

Celebrity Shopper

Carmen Reid

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Extract

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Chapter One

On-screen Annie:

Purple and white dress (Mango)
Blue wooden wedge sandals (Chloé)
Mighty beige control pants (Spanx)
Belt? Yes? No? Can't decide (Topshop)
Heavy-duty anti-perspirant (Mitchum)
Heavy-duty anti-shine powder (Clinique)
Heavy-duty hairspray (Elnett)
Total est. cost: £530

'I think you're going to cry . . .'

'OK, here's our shooting schedule for today,' Amelia said, opening the file in her hands and bringing out two sheets of paper neatly stapled together.

Amelia, in her white ankle-grazer jeans, chiffon top and pink suede wedges, may have looked as if she was about to go clubbing, but she was the most ruthlessly efficient PA Annie had ever met – which was of course why Tamsin Hinkley, producer and boss of Hinkley Productions, employed her.

Our shooting schedule!

Annie still felt a little inward thrill when she heard those words. Appearing on TV still wasn't ordinary; it still didn't feel humdrum, typical or routine in any way at all.

For years Annie Valentine had worked as a personal shopper in The Store, one of London's most glorious fashion meccas. Somehow, even though she wasn't willowy thin, or under thirty, or married to a famous producer, she had managed to swap shop life for a TV-presenting job. Well, OK, her first TV-presenting job had been a thankless, penniless grind, but now . . . now she was filming her second series of *How Not To Shop*.

The first six-episode series had been a surprise Channel 4 hit, steadily climbing the ratings charts to become one of the most popular slots on Wednesday night.

A second ten-episode series had been commissioned, Annie's generous wages had increased and now she was beginning to feel like a real, live, genuine TV star. She got fan mail! People waved at her in the street! Taxi drivers asked her: 'Ain't I seen you on the telly or something?'

Just like its presenter, *How Not To Shop* was girlie but ballsy, frivolous but with feeling. It was a chatty but inspiring Girls' Night In.

Viewers didn't necessarily watch at home alone. They rang their sisters and their girlfriends, opened a bottle of wine, brought along a bucket of popcorn and watched Annie together.

Annie did makeovers on the show, yes, but always with a twist: what to wear to your ex-husband's wedding, what to wear to ask for a promotion, what to wear to tell the plumber that his work was terrible and he wasn't getting paid . . .

The show also featured a high-street sweep, with Annie picking out all the best things from the mainstream stores.

Plus, she did little thought-provoking strands, including a regular 'Women and Money' slot. She didn't just want to be on TV encouraging women to part with their hard-earned cash, she wanted them to be careful and clever with it too.

Annie tried to understand money, as did her partner in the slot, Svetlana Wisneski. Svetlana, a multiply married millionairess, would sashay on to the screen draped in a super-label dress plus jewellery worth ten times the average salary and huskily begin with something like: 'Is a *w*-ell-known Russian saying: "Spending is short, but earning is long." Don't throw away your money, my darrrrrrrlings, choose and use your assets *w*-isely.'

After twenty-plus years in England, Svetlana had finally learned to pronounce her 'w's properly, but she tended to over-exaggerate them.

Since Annie had been signed up to do the programme, she'd gone through a series of radical changes. Her once trademark bright blond ponytail had been lopped off into a tousled, face-framing short cut which highlighted her delicate features, ready smile and friendly eyes in a different way. Annie had always been devoted to fashion and dressed to impress but now there was more clever camouflage work involved. Her figure, ever more curvaceous than she would have liked, had now curved right out of a size 12 into the dangerous fashion territory of size 14 and *beyond*. This had everything to do with her biggest change of all, the knock-out change, the one which had redefined her the most: she'd gone from being a mother of two to a mother of four.

Annie still wasn't sure how it was possible to be so busy and so tired at exactly the same time. Without her partner Ed currently taking an extended paternity leave and dealing with just about every aspect of family life, there was no way Annie could be the star of her own television show.

Right now, Ed was downstairs coping admirably with breakfast for the thirteen-month-old twins: Michael and Minette. Or Micky and Minnie as Annie's thirteen-year-old boy, Owen, had christened them as soon as he'd heard their official names.

'So what are we going to wear on screen today?' Amelia asked Annie.

Annie closed her eyes, not to help her think, but to let make-up girl, Ginger, apply a careful coat of shadow, liner, and then mascara for the benefit of the camera.

'These are the shoes and I think you're going to cry,' Annie replied. She pointed past Amelia to a pair of high wooden wedges adorned with a wealth of straps and buckles. 'You're going to be soooo jealous.'

'Oh, to die for . . . ' Amelia agreed, 'but that's as far as you've got?'

'The red dress?' Annie asked hopefully.

'No!' Amelia replied, flipping through her file until she came to the outfit schedule. 'Been worn four times already; even the viewers who think it's great you wear things again are beginning to worry.'

'I love that dress, it's so flattering,' Annie sighed, and then ventured: 'The orange?'

'Too like red,' was Amelia's verdict. 'How about something blue? Or purple? Shall I look in the cupboard?'

Annie wanted to say no, because she didn't like people – even people as smart as Amelia – to leaf through her carefully chosen things. But this was her 'office' wardrobe. There was a clothing allowance for the show (as Annie constantly reminded Ed. Yes, but she definitely subsidized it, as Ed constantly reminded Annie).

The BlackBerry on Annie's desk, right beside her hand, began to ring. Actually, it began to trill, buzz, bleep, shuffle and jump, because she kept her phone on every possible

setting so that despite the noisy chaos which tended to surround her – both at home and in the studio – she didn't miss a call . . . well, not so many calls anyway.

'Hi!' she answered cheerfully, seeing the name of her sister Dinah on the screen. 'How are you doing? I'm sorry it's been—'

'Exactly one week since you said you were going to phone me right back?' Dinah sounded unusually frosty.

'I've been busy,' Annie protested. 'The telly . . . the babies . . .'

'Annie Valentine, you know perfectly well that you have a full-time, completely saintly nanny partner on hand twenty-four hours a day, so don't you dare give me the I-was-too-busy-with-the-babies line,' Dinah snapped.

'I'm sorry. I should have phoned before,' Annie apologized.

'Yeah, you should have.'

Annie decided to change the subject. 'How's work?'

'That's what I've phoned to tell you. I've been laid off and I'm just gutted . . .'

 Dinah began.

But the words didn't get nearly as much of Annie's attention as they should have done because, just then, Amelia held out a monstrous shiny purple wrap thing which Annie must have bought when she was drunk or maybe blinded by the glare of the sun – what other explanation could there be? Plus, the call-waiting signal began to bleep in her ear.

'No, no, no. No way!' Annie exclaimed, which was right for Dinah, but she was actually talking to Amelia about the dress.

To Dinah, she said: 'Babes, will you hang on for one tiny moment? Just for me? Pleeese. I'm expecting a call from my boss any second.'

She pressed a button.

'Annie!' came the warm, fruity voice of her best friend, Connor McCabe, actor.

'Hello, honey,' she greeted him.

'We're supposed to do lunch,' he reminded her.

'I know, I know, I've been terrible. How many times have I put you off now?'

'Three. One more refusal and that's probably it, I'll have to strike you from my contacts book.'

'Connor! We go way back, doesn't history count for anything?'

'Errr . . . no.'

'I knew you when you weren't famous,' she reminded him.

'I can now say the same thing about you,' he reminded her.

'I'm not famous,' she immediately protested, mainly because the idea of being famous was terrifying.

Annie loved doing the TV show, she loved the programme's growing success, but she tried to think of it as doing what she'd always done in the changing rooms of The Store: giving people good advice about how to make clothes work for them. It was just on a bigger scale . . . the latest viewing figures were close to two million.

Annie didn't want fame. Imagine having photographers posted outside your front door, there to snap you on the way to the supermarket all covered in dog hairs and baby sick. Imagine being sniped at in gossip columns. Or having to endure your bikini shots on a magazine cover. It was too hideous even to think about.

Annie had decided that if she didn't act famous, if she still went on the underground and still hung out in the same places with the same people as she'd always done before, then she couldn't possibly become famous. Fame

was a nasty, inconvenient disease that she didn't want to catch.

Whereas money . . . now that was a different matter altogether. Annie wanted all the money that could possibly be had, because to her, money represented security. She'd not had nearly enough of it for most of her adult life and somehow, even though she was very well paid, she still didn't seem to have enough now.

On her desk, buried under all the other cuttings, magazines and bits of paperwork, was Annie's bank statement for this month, greeted as usual with horrified shock. It wasn't just the clothes, it was the mortgage, the school fees, the groceries, the taxis, the gym subscription, all the multiple expenses of life. If you worked hard, you seemed to have to spend just as hard. Maybe she would cancel the gym subscription . . . it had been five months since she last set foot in the gym.

'So when are we doing lunch? I need a date,' Connor insisted. 'I want to go somewhere incredibly cool and show off to everyone who's anyone that hot new telly star Annie V is my oldest and dearest best friend.'

'Aha, so it's not about me, it's all about you,' Annie pointed out.

'It's always all about me!' Connor told her. 'You've known me long enough to know that.'

'True . . .' Annie was still shaking her head at Amelia's dress options. She was also sucking in her cheeks as instructed by Ginger, who was now dusting on rouge.

'How about a week on Thursday?' she suggested, glancing about for her planner, but unable to locate it. 'I don't think there's anything happening lunchtime that Thursday; I'm sure I can get away for a couple of hours. Where shall we go?' She did manage to locate a Post-it note on her desk and a Biro to scribble down the details.

'I think we have to go to De Soto's; it's where all the Soho power people go these days. It's the place. The powerhouse.'

'OK, you book the table and I will see you there a week on Thursday, one p.m. I will call you immediately if I have a problem with that. Love you,' she added.

Connor hung up and Annie flicked back over to Dinah's call, while instructing Amelia: 'Yes! That one, that will work with the shoes, we'll open it right up, put a white vest top underneath, very fresh, very summer-is-on-its-way.'

'It's February,' Amelia reminded her.

'I know, darlin', but we have to give people hope. Hope is what we are all about.'

She spoke into the phone: 'Dinah, babes?'

The line was dead.

'Oh no,' Annie said out loud.

Annie would have called Dinah straight back, her finger would honestly have hit redial, straightaway, but just then Ed popped his head round the door and all activity in the room ceased, because he had Micky and Minnie in his arms.

'Hello, my babies!' Annie gushed.

'Hey, cuties,' Amelia had to join in.

'Awwww,' Ginger added.

Micky and Minnie were perfect. They were chubby, giggly and drooling. They crawled, they wriggled, they had delicious, chunky rolls of fat on legs which they waved about delightedly at nappy-changing time.

Their dark blond hair curled on top of their big heads and they had pearly white teeth that winked with every smile. Minnie had Ed's sparkling blue eyes, Micky had eyes that were a hazel green-brown, and apart from this one difference, it might have been hard for even family members

to tell the twins apart; although, obviously, they were dressed as a boy and a girl.

The dressing of the babies was something of a little 'discussion topic'. In fact, the sleeping and eating routines of the babies, the reading material for the babies, the feeding of the babies, the placing of the babies' cots and so on and so forth: these were all little 'discussion topics' for Annie and Ed.

Annie had been a mummy twice before (to Lana, now seventeen, as well as Owen). Ed was entirely new to the game. He was the over-anxious first-time parent, whereas Annie, who had a whole TV career taking up quite a portion of her time, tended to be relaxed. Maybe sometimes just a little too relaxed.

Such as when she fell asleep with Micky in her arms and dropped him off the sofa and on to the dog, Dave. Or when she re-heated a bottle of defrosted breast-milk and gave Minnie food poisoning. Or what about when she walked home from the corner shop without the pram? She hadn't realized until she'd put on the kettle and then gone upstairs to look for the babies in their cots. *That* was a moment she'd never forget.

'Annie?' Ed asked her now. 'Do you have a second?'

'Ermmm . . .'

Her face was done, but there were still nails to file and paint just as soon as she'd been buttoned into the purple and white dress which had been given the Amelia seal of approval.

'I think we need to talk about the whole builder thing again,' Ed said, narrowing his eyes the way he did whenever he was worried.

Any moment now and he would push back his messy (in a good way) tangle of brown curly hair and then she would know that he was really agitated.

'The builder is going to be fine, really fine...' she rushed

to reassure him. 'I've spoken to two other people he's done work for and they were both totally positive.'

'Yeah, but do we really need the work done?' Ed asked. 'It's not as if we don't have enough going on. And it's very expensive.'

'Ed!' She looked at him with a touch of exasperation. 'We will all enjoy having a fantastic new bathroom. I promise you.'

'Yes,' he was prepared to concede, 'but huge new windows for the kitchen?'

'Loads more light,' she countered, 'plus, they are triple-glazed, so even though they're bigger, the room will be warmer.'

'Hmmm . . .' He still sounded doubtful. 'But the cupola? Surely we do not need a cupola slap bang in the middle of a roof that we paid a complete fortune to repair?'

Ah, the cupola. The cupola was going to be much, much harder to argue for, she had to admit, as she stripped down to her strict and controlling mega-underwear.

'While we've got the builders in anyway,' she began, 'we might as well get everything done that we want to get done. We don't want to go through all the mess and upheaval all over again.'

'You said that the last time,' Ed reminded her. 'It's only three years since the house was entirely "remodelled" . . .'

'But it's dark and gloomy in the hallway; if we let in more light, by putting in some windows . . .'

Some windows . . . She was talking about a copper-domed turret, she was soooo playing it down here, but this was her little indulgence. She'd worked unbelievably hard, right through her pregnancy, back in the studio two months after the birth. She'd earned that cupola.

'If we put in more windows,' she went on, 'think of all the money we'll save on lighting the hall.'

'We're making a hole in the roof, Annie.'

'But it's so well insulated,' she protested.

'That's really nice,' Amelia broke in cheerfully, 'maybe with a chunky belt?' She was pretending to tune out this domestic disagreement, but really she and Ginger were lapping up every single word.

'Yeah, I have a good belt for this,' Annie agreed, before turning to Ed once again. 'Babes' – she gave him her biggest, most soothing smile – 'I think you're a bit tired. As soon as I'm back this afternoon, I'll take the babies and you have a nap. You'll feel much better when you've had more sleep.'

She didn't add: *and so would I, but it's completely impossible, because these bloomin' babies are the worst sleepers in the whole world.*

'All right, all right,' Ed conceded. It was hopeless trying to talk to Annie like this anyway: him with his armful of baby, her with her army of helpers.

Despite having a baby in each arm, Ed still managed to use his foot to give the door a huffy slam on his way out.

The door slam sent a blast of air across the room, scattering papers across Annie's desk and sending the small yellow Post-it over the edge and down to the floor, where it settled behind a neatly stacked pile of *Vogue* magazines.