to save everybody. I mean what's with that?'

'Shhhh! For God's sake, someone will hear you.' The voice was Lou's, but Colin Green continued.

'She's bottled it,' he said. 'One tough story, one job that doesn't go according to plan and she's out of here.'

The sub-editor was nodding fervently.

Annie froze. The noise, the chatter, the laughter, the knackered old jukebox playing 'Dancing Queen' all swirling to a halt around her.

'Going into *fashion*?' Green said. 'I ask you. The woman's meant to be an award-winning journalist. What's she going to investigate there? Skirt lengths?'

'Oi!' Lou's familiar voice said. 'What's wrong with fashion?'

Standing motionless in the crowd behind them, Annie heard the sub snort derisively and slam what sounded like an empty pint glass down on the window sill next to him, but Lou persevered.

'You're just jealous,' Lou said to Colin, 'because Annie broke that King's Cross story when you couldn't even get close. You think it was easy befriending those kids, listening night after night to tales of abuse, while putting herself in danger at the same time. And then when that girl died . . . well, you can't blame Annie if she needs a break. She deserves one.'

Annie wanted to scream, 'I'm not cracking up. I fancy a change, that's all. Deal with it!' She knew she shouldn't give a toss what they thought, but it still galled her. Christ, even her best friend on the paper thought she was copping out, and Lou *worked* in fashion.

Unable to bear another word, Annie glanced around to make sure no one had been watching her watching them and crept away. But by the time she'd fought her way to the

pile of damp coats by the door, Annie's resolve had hardened and she kept going, heading downstairs towards the Ladies for some long-overdue face repair.

Let no one say Annie Anderson had lost her nerve.