

CHAPTER ONE

ANNA WAS LYING in bed with the duvet pulled up over her head. A thing not so unusual in itself, except for the fact it was half past seven on a Thursday evening, and she was fully dressed, bar her shoes. Somewhere in the distance, her doorbell was ringing. She was doing her best to ignore it.

She'd climbed into bed about half an hour ago, and she had no intention of getting out again that evening. Maybe not ever. It was nice in her cocoon. White. Calm. The world had been too bright today, too noisy. Just too flipping cheerful. But this was a lovely solution. She should have come up with it sooner.

The letterbox clattered. 'Anna?'

Anna stared hard at the cotton duvet cover and began to count the individual threads above her nose. Maybe she should consider some sort of soundproofing?

The voice came again, louder. 'Hey, there! I'm here. Open the door!'

Deep breathing... That was supposed to be good for keeping calm, wasn't it? Anna decided to try it; she wanted so badly to hang on to this velvety, white numbness. The only problem was that it had been a very long time since Anna had been able to take a deep breath. Two years, nine months and eight days, to be exact.

Had it truly been that long? It still felt like yesterday. She rolled over onto her side and curled into a ball, squeezing her eyes shut.

The voice called through the letterbox again, but it no longer sounded bright and happy. More irritated. Maybe even a little desperate. Anna blew out a shaky breath. Her bubble of calm was in a precarious state now. Cracks were appearing. She tried to pretend these intrusive noises were happening on a different plane, in a different reality. At least, she did until the voice became softer, more pleading.

'Anna? Minha querida? Are you okay?'

Anna covered her face with her hands and let out a sound that was half-growl, half-sigh, then forced her legs out of her duck-down nest and found the floor with her feet. The rest of her followed a second later and then she walked mechanically out of her bedroom and down the stairs into the hall.

'Thank goodness for that!' her best friend said when Anna opened the front door. 'I was worried you'd fallen down the stairs or slipped in the bath!' Gabriela's tone was cheery as she stepped into the hallway, but there was a tightness to the accompanying laughter and there were questions in her eyes. Anna knew Gabi wasn't going to ask them, but she heard them anyway. You are okay, aren't you? Or do I need to be properly worried?

Everyone Anna knew had questions in their eyes these days when they spoke to her. Often, the same questions. But they were afraid of saying the wrong thing. Or not saying the right thing. Anna lived in a minefield of eggshells.

Gabi thrust a cake tin into Anna's hands. 'I was missing my mother's carrot cake, but I made far too much.'

'Thank you,' Anna said, receiving the tin and hugging it into herself. 'I'll look forward to it.' Her friend's bright-orange Brazilian version of the cake, slathered in chocolate sauce, was amazing.

Gabi's eyes held a mixture of worry and hope. 'Will you?' This was more than cake. Gabi had always moaned that her curves were a result of her mother equating loving people with feeding them, but it seemed she was more like her mother than she realized.

Anna nodded awkwardly. 'Of course.' And then she went and placed the cake tin in the kitchen, out of sight, hoping it would curb any further discussion.

She appreciated that her friends and family cared about her, but she was sick of being watched, of every word that left her mouth, of every gesture, being judged and weighed and measured so they could compare notes, so they could encourage each other with the tiny pieces of evidence they collected that she was finally 'getting over it'.

When Anna returned to the hall, Gabi squinted at her. 'What have you done to your hair?'

Anna reached up and discovered that her shoulder-length brown hair was all fluffed up at the back. She smoothed it down with her hand, trying not to make it obvious. She didn't dare glance in the mirror by the front door. She hadn't left the house since Christmas Day, and she feared she'd see some-one scruffy and pasty-looking. In comparison, Gabi looked immaculate. Her hair fell in dark, silky spirals around her shoulders and the cobalt-blue dress she wore complemented her warmer skin tone perfectly.

'You are ready for the party, aren't you?' Gabi's gaze travelled downwards to the crumpled little black dress Anna was wearing and to her stockinged feet. 'It's only a few hours until we will all shout "Happy New Year" and I don't want to be late!'

Happy New Year...

Oh, how Anna would like to do a little bit of surgery on that phrase. The first word should be chopped off and discarded, for a start. However, 'new year' was a fact. Nothing she could do about that. Time was going to march on whether she wanted it to or not, but 'happy' just seemed ridiculous, maybe even a little insulting.

A rush of emotion hit her, engulfing her so completely that she briefly considered sprinting up the stairs and diving back under her duvet. She turned to Gabi, ready to make her excuses, but the look in her friend's eyes silenced her. Although she was clearly perplexed at Anna's dishevelled state and more than a little concerned, there was something else shimmering under the surface, a look Anna recognized.

'There's someone you like at this party, isn't there?' she asked, because that sparkle behind Gabi's eyes only ever appeared when romance was on the cards.

Gabi blinked at her innocently. 'No.'

Hmm. Anna wasn't so sure she believed that.

'Don't look at me that way,' Gabi added, frowning. 'After Joel, I'm done with men, remember?'

Anna nodded slightly. 'I do remember you telling me that.' Whether it lasted remained to be seen. Right at that second, Anna would have bet twenty quid on her friend's lips being locked onto someone else's come midnight.

But Anna couldn't begrudge her that. The break-up with Joel had been almost five years ago. To be honest, Anna hadn't been sad to see the back of him – he hadn't appreciated Gabi nearly enough – but Gabi hadn't seen it that way and she'd been broken-hearted. Since then, there had been a

handful of short-lived relationships. Gabi liked guys who were confident, but more often than not, 'confident' turned out to be 'cocky and self-absorbed'. Not qualities that lent themselves to a mature, long-lasting partnership.

'It's true,' Gabi added, looking so convincing Anna almost believed her. 'Are you ready?'

Anna glanced up at the staircase, beyond which her duvet cocoon lay waiting, and sighed. At least one of them should have something to hope for this evening as they crossed the threshold from this old, tired year into the fresh blankness of the next.

She forced the corners of her mouth to turn up. 'Of course. Give me two seconds. I'll just grab my coat and put on my shoes.'

CHAPTER TWO

IN AN IDEAL world, Anna thought, *I would arrive at every party an hour and a half late*. That way she could skip the beginning, when everyone was buzzing with optimism about the night ahead, full of loud hellos and instantly forgotten introductions.

Gabi worked as a food stylist, in charge of making the pictures of dishes in cookbooks and magazines appear mouth-watering. Over the years, she'd encountered an eclectic mixture of people, from photographers and art directors, to magazine editors, stylists and TV presenters. The party that evening was being hosted by an ex-pat Californian who owned a chain of south London beauty salons. Vanessa lived in Chislehurst, and as Anna drove to their destination, the houses became progressively grander, the streets leafier. It was only a couple of miles away from Anna's semi-detached in Sundridge Park, but it seemed like a different world.

She trailed around the ground floor of the stylish house behind Gabi, a glass of untouched fizz in her hand. Every time Gabi managed to extricate herself from one group of excitable extroverts, she was instantly dragged into another, most of whom Anna didn't know. Anna just hovered around the edges, keeping her expression friendly but neutral, and avoiding eye contact as much as possible.

The advantage of having a more outgoing friend who seemed to know ninety per cent of the other guests was that the conversation eddied around Anna, much the same way a stream flowed around a rock in its path, and that was fine by her. Because with small talk came questions, and she wasn't particularly keen on questions, not the personal kind, anyway, and the one question she really didn't want to hear was—

'Hey, Anna! How are you?'

She fixed a smile in place and turned to find another of Gabi's creative, interesting friends smiling at her. 'Oh, er, hi...' Anna trailed off, partly because she couldn't remember the woman's name, but mostly because this one simple question always left her in a quandary. She was basically an honest sort of person, so when somebody asked her how she was, her automatic response was to tell the truth.

Big mistake.

Back in the early days, she'd done just that, launching into a description of how each second of the day was a painful knife-stab in her heart, how she dreaded opening her eyelids each morning. It had been so wonderful to let it all out.

But she'd soon discovered it was a great way to make her friends' faces fall, to cause them to stammer awkwardly. More often than not, they'd invented someone on the other side of the room they urgently needed to talk to and had scurried away.

No one really wanted to hear how she was. Not after two years, nine months and eight days. Not even Gabi. Instead, they wanted to hear she was putting herself back together, that it was possible to heal from something that tragic and move on. It was selfish, really, because they were asking her to give them hope. They were asking her to reassure them that if something that awful happened to them, they'd eventually be okay too. But Anna wasn't okay. She wasn't even close.

Gabi's friend was looking at her, eyebrows raised, waiting for an answer.

'Doing good,' Anna replied, nodding, and noticed, once again, how grief had turned her into a big fat liar. 'How about you?'

The woman – *Keisha!* Her name was *Keisha* – nodded philosophically. 'Oh, you know. Same old, same old...' And then her brows drew together. 'I heard about... you know... I'm so sorry.' And then she did the worst possible thing: she placed a sympathetic hand on Anna's arm. It burned.

Anna wanted to shrug it off, to glare at Keisha for stepping over an unmarked boundary, but she didn't. 'Oh, look!' she said, staring at the air past the other woman's head to the opposite side of the large and glossy open-plan kitchen. 'I think Vanessa is looking for you.'

Their hostess was actually nowhere to be seen, but two could play at the 'invisible friend' game. Keisha looked torn for a brief second, then gave Anna a swift one-armed hug and hurried off. Anna breathed out and escaped in the other direction.

She was glad when the hour hand on her watch slid past nine and people got beyond the 'meet and greet' phase and settled into small groups, leaning against kitchen counters, staking out their places in the various seating areas. It made it easier to skirt around the edges of the party, glass of warm fizz in hand, giving the impression she'd just finished a fabulous conversation with one person and was on her way to another, when really – aside from that brief exchange with Keisha – the only person she'd properly engaged with all evening had been Gabi, and that had been in the car on the way there.

They'd barely pulled out of Anna's road when Gabi had said in a very off-hand way, 'Did I mention Jeremy is coming tonight?'

Anna had glanced sharply across at her friend in the passenger seat. Gabi had been sitting calmly, hands folded in her lap, the hint of an angelic smile on her lips. That had troubled Anna, because Gabi didn't do cool and matter-of-fact. Gabi did squeals and smiles and showers of confetti. Over everything. The churning in the pit of Anna's stomach had intensified.

'Oh?' she'd said, deliberately keeping her tone light. 'Remind me who he is again?' Even though she'd known full well that Jeremy was a pal of Vanessa's. Even though she'd known he was a graphic designer and had an 'amazing' flat in Beckenham.

Anna had known it was only going to be a matter of time before that particular grenade landed because Gabi had been casually dropping his name into conversation for weeks now, almost as frequently as she hinted – not always so obliquely – that it was time for Anna to 'move on'.

But Anna didn't want to move on. She wasn't ready. However, the fact she'd said this a thousand times had obviously had no impact on Gabi at all, because there her friend was, smile barely contained, weaving her way through the crowded kitchen with a man in tow.

And the penny finally dropped. It hadn't been her own romantic prospects Gabi had been getting all sparkly and hopeful about earlier on that evening – it had been Anna's.

Anna turned to slip away in the opposite direction but found herself blocked by a gaggle of Vanessa's beauty salon employees, blinged up and colourful like exotic birds. They'd set up camp next to the glass-fronted fridge containing nothing but champagne and didn't seem inclined to budge.

'I thought I'd lost you!' Gabi said, breaking into one of her Julia Roberts-style grins. She glanced over to the man whose arm she had hold of, who, it had to be said, wasn't looking as enthusiastic about this encounter as Gabi was. 'This is Jeremy!' Gabi said, with the same degree of fanfare more suited to announcing an Oscar winner. Tall with sandy-blond hair, Jeremy had the kind of sharp cheekbones that reminded Anna of the detective in the Swedish crime series she was currently bingeing on Netflix.

'Remember I told you about him?'

Anna shot Gabi a look. *Seriously? You're really doing this?*

Undeterred, Gabi countered with a look of her own – *Don't mess this up!* – and carried on talking. 'You know you were saying you wanted to try salsa classes? Well, Jeremy here has been going to some at the Civic Centre. He can tell you all about them.' Gabi then came to the startling realization that everyone's glasses needed topping up and, despite being right next to a fridge packed with champagne, skipped off in the opposite direction to find some. That left Anna and Jeremy staring awkwardly at one another.

Anna took a breath, smiled and said, 'Hello.' Yes, she was feeling a bit antisocial at the moment, but she wasn't rude. That was also why, as they began tiptoeing through the small talk, she didn't tell him salsa classes had been Gabi's idea. Something to get Anna out of the house. Something to take her mind off things. Before that, it had been conversational Italian, and before that, silver jewellery making. Even flipping car maintenance.

And so that was how Anna ended up talking to Jeremy in the kitchen for half an hour. He was a nice man, she decided. Not too full of himself. Not boring. And he'd obviously been blindsided by Gabi's not-so-subtle attempt at matchmaking too. He was trying his best to hide it but not quite succeeding. Anna liked him more for that.

When he suggested moving outside to get away from the crush and noise of the kitchen, she followed him. 'So, how did you become such a salsa expert?' she asked, as they made their way out onto the deck overlooking the immaculate back garden.

Jeremy made a face. 'I definitely wouldn't call myself an expert.'

'No? How long have you been taking lessons?'

He rubbed a hand over his face and laughed. *He had a nice smile*, Anna thought. There was a twinkle in his eyes, a warmth there, something genuine. 'Well, that's just it... I've only been a handful of times, and that was because my sister was desperate to go and my brother-in-law flat-out refused.'

Anna laughed along with him. Not a full-on belly laugh, more a soft chuckle, but it shocked her so much she fell silent again almost instantly. The sound was foreign to her ears, the gentle juddering of her shoulders, alien. How long had it been since she'd last laughed? She wanted to answer 'days', but that would be bare-faced lying. 'Weeks' was also probably a tad optimistic.

Maybe that was why she threw herself into the conversation with this nice man more fully, why she found herself not just standing there, smiling and nodding in the right places, but talking back, sharing little bits of information about herself. Maybe that was why, when he told her about the salsa classes and said he'd brave them again should she wish to go and not want to walk through the door alone, she said she'd think about it.

It struck her, as she steered the conversation towards another subject, that Gabi had picked well. Very well. Because in another life, another reality, she might be feeling butterflies at the thought of dancing with Jeremy, at the thought of plac-ing her hand in his, feeling the brush of his palm against hers when they moved. As they leaned on the deck railing, Jeremy kept looking at her, and every time he did, she was surprised to discover delicate wings tickled her inside.

But Anna knew not to pay much heed to the fluttering. Butterflies were short-lived creatures and, given the frost hardening the depths of her soul, they'd probably be dead soon. Frozen stiff, poor things.

Even so, when Jeremy took the glass of warm, flat cham-pagne from her hand to get her a fresh one, their fingers brushed, and the butterflies started to panic.

That brief touch tripped a secret alarm inside her, like a cashier pressing an under-the-desk button during a bank raid. Red lights flashed in the vault of her heart every few seconds. Sirens blared inside the confines of her skull as Jeremy pushed his way through the crowd back towards the kitchen.

Don't care if he's nice-looking, the alarm yelled. Even really nice-looking. He's not Spencer.

Don't care if he's intelligent, sensitive and gently serious in a way that's appealing, in a way Spencer never was. Don't care that this Jeremy person might never crack a joke every time you tried to talk about something deep or important. He's not him. Never will be.

Anna tried to ignore the nagging alarm when Jeremy returned. She tried to listen to an anecdote about a particularly demanding design client he'd had, but the pulsing warning was there in the back of her head as his gaze began to linger longer on hers, as a little bubble of intimacy began to close around them.

Oh, heck. She knew where this was going.

In less than half an hour, he might gently touch her arm while making a point. Maybe, when Big Ben's chimes rang out across the nation, he'd lean in and kiss her softly on the lips. Her stomach plummeted at the thought. She felt hot and prickly all over.

Not Spencer, the warning flashed again. Not Spencer. Not Spencer. Not Spencer.

Anna tried to smile and nod as Jeremy kept talking, but she felt sick and giddy at the same time. This really wouldn't do. She had to find a way to make it all stop.

But then Jeremy segued into a story about a stag do he'd been on, where he and his pals had spent an afternoon driving racing cars at Goodwood. Anna grabbed the lifeline he offered without hesitation.

'I bought my husband one of those experience days for his birthday,' she said. 'Supercars... He was mad about Aston Martins.'

Jeremy opened his mouth to say, 'Oh, really?' but then her words caught up with him, and he faltered. He nodded a couple of times, a filler action, she guessed, designed to give him time to regroup. 'Aston Martin?' he finally said, his head still bobbing. 'Good choice.'

He was momentarily stalled, she realized, but not shocked at the mention of a husband, as most men might have been if a woman at a party had been talking to them exclusively for more than an hour with no sign of a significant other.

'Gabi told you about Spencer,' she said. A statement, not a question.

'A little,' he replied, and she had to give him credit – he maintained eye contact, didn't look away or do the invent-a-friend routine. Up until then, their conversation had been plain sailing, but he didn't run when the waters got choppy. He stayed and navigated the lurching awkwardness that followed her revelation. The man had class.

But Anna couldn't let that make a difference, so she launched into the story of what happened two years, nine months and eight days ago: how her husband had gone out one evening to the corner shop to buy a bottle of wine. How he'd never returned because someone else had drunk too much wine the very same evening, and then that person had got behind the wheel of a car. It had only been a three-minute walk to the shop.

She'd told Jeremy how she'd heard the sirens as the ambulance arrived and how she'd just known that something was very, very wrong. How she'd left the front door open and had run out of the house in her bare feet, even though it had been March. How she'd seen Spencer lying in the road, surrounded by paramedics. How their faces had been white. Grim. How he'd been pronounced 'dead on arrival' when the ambulance had made it to the hospital.

She told Jeremy every last detail while he watched her, not horrified or embarrassed, but with compassion in his eyes. True compassion, not pity.

And that was why Anna made sure every word was a brick, and that she built each brick into a wall. A boundary line. And when she had finished her tale, she was on one side, and Jeremy was on the other.

Still he didn't turn tail. Damn him.

'About the salsa lessons...' he began. 'I get the feeling they're more Gabi's idea.'

'They are,' she said simply. Truthfully.

He nodded, understanding there would be no salsa-ing for the two of them any time soon. Probably not ever.

'It was nice meeting you, Anna,' he said gently, looking her straight in the eye. Not in a romantic way (she'd definitely squashed that vibe) but in an honest way, letting her know he really meant it.

Anna nodded in reply and swallowed down the stray words forming in her throat, afraid they might form a request for him to stay, to keep talking to her as if she was a human being and not a walking tragedy that needed gentle handling.

He glanced towards the house. 'There's someone I need to...' He didn't finish the sentence but gave her a rueful smile before turning and walking back indoors. Anna watched the back of his head appearing and disappearing as he made his way through the crowded kitchen.

He'd fallen back on the old invisible friend routine after all, but far from hating him for it, she was grateful. He'd done it to save her any further discomfort, not himself. Jeremy had seen her bricks, he'd seen her wall, and he'd respected them. Tears sprang to her eyes.

She was still standing there, staring blurrily through the vast folding glass doors into the house, when Gabi bounded up. 'Where's Jeremy?'

Anna was pretty sure her friend was here asking her this question because she'd spotted him back inside the house on his own. 'He had someone he needed to talk to,' she said, and ignored the flicker of warmth at the idea of being connected to him through this little white lie, a secret just between the two of them. She turned to face the lawn and stared out into the darkness.

Gabi looked crestfallen. 'But... But it looked as if you were getting on really well.'

'We were.'

'You were talking for ages.'

Anna nodded again. She felt a stab of guilt in her stomach.

She really hadn't been fair to Jeremy, chatting to him for so long. And then the knife of guilt, only a flesh wound at that point, plunged itself deeper, twisted and turned. She hadn't been fair to Spencer, either. 'What were you *thinking*, Gabi?'

Gabi feigned ignorance for only a split-second before she crumbled. She looked beseechingly at Anna and shook her head. 'I don't know... I was just thinking that he's a nice guy and that... And that...'

Anna's jaw tightened. 'If you say I need to move on, I'm going to dump this glass of champagne right over your head.'

Gabi's expression grew earnest. 'But you *do* need—' That was it. Anna had had enough. She didn't make good on her threat, but she did fling the glass over the railing of the deck and onto the lawn, where it rolled down the slope and landed under a bush. Vanessa would kill her if she ever found out.

'I don't need to move on!' she yelled. 'It's only been two years!' Gabi opened her mouth, and Anna knew she was going to – quite correctly – point out that it had been closer to three, but she took in Anna's warning expression and shut it again. 'What am I supposed to do? Just snap my fingers and say, "Oh, well! The love of my life, the man I adored with every fibre of my being, is gone, so I'd better just pick a replacement?" As if he was last year's fashion trend?'

'Okay, no... I...'

Anna could see the hurt in her friend's eyes, but it didn't slow her down one bit. *Too bad, Gabi. You're the one who pushed and pushed, the one who prodded this tiger out of its numb sleep, and now you're going to hear it roar!*

'When you've had a relationship that's lasted more than eighteen months, maybe then you can start telling me how to live my life!'

Gabi flinched. Anna knew she'd hit below the belt, that she was going to feel horrible about this when she calmed down, but she had to make Gabi stop. She had to make her see.

There had to be an end to the Italian lessons, to the jewellery making and the salsa dancing. To the *Jeremys*. Because Anna knew there would be more of them paraded out for her to meet if she didn't stand up for herself now. She had to make Gabi understand that she wasn't going to magically get over Spencer if she learned to conjugate the verb *essere* or perform a perfect 'side basic'. She wasn't going to get over him *ever*.

'So don't tell me to move on. Because you don't get it. You don't understand! Not until you've lived through it!'

And, before Gabi could offer any words in her defence, Anna turned and strode across the deck, heading for the gate at the side of the house. Thankfully, it wasn't locked. She couldn't have faced pushing her way back through all those people inside.

You couldn't face having to turn around and see Gabi standing there, silent tears stinging her eyes, a little voice inside her head goaded, but Anna drowned it out by wrenching the gate open and slamming it shut behind her hard enough to make the latch rattle. And then she marched to the cul de sac where she'd parked her car, climbed in, and drove herself home.