

Too Early, Too Late

by Marit Meredith

Gem checked her watch. She was in good time, but still had the feeling that she might be too late. Too late for a last chance. She quickened her step.

If Gem could show *her* a recording of her life, *she'd* have a surprise. Things don't always go to plan. Gem knew what people would have said back then, of course. She wasn't stupid.

'The best thing for her, dear,' and *she* : 'I suppose other parents will be able to give her a better life, won't they?' Gem imagined the young teenage mum-to-be in a turmoil and close to tears. Perhaps her mother hadn't let her go willingly.

Gem was early. Still half an hour to go. She lit a cigarette, then crushed it under-foot. She hadn't smoked in five years, but carried an emergency packet, in case. Gem crushed the packet in her hand. She didn't need emergency reserves any more. Those days were long gone.

Her last foster family was a stroke of luck. Gem was what they wanted, the kind of child they came looking for. She didn't feel like a child. She was fourteen, and almost a woman. She finally felt at home and was allowed to use her talents. Most people wouldn't have approved, but ask her if she cared, and she'd shrug her shoulders. For a few hours a week - the hours she didn't work - she had a lifestyle to be envied. Even when she was too old to be fostered, she stayed. She was one of the family. She felt wanted.

'Miss Reynolds?'

Gem turned, a smile pasted on her face.

'Miss Reynolds - your mother, Helena. I'm afraid she's a little unresponsive, but...'

'Don't you mean my grandmother?'

Dribble ran down the corners of the mouth of the shrivelled-up old woman.

'I can assure you that she's your mother. Here,' the nurse passed her an album, 'your mother put together a record of your family history, and of who she was. As you can see by that cutting, she was the oldest mother ever to give birth, at almost 70 years of age.'

'Bloody hell.'

'That's what it turned into. She was too old, and was advised to give you up for adoption. You must be almost 25? Helena had her 95th birthday the other day.'

Gem nodded. She could have accepted being born of a teenage mother, but this was beyond all reason.

'I think she would want to know that you've got a good life - you know, before she goes.'

'It's too late to make it up to me now, so what does it matter?' Gem looked at the pitiful creature in the wheelchair. 'She couldn't, even if she wanted to, anyway. But I've got a good life, plenty of money and everything I could want. My job — well, that's something else. You wouldn't want to know.' Gem nodded towards the old woman. 'Nor would *she*.'

The short skirt, the plunging neckline, fishnets... it could be any young woman out on a Saturday evening — but this was mid-day, mid-week. The nurse could guess.

'Don't you want to say something to your mother? She can hear you, you know.'

'Really?' Gem applied a fresh layer of Cardinal red lipstick, and took a step back. What was there to say? This woman had never been her mother.

'Goodbye, Helena.'

