The Celebrity Mother

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Prologue

They buried the baby alive.

She was a girl and her mother had sobbed the moment she emerged from the womb. The *devas* had not responded to her prayers for a boy; she must be cursed to have given birth to a girl. A girl born into a poor family was a bankruptcy notice. They would never be able to afford her dowry. They could not even afford to feed her. And therefore she must die.

And so, six days after the baby had gasped her first breath, two silhouettes carried her, concealed under a dirty sari, on to a patch of wasteland in southern Delhi. It was midnight and the unsympathetic moon shone down brightly, highlighting their every move. Her uncle rocked her surreptitiously; her father began to dig. The grave was shallow, barely a foot deep. They placed the baby in the

grave. She smiled up at them, dark eyes sparkling, enjoying her novel new cradle. When they tossed the first shovel of dusty red earth over her, she gurgled and giggled. When the dirt flew into her mouth, she began to scream.

A distant noise; some shouts. The two men became fearful. The cover was thin but it would have to do. One last spray of red earth was kicked over her, and they were gone.

She wanted to scream but her mouth was clotted with earth. Tears formed moist brown trickles on her cheeks. She waved her fists and punched ineffectually against her earthy blanket. She craved air like her mother's milk. Her tiny lungs fluttered in panic. And then faltered. She closed her eyes and saw the blue god who had once smiled over her cot. He seemed to be smiling at her now, and suddenly her tomb was filled with light—

Ten Years Later

1

Karina

I'm sitting on a plane to India, enjoying the sort of high that would normally take unimaginable quantities of cocaine to achieve. As we soar into the aching blue sky, I feel like punching the air. It may be a cliché but it's true: today is the first day of the rest of my life.

A journalist from *Elegance* is sitting beside me. She's got ebony hair, her nose is ever so slightly crooked and her lips are hungry for collagen. But she looks elegant in her Dolce & Gabbana suit. And I can't help feeling smug. A year ago my agent plagued *Elegance* with ideas for features. We offered them a story about my plans to start my own clothing line. *No*, they said. A story about my tragic childhood with an overbearing mother. *No*. A story about

my secret lesbian crush on Lindsay Lohan (not strictly true but by now I was getting desperate). *No no no*. Don't call us, we'll call you. Today, life is very different. After a bidding war with three other magazines, *Elegance* have paid me *fifty thousand pounds* for this exclusive. It means a whole new wardrobe, a new kitchen and, when I return from this trip – shh – a new nose.

'So, Karina, how do you feel?' Patricia, the journalist, asks.

'I feel nervous. Excited.' Patricia looks rather unconvinced so I add hastily, 'I feel I could cry, I'm so happy!'

She looks pleased and scribbles hard.

'I mean – it's just so amazing,' she says. 'You're about to change the entire life and destiny of a child. A child who could be doomed to poverty, to working in a sweat shop for one pence an hour – and you're going to save them.'

I feel a tiny flicker of alarm when she says this. But I quickly shrug it away. Last night I suffered a terrible panic attack and had to call Clare. She assured me that she had a similar experience the night before she gave birth to her first child. She felt terrified that it would be the beginning of a prison sentence – right up until the moment her baby boy was placed on her breast and she felt a deep wave of unconditional love. And although I'm adopting, I've read countless stories

of women who experience just as deep an emotion when they first set eyes on their chosen child.

'I just see the whole thing as an opportunity to *grow*,' I say. I said this in the interview with the woman from the adoption agency and she looked very impressed.

She looked even more impressed when I said I'd donate ten thousand pounds to the adoption agency in Delhi. Adoptions in India can often take a year or more, even with the new regulations to cut red tape. Funnily enough, mine was whizzed through in a matter of weeks.

'So let's just recap on your biog,' Patricia says, eyeing up a press release. 'You're thirty-four—'

'Thirty,' I say automatically.

Then I remember that my agent has advised me to stop lying about my age. He said it would look better if I opted for a 'more mature image'.

'Thirty-four,' I concede.

Patricia laughs and winks at me, and I echo her. But I can't help thinking – will I have to tell men from now on that I really am thirty-four? Will they still fancy me?

'And you started out in showbiz at a very young age – you were only four when you appeared in a Dulex ad.'

'That's me – I was the Dulex girl. My mum pushed me hard.'

'Your mother is . . .'

'She's dead.'

'I'm so sorry. So, after Dulex, at the age of eighteen, you were chosen to be a member of the girl band Beppo.'

'Yep.'

'And after seven years of chart success, your group split up. Soon after, you started dating Liam Holt and your relationship hit the headlines. When you split up, you ended up in rehab.' Suddenly there is a glint of steel in her smile. 'And when you applied for adoption, did the social worker who interviewed you know about this?'

'Rehab was eight years ago,' I assert, waving my hand. 'I didn't go there because of drugs – I was just feeling *tired*. Look, when I went to the Priory everyone was in there – Kate Moss, George Michael – it was a networking opportunity as much as anything.'

'And then you went solo and had a one-hit wonder with "Summer Sun" – then, sadly, your follow-up was a total flop and you were dropped by your label.'

'I decided I'd prefer to go into acting – singing has always been a joy of mine, but acting was more of a vocation—'

'But you ended up in a bit part in the British film *Three Weddings And A Wanker*, which went straight to video.'

'Straight to video is not a sin in my eyes. I don't make films just for the money, or for superficial reasons like box-office success. I believe in artistic integrity, in the chance to work with a great director—'

'Including *Bank Job Kung Fu 4*?'

'I did all my own stunts,' I splutter.

'Your fame is in decline, while Liam has settled down with his new girlfriend, the actress Hayley Young. D'you feel that the adoption is a reaction to losing Liam – whom you once described as the love of your life?'

'Absolutely not,' I cry, my anger taking control. Then I swallow, take a deep breath, force a smile. My agent has negotiated sight of a full copy of the article before it goes to press, so I'll damn well make sure it's slashed out if she dares to include it. 'A woman doesn't need a man to make her feel whole – but she does need a baby.'

Patricia looks struck. I'm pretty good at giving lines to journalists. A month ago, when size zero was being debated all over the place, I gave hundreds of anguished quotes about my infamous yo-yo dieting's being entirely the fault of stick insect models. But, in truth, yo-yo dieting is the best PR a celeb can do. Deliberately swinging from anorexia to obesity on a month-by-month basis – and showing off both extremes in low-cut dresses at premieres,

or bikinis on the beach – is a guaranteed way to keep your photo in the magazines. Even if the captions are less than flattering.

'And lastly . . .' She hesitates.

She'd better not say it, I think. So far she's avoided the subject, but if she dares to bring it up, I think I'll scream.

'. . . what would you say to those who might claim that your decision to adopt an Indian girl is really just a way of jumping on the Angelina Jolie band-wagon?'

2

Karina

I'd like to rewrite – no, *correct* – history by asserting that I was one of the first people to initiate the celeb-adopting-a-baby trend, second only to Angelina, and way before Madonna. This isn't the first time this has happened to me. Eight years ago I remember I bumped into Kate Moss at a party and she admired the flower-power waistcoast I was wearing. Three days later, Moss left her house wearing something identical and all the magazines were having orgasms over 'the new trend Moss has set again'.

This is my second attempt; the first never really came together.

I'll tell you how the idea of celebrity adoption came to me. I hadn't a thought of Angelina five years ago, on a Saturday night in July, when I was

sitting watching TV alone. I remember the night clearly – I had just turned thirty and I was recovering from a week of partying which had culminated in a forty-eight-hour binge-orgy-riot at my house in Primrose Hill. The debris was still littered everywhere: little pyramids of ash all over the floor, cigarette stubs branding my lovely Conran furniture, bottles clanking every way I turned. But I was too depressed to do anything but sit in my nest of trash and filth. The day after my party had finished, my latest crush, a toy boy from *Hollyoaks*, had just dumped me. All the tabloids had exuberantly revealed that he had been two-timing me with his eighteen-year-old co-star all along. Even though I told everyone I really didn't care, it had just been a casual thing, he'd been nothing more than my bit-of-fluff toy boy, deep down I missed his boyish laugh and cute texts. I felt humiliated. I felt *old*.

Thirty is a horrible age to be – not just because of the first flash of crow's feet around your eyes, or the advent of Botox – but because you're forced to look at your life and consider where you are. After my doomed love affair with Liam in my mid-twenties, I had emerged from rehab determined to change. No more drugs, no more messing around. I was going to make it big by the age of thirty. I'd have a house in Hollywood Hills, be married to

Tom Cruise and be earning a salary of twenty million dollars a year. I was hungry and ambitious and determined that nothing would stop me. I was convinced that I had the talent and the drive. I'd been in the business for long enough to know that drive is the more important.

I hadn't thought about the importance of luck. I hadn't imagined that I would keep making the wrong decision at every turn. That the part in the Brit-flick *The Bad Bride* that looked so naff and only paid five hundred pounds would make my rival Melanie Prince a global star. That the song I chose to launch my solo career would fail to inspire the masses to buy the next. All around me, it seemed that Lady Luck was showering golden kisses on girls who went on to become soap stars and pop stars and movie stars and model stars whilst I just hovered in the background, getting a little older and a little more disappointed year by year.

My disappointment began to breed self-doubt. As I sat there on that Saturday night, watching TV, a terrible feeling began to possess me. It had started as a whisper a few years ago, a little voice in my ear at the end of each failed audition. Now it was in danger of becoming a scream.

It's too late, it said to me. *You're past it. You're not getting the breaks. It's not going to happen. You're going to have to sell your house and work*

in Tescos and accept your dream isn't going to happen.

It's too late.

I drowned the voice out by grabbing a nearby wine bottle that still had some dregs of red in it and downing it in one. Then I turned up the volume on the TV.

On the screen was a concert. Bono was singing on a big stage in a park. Crowds were screaming praise. A banner behind him said AFRICAN APPEAL. Every so often a red strip would run at the bottom of the screen with a hotline number begging people to donate. Fifty pounds will buy a family a goat and a plough, it said. A hundred and fifty pounds will buy six thousand water purification tablets. A hundred and fifty pounds will also a buy a new Hermès scarf, I thought vaguely. Normally I found these charity appeals quite moving and would always end up ringing and donating. But tonight I was too upset for compassion; I couldn't help feeling sulky and cynical. How lucky those Africans were to have people raising money for them. I'd bought this house in Primrose Hill in my twenties when I was flush with my money from Beppo, but recently I'd been struggling with the mortgage – I could do with a charity concert myself. I pictured Madonna, Bono and Ronan Keating all getting up on stage and appealing to the crowds: 'Let's all stop

to spare a thought for Karina and the Louis Vuitton she so desperately needs. Please give generously.' I smiled.

Then Bob Geldof came up on the screen and began talking about the orphans in Africa. I rummaged around for another wine bottle. And then the thought hit me.

I sat up. *What if*, I thought, *what if I were to adopt an African child*?

I mean, all Geldof had organised was a few concerts. And how much effort did a concert really take? All he had to do was phone up a few friends and say, 'D'you want a chance to look good and plug your latest release at the same time?' Who would say no to that? Yet look at how famous he'd become as a result. In fact, he was better than famous. He was seen as a saviour. In our secular Western world, he was our equivalent to Gandhi.

What if, I thought, the way to get famous was not to get drunk, collapse in the gutter without any knickers on and have a breast enlargement, but actually *do good*? Life was all about trends. Moss's thinness was a reaction to the curvy supermodels of the eighties. Everything in our current society screamed Thatcher's legacy; everything was about money and selfishness. What if I bucked the trend and started a new one? What if I made philanthropy as fashionable as skinny jeans?

What if, instead of buying a goat or a farm or a tractor, I actually went one step further? What if I offered to adopt one of those African babies?

Bright butterflies of fantasy began to flutter through my mind. I saw myself being filmed by the BBC on safari in Africa with Geldof, wearing designer khaki. I pictured Geldof saying to the camera, 'Karina – she's just so real. She's been such an inspiration to me . . .'

I was so excited, I called up my agent at home.

'I don't know,' he said, sounding doubtful, 'it sounds like a weird idea to me. I mean, what if you get the kid and you go off it? Can you just give it back?'

'I won't *go off it*! And it won't be an it – it'll be a lovely little boy or girl!'

There was a long pause. 'I don't know, Karina. I can't imagine any of the magazines being interested in this . . .'

'Well, what am I supposed to do?' I cried, my euphoria gushing out of me. Hysteria immediately filled the vacuum. 'I'm thirty and nobody will hire me – *tell me what I'm supposed to do?*'

'I've got you an advert for Persil. Look, it's a Saturday night, Karina—'

'You think an *advert* is going to solve this?' Realising I was on the brink of tears, I slammed down the phone in shame.

I wept, then – but only briefly. I have always been one of life's determined people. His lack of belief in me only inspired me further. When my mum took me to my first audition at the age of four, the casting director told us I didn't have star quality. He said I should give up there and then. But my mum kept taking me from audition to audition, whispering in my ear, 'You *are* a star, you will *never* give up, *never*.' I think that's why I'm so pig-headed now. When I want something, I get it and, as I was taught, I never, *ever* give up.

I spent the whole of Sunday cleaning my house with a burst of fresh, happy energy. This is the start of a new me, I told myself. From now on everything is going to change. You are going to be the most glamorous philanthropist in the country.

I threw myself into researching adoption with huge gusto. Fran and all my friends teased me that I'd never make it past the interview with the social worker. But, of course, I passed it with flying colours. All the frustrated acting abilities that had been stewing inside me for years finally got a chance to be expressed. I gave the social worker a performance of a lifetime, and by the end she said I was one of the best candidates she'd ever come across.

She was, however, a little concerned that I wanted to adopt a severely disabled baby.

'I'm quite sure,' I asserted strongly. To begin with,

I'd decided a disabled baby would earn me double philanthropy points; if I was going to do this, I had to really go for it. But then I'd seen the photos of the kids and felt a genuine flare of compassion in my heart. They were the kids nobody wanted to adopt; the ones who would spend all their childhoods in orphanages with few facilities to help them. They really did need a home.

I kept telling myself it was a wonderful idea, even whilst everyone around me was telling me I was insane. My two closest friends are the girls I sang with in Beppo: Fran and Clare. Recently, however, I've grown apart from Clare, who has settled down, married, had kids and makes her own jewellery for a living. Fran, on the other hand, is the female equivalent of Peter Pan. Peter Pan on cocaine, that is. For the first time in years, however, both of them were in complete agreement. Convinced that I was making a Terrible Mistake. Fran even tried to book me into the Priory behind my back for full-on counselling. Then one day Clare came over and said, 'Show me the papers the agency have sent you.' I showed Clare the photo of the baby.

'Isn't she so *sweet*?' I said.

'No,' Clare said bluntly. 'I don't think that her squinting, cross-eyed gaze and drooling cleft lip are sweet at all. I'm sorry to put it so harshly, but I don't.'

'I don't want a designer kid who looks like

something out of a perfume ad!' I cried. 'I want to help a kid who really needs a home.'

'It's not about looks, Karina – you're not getting me. Look,' she said, pointing to a chart detailing the baby's height, weight and head circumference. 'This looks serious. I'm going to show this to my paediatrician.'

A week later, Clare told me her paediatrician's verdict: the baby's head circumference was so low it was off the radar.

'Look, Karina, I think that you're not as superficial as you pretend to be. I think that underneath your insane "fame philanthropy" motives for this baby thing you actually mean well—'

'Clare!' I gasped in outrage.

'But – *but*,' she interrupted insistently, 'you haven't thought this through. This baby is very, very ill. It's going to need speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, special education – we're talking practically twenty-four-hour support and care. Imagine the cost – you're already struggling so how the hell are you going to afford it? You'll never be able to go out on the town with Fran. You'll have no time for any boyfriends.'

'I'm done with men,' I snapped, but deep down I knew that Clare was right. Adopting a baby was a big thing as it was. Taking on a disabled one was a huge responsibility I just wasn't ready for.

A week passed and I quietly cancelled the adoption. I told all my friends that the agency had suddenly closed down after a health and safety test and I was heartbroken to have missed out on such an amazing opportunity. My agent seemed relieved; he told me none of the magazines he'd spoken to seemed that interested, and cheered me up when he told me he'd got me a bit part in the new James Bond movie.

All the same, I couldn't help feeling a pinch inside. From time to time I thought about that poor baby and wondered what type of life she was living. Whether she was happy; whether she'd ever found a home.

And then – you know the rest of the story. Angelina adopted her second child and then Madonna got in on the act and soon you couldn't open a magazine without seeing them clutching their adorable little darlings against their cheeks. Every time I saw one, I wanted to yell at passers-by, 'It was *my* idea, *mine mine mine*.'

You can imagine how incensed I was when my agent casually said to me some years on, 'You're thirty-four, you must be feeling broody, Karina – have you ever thought of adopting an orphan from abroad? You'd get heaps of press.'

After I had raved for five minutes, he told me

to shut up and make sure I adopted one from India.

'Angelina's covered Cambodia, Ethiopia and Vietnam, Madonna's done Africa. We need a new angle – a new country. You'd better get in quick: Madonna's got her eye on India right now.'

I went home and thought long and hard about it. By now, I was a little older and wiser. I asked myself, *do I really want to do this? Not just as a publicity stunt – but as a real life choice? Do I want to be a mother?* And then I thought about how lonely I had begun to feel recently, how empty my bed seemed unless it was filled with a man. And how, to my surprise, I had begun to feel tiny maternal pangs from time to time – a baby in the street would provoke a gooey smile and when I picked up Clare's baby I didn't want to hand her back. I realised that yes – I did genuinely feel ready to be a mother.

Clare suggested that, given my obsession with beauty sleep, I might do better with a young girl rather than a baby. It sounded a great idea to me. I decided I was ready. I had just done a very lucrative ad in Japan and I used every penny to make a donation to the agency, speeding it up as fast as we could in order to beat Madonna. Even so, we were surprised by how enthralled the press were. Even my agent was amazed at the revival in my career – 'Fifty K!' he kept crying. 'Fifty K! They wouldn't normally pay

this amount for a D-list celeb – I think it's only because you're Liam's ex,' he said, which made me so cross I nearly called the whole thing off.

And here I am, sitting on a plane, next to a journalist from *Elegance*. I am about to adopt Devika. The agency has been sending over pictures of her and she looks like an absolute angel. Over the last few weeks, I've been sleeping with her picture under my pillow and taking it out every morning and giving it an affectionate kiss.

'You know, when Devika was born her parents actually tried to bury her alive,' I tell Patricia. 'Can you believe that? I mean – imagine being so poor that you have to bury your baby, knowing that if she lives you'll starve and she'll end up a beggar or a prostitute.' I stroke her photo, her perfect nose. 'She's ten now and she couldn't get any Indian parents to adopt her because she has darker skin. It's not popular, apparently, because when they adopt they like to pretend the kids are their own.'

'That's such a moving story,' Patricia says. 'I really think you're doing something very special.'

Is it just me, or do I detect a certain doubt in her voice?

I have a funny feeling Patricia doesn't quite believe in me. Maybe it's just the jet lag tiring us out, but she seems to be smiling less and less and that steely

glint is making a home for itself in her eyes. Eventually the questions dry up and Patricia's head drops back as she falls asleep but I stay awake, seething with determination and plans. I'm going to show her. By the end of this trip, I'm going to damn well prove to her that I can be the best celebrity mother in the world.