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Written by Alexandra Brown

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Christmas at CARRINGTON'S

Alexandra Brown

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Prologue

I never used to believe in lust at first sight. You know, the kind where your tummy tingles and your heart soars so high it feels as if it might just burst right out of your chest, cartoon style, and do a deliriously euphoric freeform dance around the room? But I certainly do now. Oh yes, because that's exactly how I felt the very first time I clapped eyes on Tom. And he's going to be here, right outside the door to my flat in approximately five minutes. I literally *can not wait*. I truly think he might be the one. I hope so. Now, that really would be pretty special indeed.

The doorbell buzzes, sending my pulse into overdrive. He's here. And on time – previous boyfriends could certainly learn a thing or two about timekeeping from him. I practically tear down the hallway to press the intercom before pausing to inhale hard through my nose and exhale even harder, keen to create a modicum of breeziness.

'Hello,' I breathe, in what I hope is a sophisticated, nonchalant-sounding voice, à la Angelina Jolie, or someone equally poised. I can't imagine she ever legged it down her hallway gushing to let Brad in. Oh no no no.

'It's me,' Tom says. *Mmm, familiar. And I like it*. For a nanosecond I contemplate asking 'Who?', to create an airy, elusive aura, but quickly decide against it. It's not my style to play games, even if the relationship is brand new and we're both still learning how to 'be' with each other. Besides, I don't want him thinking I'm some kind of a milly with a stack of men on the go.

'Hi Tom.' I glance at the screen and smile on seeing him attempt to smooth his tangle of thick dark curls. With his velvety brown eyes and year-round Mediterranean real tan, he's utterly delicious and, to be honest, I never in my wildest dreams thought I stood a chance. He has the kind of looks and background that could bag him a supermodel, but without any trace of arrogance or sense of entitlement that the beautiful people sometimes have. And occasionally I have to pinch myself ... that he wants me, ordinary Georgie Hart from Mulberry-On-Sea, a size 14 on a good day, with a brunette bob that often does a spectacular impression of a pair of floppy spaniel ears, especially if I don't use my giant sleep-in Velcro rollers for a bit of extra bouf.

'Georgie, can you come downstairs please?'

'Sure,' I reply, wondering what he's up to as I reach for my coat. We had planned to snuggle up and watch a film. I have popcorn and Häagen-Dazs.

'Change of plan. It's a surprise. Quick, you must come down right now.' His voice is full of boyish excitement and I love this side of him – the stark contrast to his usual

serious, business-like demeanour at work. Tom works at Carrington's too, the department store where I run the Women's Accessories section. In fact, he owns the store; he's the managing director, the majority shareholder, so we have to be discreet. Not that the other staff mind – quite the opposite, in fact, they all really like him – but still, nobody wants to see the boss indulging in a PDA in the workplace. I'm sure it's not the done thing for people in his position. An 'emerging captain of industry', as one *FT* reporter recently crowned him.

After grabbing my key and pulling the door closed behind me, I bomb down the stairs and arrive in the little foyer area. Tom is leaning casually against the row of mailboxes with an extremely cheeky-looking smile on his beautiful face. *Mm-mmm, dreamy*. He'd be perfect starring in one of those rom-com films. I tiptoe up to give him a kiss and he circles my waist before pulling me in close to his left hip and treating me to a burst of his delicious chocolatey scent. I'm just about to press my tingling body against his when he takes a quick step backwards.

'Oops, careful. Don't want to squash this little dude.' He winks.

'Little dude?' I crease my forehead.

'That's right. Mr Cheeks.' Tom gives me one of his 'butter-wouldn't-melt' looks.

'Mr Cheeks?' I repeat, my eyes flicking towards Tom's jacket. And, oh my God. He pulls the zip down and a tiny black fluffy head pops out.

'Georgie, meet Mr Cheeks, named on account of him being very cheeky.'

'A kitten! You have a kitten.' Wow. How cute is that? Not only is he an incredibly sexy man with a fantastic sense of humour, but he loves animals too ... he's practically perfect. 'How come you never said?' I ask, giving Mr Cheeks a stroke. 'And why have you brought him with you?'

'Err, well, he's not actually my kitten.' Tom gives me a sheepish look.

'Who does he belong to, then?'

'You?' His mouth twitches into a smile as he lifts one eyebrow.

'Don't be silly. You can't buy me a kitten,' I say, incredulously. I've never had a pet of my own before.

'Of course I can. I can do whatever I like,' he jokes, treating me to a huge grin. 'Isn't he sweet?' And he lifts Mr Cheeks out of his jacket and snuggles him in the crook of his elbow.

'Aw, poor thing, he's trembling all over.'

'And is it any wonder?' Sighing, Tom shakes his head. He looks really concerned.

'What do you mean?'

'Come on, let's go upstairs and I'll tell you all about it.'

It turns out that Mr Cheeks is a stray. He arrived at Tom's back door in the middle of the night, meowing and whimpering, trembling all over and covered in mud. Tom

took him in and hand-fed him cooked chopped chicken before bathing him and letting him sleep on his bed.

'So, you'll let Mr Cheeks stay then?' We're sitting side-by-side on my sofa with the kitten still snuggled in the crook of Tom's elbow. Mr Cheeks is really timid and seems to have latched on to Tom like a security blanket. Tom turns to me and tenderly pushes a stray chunk of hair out of my eyes, making my face tingle.

'*Weell* ... he is too cute for words.' I hesitate momentarily. 'But I can't, really I can't. He'll be here on his own all day while I'm at work.'

'I'm sure he'll get used to it ... I bet he'll be out swaggering around the neighbourhood, or whatever it is cats do all day, in no time. Or I'd be happy to pay for a cat-sitter if he starts to pine through loneliness,' Tom suggests, entwining his fingers around mine.

'Don't be daft. Why don't you keep him yourself? He seems to have really taken to you ... '

'I'd love to, but my house just isn't practical, not with my canvases and paint everywhere, and he's already clawed through the Venice waterway.'

'Ooops,' I say, remembering the exquisite picture. Tom had just started painting it the first time I went to his house, and it's truly magnificent. He has a real gift, even if he does nonchalantly dismiss it as '*Just something I do to relax.*'

'And you know how often I'm away from home, travelling to meet suppliers and up to board meetings in

London. It really wouldn't be fair. Anyway, I think he'd much sooner snuggle up to you of an evening – just like me.' Tom grins as he puts an arm around my shoulders and gently pulls me in close before kissing the bridge of my nose.

'Stop it,' I tease, pressing my palm against his firm chest. 'I know what you're doing.'

'*Whaaaat?*' Tom replies, trying to sound and look all innocent. 'It's the truth, isn't it Mr Cheeks?' And he takes the kitten's little paws and places them on my arm. 'Aw, look at his little face. Those soulful green eyes. And he has nobody. He's just an orphan. And, ahh, *looooook* ... ' Tom pauses as the kitten leans his tiny chin on my arm. 'See, he absolutely adores you already,' Tom beams, after giving Mr Cheeks a quick proud-dad glance for his perfect timing.

'No he doesn't,' I smile. 'He adores you.'

'Hmm, I'm not so sure. Hang on a minute.' Tom lifts the kitten up to his ear and pretends to listen to him talking. 'What's that, little fella?' he asks Mr Cheeks before turning back to face me. 'He says I should kiss you and that will make you take him in.'

'Oh did he?' I try not to laugh.

'Yep.' Tom places Mr Cheeks down on the rug before lifting my chin and pushing me back on the sofa. But he doesn't kiss me. Instead, he lifts my hands up over my head, secures them under a cushion and then tickles me all over until I can bear it no longer.

'*Stoooooop*. Please,' I gasp, now desperate to feel his lips on mine. Having his face in such close proximity is divine, but such a massive tease, especially when I can't move to touch him.

Eventually, I manage to wriggle my arms out from under the cushion and slip them around Tom's back instead.

'So you'll let him live with you then?' Tom props himself up on one elbow so he's lying next to me now, and does puppy-dog eyes. 'I'll cover all his expenses. Vet bills, vaccines, food, etc.,' he pleads, and I can't help thinking how incredible he is. Kind, funny, and he seems to really care about this stray kitten – which, let's face it, he could have just ignored, as I'm sure lots of men would have done after being woken up in the middle of the night. But not Tom, he was giving the scrawny, bedraggled cat a bath at 4 a.m.! That's proper tenderness right there ...

'OK, on one condition.' I shake my head in surrender.

'Anything. I couldn't bear to leave him at an animal shelter. Not now. Not after everything he's been through, and he's already used to a certain living standard too. It would be too cruel for words. We could share him. And then at least I'd know he was safe when I'm away on business.' Tom tickles me again.

'OK. Don't milk it,' I say, trying to catch my breath as I push his hand away.

'Ha! Nice pun. I like it.' I give him a blank look. 'Cat.

Milk lovers.' He winks. 'Oh never mind,' he adds, smiling cheekily. 'So, what's the condition?'

'That you do everything Mr Cheeks tells you to,' I say, trying to keep a serious face.

'Hmmm, OK,' Tom replies slowly and suggestively, circling his index finger over the back of my hand. I lean towards Mr Cheeks, pretending to listen to him speak.

'He says the first thing you must do is kiss me.' And Tom does. My tummy flips over and over as I roll onto my side and melt into his arms, and I honestly don't think I've ever felt this happy. Not ever. And now we have a kitten in common. A bona fide joint responsibility, and everyone knows what that means ... I wonder if it's too soon to say the L word?

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Eight shopping weeks until Christmas

It's Monday evening in Mulberry-On-Sea and, by the size of Sam's smile, it's obvious she has some exciting news to share. I close the front door to my flat behind her and she practically skips on into the shoebox-sized lounge, closely followed by a gust of crisp, wintery-cold air. Taking her swingy faux-fur cape, I bundle it onto a radiator to keep warm.

'It's blooming perishing out there.' Sam whips off her gloves and rubs her hands together before pulling an exaggerated freezing face. 'And with only fifty-four days until Christmas Day – well, I bet it snows. Just imagine, a proper, gloriously glistening white Christmas, now wouldn't that be magical?'

'Sure would,' I say, handing her the latest edition of *I Heart TV* magazine. Sam loves all those soaps and reality shows. Me too. And there's a special sneak preview feature inside, of what's on over Christmas. I was perusing the wine aisle in Tesco when she texted me to get her a copy.

'Thanks Georgie.' She grins and takes the magazine.

'It'll be like our very own giant snow globe. We could even go ice-skating. Mandy, who works at the town hall, came in the other day for a chocolate orange cupcake with banoffee coffee and said they're building a rink in the market square in the centre of town. Apparently there's going to be real reindeers and stalls selling hot chocolate with huge dollops of squirty cream dusted with cinnamon and mini-marshmallows, and, well, she didn't actually go into that much detail, but you know what I mean ... they're bound to, aren't they? And roasted chestnuts and all those handcrafted Christmassy gifts that have no use *what-so-ever*, but we still love them anyway.' She pauses to catch her breath, her natural blonde corkscrew curls bouncing around her shoulders. 'In fact, I'm going to see about getting a stall. I could sell mugs of steaming mulled wine and sticky sausage sandwiches, and what about slabs of fruity Christmas cake stacked high with velvety melt-in-the-mouth marzipan icing? Mm-mmm. Yes, everyone loves cake!'

Sam owns Cupcakes At Carrington's, the café concession on the fifth floor of Carrington's department store, and is a real foodie. She's also privy to all kinds of tantalising gossip gleaned from her loyal customers, office workers from the firms around the market square in the centre of town, staff from the hotels down along the seafront, and just about everyone who lives or works within a ten-mile radius. When Felicity Ashbeck-Smyth, one of Carrington's regular customers and owner of

Mulberry-On-Sea's very own temple of holistic enlightenment, was caught with a cannabis plant in her yoga studio, Sam was the first to know. And Sam's café really is the best place in Mulberry if you fancy a legendary afternoon tea. Cupcakes and scones piled high with strawberry jam and clotted cream mingled with the cutest little artisan bread rolls crammed with locally sourced ham and delicious homemade chutney. You just can't beat it after a hard day's shopping at Carrington's, *the store with more*, as our strapline says.

'Never mind the squirty cream. I want to hear your news.' I steer her towards the sofa before flopping down on a beanbag nearby.

'Ohmigod. I can't believe I've been here for a whole five minutes and still not told you, I'm practically bursting. I found out last night, but wanted to say face to face. Georgie, you will die when I tell you.' Sam leans over to clutch my arm.

'Come on then.' I nod, encouragingly.

'OK, after three, because you know I've fantasised about this moment for so long that I'm not even sure I can actually say the words out loud, just in case I'm dreaming.

'For crying out loud. Will you please tell me?' I laugh, now absolutely desperate to hear her news.

'Right, deep breath. One two three ... I'm pregnant!' she screams, clapping her hands together up under her chin. Pure bliss radiates around her like an aura as I take in the news.

'Oh Sam, that's fantastic, I'm so happy for you. Come here.' After hauling myself out of the beanbag, I reach across to give her an enormous hug. Sam has wanted to be part of a big family for as long as I've known her, and that must be fifteen years, at least. We used to go to the same boarding school, before I got kicked out after Dad gambled away everything we had. He sold secrets from the trade floor of the bank where he worked and ended up in prison for five and a half years, but that's a whole other story.

Sam and I shared a bedroom, and she'd lie awake at night wondering about her mum, Christy, an interior designer who ran off to LA with a famous rock star client when Sam was only five years old. She was devastated, and even though Sam hasn't mentioned her for years now, I think she still struggles to understand why Christy left, but then who can blame her? Christy literally did a moonlight flit. There at bedtime and gone by breakfast.

'Congratulations! And to Nathan too, I bet he's delighted,' I say, making a mental note to bomb up to Childrenswear on the fourth floor, first thing tomorrow morning when I get into work. Poppy, the sales assistant up there, said they had a delivery last week of the cutest little bunny romper suits she'd ever seen. They even have big floppy ears on the hood and a detachable fluffy rabbit tail for the bottom. I'll get the pink and blue, to cover both eventualities. But what if Sam goes gender-neutral like Belinda? She's another regular

customer and her son and daughter are always dressed in identical green or yellow smock shirts with baggy knee-length shorts – a stand against commercial gender stereotyping, apparently. Hmmm, maybe I should get the lemon romper suit too, just in case.

'Georgie, you know Nathan cried. Big tumbling man tears, he's so happy,' Sam says.

'Of course he is, he adores you, and now you're going to be a proper gorgeous little family. It's the best news ever. Can I tell Dad?' I ask, knowing how fond she is of him. Sam's wonderful dad, Alfie Palmer, the charismatic and incredibly wealthy owner of Palmer Estates, one of the biggest estate agencies in the country, died earlier this year, leaving his millions to Sam; it meant no expense was spared on their extremely emotional wedding on a picturesque hillside overlooking Lake Como. But it wasn't the same as Alfie actually being there, so my dad stepped in to do the honours and I felt so proud of him. Nathan's parents live in Italy, so it was the perfect location for them to marry in before travelling around Europe for the summer, followed by a magical second honeymoon in New York and Hawaii last month.

'Of course you can. Although it's probably best to wait a bit. It's very early days.'

'So when is the baby due?'

'I'm not entirely sure. In about eight months' time?' she laughs, making big wide eyes and waving her hands in the air.

'Aw, so he or she could be a honeymoon baby then.' I quickly count the weeks off in my head.

'Sure could be. And ohmigod, Georgie, you've just given me a brainwave.'

'I have?' I ask cautiously. You never know with Sam and her madcap ideas sometimes.

'Of course, if it's a girl we can call her Honey ... *sooo* romantic.' I let out a little sigh of relief, pleased that Manhattan or Honolulu aren't in the running as suitable baby monikers. 'Or, no wait. Hold on!' Sam clutches my arm as she thinks for a second before announcing, '*Honey Moon Taylor!* How perfect is that?' she beams, stretching her hand up and wide in a semi-circle above her head, as if visualising the words emblazoned in flashing lights across a billboard. My mind boggles. Sam is a real queen of hearts, a matchmaker, a true romantic, but I've never seen her like this before, so animated with baby love. And we've never really talked about having babies before, I'm not that interested, to be honest, unlike her.

'Very,' I say, secretly wondering if Nathan would go for it. He's a maritime lawyer, loaded and solid; he strikes me as a more traditional-name-type guy. 'I'm absolutely made up for you both and this calls for a proper celebration. Dinner and fizz somewhere posh. Orange juice for you obvs.' I laugh.

'I can't tell you how happy that makes me feel.' Sam beams. 'No more Jägerbombs for me,' she shrugs. 'We could try out that new restaurant down by the marina,

the swanky one that's opened up to cater for the visiting glamouratti arriving on their yachts.'

'Good idea, but in the meantime these will have to do.' I pull open a box of mince pies and offer them to her. Sam takes three. I give her a look.

'*Whaat?*'

'I didn't say a word,' I smile as she crams one of the pies into her mouth.

'One for me and one for the baby,' she explains, in between bites.

'And that one?' I point to the pie still clutched in her left hand.

'Could be twins.' Sam winks and collapses back into the sofa. 'Nathan's dad is a twin and you know what they say about twins running in families. God, I'd actually *love* to have twins. Double sweetness.'

Laughing and shaking my head, I flick the television on and help myself to another mince pie.

'Sooo, talking of romance, how are things going with Tom?' Sam makes big eyes and gives me a hopeful grin.

'*Weell* ... ' I hesitate, unsure if I'm ready to share the exquisite details of his practically perfect taut chest, or his delicious chocolatey scent. Or the way he tilts his head to one side and smiles in an endearingly attentive way when I talk, or the way my thighs tingle when he gives me a cheeky surreptitious wink from across the shop floor.

'Oooh, carry on. No need to be coy,' Sam says, giving

me a gentle nudge in the ribs with her foot. 'How was your date last night?'

'Oh Sam, it was perfect as always. He's so funny. And such a gentleman. Turned up with treats for Mr Cheeks and a little box of Belgian truffles for me. We went out for tapas and chatted all evening, taking a romantic stroll along the moonlit beach – his idea, and he even carried my heels after I changed into flats to make it over the pebbles before we cuddled up by the pier, then back here an—'

'Cor! Tell me more.'

'We talked. Just work stuff, you know, his plans for the store, how he wants to rekindle the glory from its heyday, make Carrington's magnificent again, maybe open more shops in other locations, that kind of thing,' I say, keeping the rest to myself. How worried he is about pulling it off while trying to ignore the whispers and speculation in the business world over his acumen. He's only twenty-nine, two years older than me. And Sam is my best friend, we usually tell each other everything. And Tom didn't say any of this was a secret, but still, I guess he assumed he doesn't need to. Anyway, I'm flattered that he trusts me, and I don't want to do anything to break his trust.

'Hmmm, is that all? But I want to hear about the sex. I know he's been away for work, but your long distance flirtation has been going on for long enough now. You've had Mr Cheeks for well over a month and, like I said

before, a shared pet is *huge*. Practically living together. Tell me you at least had a snog.' Sam eyes me eagerly.

'Of course,' I grin, relishing the exquisite memory of his lips firm on mine and his fingers entwined in my hair as he pulled open my blouse, pushed up my skirt and swung me across the kitchen table. It was amazing. Like something out of a film, and I feel breathless just thinking about it.

'Did you get naked?'

'Mmmm.' I smile. Last night was our first time, well ... first, second and third times, to be fair. A glorious hat-trick medley of kitchen table, up against the wall in my hall, followed by an incredible bedroom finale, each time more thrilling than the last. Then we stayed up nearly all night, chatting and laughing together, swapping cringeworthy stories from our respective teenage years with a bit of truth or dare thrown in. But I'm not ready to share the details with Sam. I want to savour the memory to myself for just a little longer. I fantasised about sleeping with Tom from the very moment I clapped eyes on him, when he turned up in the staff canteen on his first day at work. Of course, I didn't know he was actually Tom Carrington then; he went undercover, pretended he was just another sales assistant. All part of his plan to assess the store from the ground floor as it were, before buying it from his aunt Camille, whose grandfather was the original Mr Harry Carrington, aka Dirty Harry, on account of his philandering ways with

the showgirls from the old music hall on Lovelace Road. Tom has assured me, though, that Dirty Harry's antics are not a genetic familial trait, which is a big relief.

'Skin on skin?' Sam probes.

'Stop it,' I laugh.

'Did he stay the night?'

'No. Well, yes, kind of, but he had to leave in the early hours, said he had a Skype meeting first thing with a foreign supplier and needed some much overdue sleep.'

'So how many times have you actually seen him now?'

'Well, we've had three or four proper dates, but with him away so much, up to London for meetings or overseas sourcing new stock lines, you know how keen he is to be really hands-on in the business, we haven't had that many opportunities to see as much of each other as we'd like.'

'*Sooo!* Georgie, these days you can have sex on a first date if you want to. That's what the suffragettes did for us. They gave us that choice. If you want sex then have it. I do,' Sam says, winking before making a serious face, and I contemplate telling her everything. 'And let's face it, Tom is not only extremely charming, funny, kind to animals,' she pauses to glance at Mr Cheeks who is ensconced on a cushion purring contently, 'he's F-I-T. Grab hold of him with both hands ... one on each—' If only she knew.

'Bum cheek,' we yell in unison before cracking up. 'Yes, yes I know. You don't have to remind me,' I wheeze,

the memory of his beautifully firm bottom beneath his tight white Calvin's making my cheeks flush.

Settling down, I flick on the TV and search through the channels.

'Stop! Go back a bit,' Sam yells, kicking her shoes off and tucking her feet up under her legs. I press the remote control and swig a mouthful of wine before polishing off the rest of a mince pie. I think about retrieving another box from the freezer. Tesco are flogging them as part of a special run-up to Christmas promotion – buy one, get two free. I have eighteen boxes. 'There, that's it. Let's watch this.'

'What is it?'

'Ahh, you know, you must have seen it before. It's that new series – undercover programme with what's-her-name.' I give her a blank look. 'Kelly Cooper. She's totally bonkers and sorts out flagging companies and stuff with her madcap, brilliantly unorthodox ideas. It's on every week until Christmas.'

'Oh right,' I say, helping myself to the last mince pie. The adverts finish and an older woman with wild orange Medusa curls and funky green geek glasses is talking directly to the camera in a stage-whisper voice, and she looks just like Ronald McDonald. She's wearing a swirly patterned Westwood playsuit and a curly plastic earpiece, and keeps glancing at a computer surveillance screen.

'Oooh, here she goes!' Sam is suddenly glued to the screen. I neck another mouthful of wine and start

flicking through the *I Heart TV* mag, wondering if it's still too early to set up my Christmas Sky+ viewing schedule.

'What's she doing?' I ask, glancing up as the camera pans to a younger woman in a car park pulling on a big floppy hat and shades.

'She's getting ready to go to wherever they're filming. It's always a secret until they arrive inside, makes it more thrilling and authentic. Last season's show was called *Kelly Cooper Come Onboard* and it was on an Italian cruise ship stuffed full of lush sailors. Swoon.' Sam makes dreamy eyes.

'Cor! I like the sound of that.'

'It was amazing. I've got the whole series in box set. I'll lend it to you. Anyway, first off she'll be seeing if the business is up to scratch. It never is. That's the whole point of the show. And then she helps them get their act together. Come up with new ideas to increase revenue, that kind of thing. Oh God, I love this programme.' Sam is practically hyperventilating now. 'That's Zara, her glamorous assistant. She's actually her daughter in real life,' she adds, all matter-of-factly.

'But it is real life,' I say, feeling confused and wondering how I completely managed to miss watching this programme before now. I'm usually right there when it comes to a decent reality show.

'Hmmm, guess so ... anyway, she's the one who goes undercover, hence the hat and shades, Kelly is way too vibrant and recognisable.' *That's one way of putting it*. I

resist the urge to smirk while Sam does the whole fangirl thing. 'And that guy is the cameraman, he's there to capture Zara's experiences, with a secret hidden camera, obviously. Don't want to alert the staff, so they put on an act; it would ruin everything if they were on best behaviour. That's just boring. And don't be fooled by Kelly – she may appear all jolly and fun at first, but underneath she's ruthless, a total ballbuster when it comes to promoting her TV shows and whipping businesses into shape. She really tells it like it is and doesn't take any prisoners. In her last series, she made them sack five people.'

'What for?' I ask, instantly feeling sorry for the ones that lost their jobs.

'I'm not sure, just read something about it in one of those celebrity gossip magazines. Sniggering when she was talking, most likely. Wouldn't surprise me. That's what she's like,' Sam says.

My mobile rings and, on seeing it's Eddie, my other best friend and Tom's personal assistant (well, boy assistant or BA for short), I press to answer.

'Get your tellybox on *right now!*' he shrieks, totally bypassing the introductions bit and almost perforating my eardrum in the process.

'OK, calm down, it's already on. Where's the drama?'

'Dollface. You will not believe this. Gird your ladyballs. S-C-R-E-A-M.'

'What are you going on about? Eddie, have you been at the booze cabinet?' I laugh.

'Oh darling, *purlease* with the vulgarity ... now is not the time to make me out to be some kind of lush. Now, will you just shut up and watch.'

Doing as I'm told, I stare at the screen. And freeze – motionless like the gold statue that stands on a box outside Mulberry-On-Sea station. I'd know that cherry-wood panelling anywhere.

I can hear my own blood pumping. The camera zooms to a woman browsing through the Women's Accessories department, and I know I'm not mistaken. Sam flings herself upright but doesn't utter a word. She knows it too. It's Carrington's. *My Carrington's!*

It's the actual department store where I work and I feel clammy with fear. I want to throw up. A rivulet of sweat snakes a path all the way down my back. Sam jumps up. I toss the magazine down on the sofa and Sam clutches my free hand. We stand together in silence. Our jaws hang open as Kelly's secret camera, which must be secreted inside Zara's hat, glides around the gloriously decadent Art Deco store before coming to a halt up near the key winter merchandise. And right next to the very display podium that I set up a few weeks ago.

Annie, one of the sales assistants who works with me, comes into view. She's lounging nonchalantly behind the counter with her back to the camera and *oh my God* ... she's texting on her mobile, totally oblivious to the woman who is now swinging a gorgeous, caramel-coloured, Billy-the-goatskin or whatever, £900 Anya

Hindmarch tote on her shoulder while admiring the view in the long mirror. The very mirror I had installed specifically to entice customers to try on the bags. Because every decent sales assistant knows: *those who try it, buy it*.

Zara glances in Annie's direction, and then raises a perfectly groomed HD eyebrow at the camera guy, as if deliberately drawing the viewer's attention to the fact that she's being ignored. Now the camera is panning towards the window display and *oh my actual God*. I want to die! Right now, in my shoebox lounge with a lump of partially chewed mince pie trapped inside my gullet. My arse is only gyrating around to that Beyoncé tune, 'Single Ladies'. I'm even wagging my left hand in the air and pointing to my ring finger. And I swear they've put a wide angle on the shot. I know my bum is big, but it ain't *that* flipping big.

'Boom boom, peng ting! Yo go *girlfrieeend* ... get jiggy with it and all that. You are magnificent,' Eddie bellows, like he's some sort of badass gangsta boy, and I think I might actually faint. With his voice shrieking in my ear and my wiggling bottom on the screen it's like a total sensory overload. And my phone hand seems to have gripped itself into a spasm, so now I have the gnarled fist of an ancient old husk of a woman too, which will probably wither from inactivity and render me a cripple by the age of twenty-eight. *Grreat*. Big bum and club fist – not an attractive look. What on earth was I thinking?

I'm usually so efficient at approaching customers, we

both are. Annie and I always wait a few seconds, nobody wants to be pounced on the very minute they show an interest in the merch. OK, so we might send the odd text message when the shop floor is quiet, that's why we keep our mobiles on silent in our pockets – we're not supposed to, but everyone does. But we never ignore the customers. No, not ever!

'This is so fucking *ma-jor*. You're going to be a dramality star.' Eddie sounds like he's about to holler himself into a hernia, he's that elated for me.

'A *whaat?*' I shout, fear and humiliation making my voice sound shrill.

'You know ... *dramality*. Real but made up. You're going to be famous. You are going to be a celebrity and, let's face it, that's what everyone wants to be these days,' he sniffs, as if he's the authority on popular culture all of a sudden. 'You're going to be on that jungle programme, baring your teeth like a baboon when your cheeks peel back to your ears as you're dropped from a helicopter into the Australian bush. You're going to have your wardrobe critiqued in *Now* magazine. You're going to win a BAFTA. Oh darling, I always knew you were a true star.' He pauses momentarily and actually sounds genuinely emotional. 'You're going to feature in the *Daily Mail* sidebar of shame. You're going to make a mint from doing your own fitness DVD. You're going to have your own fake tan product range. *Sweet Jesus* ... you might even get your own TV show!' Eddie pauses to suck in a

massive gasp of air before he's off again. 'I wonder if I'll get to be in the show too. You must ask that delicious man of yours. In fact, call him. *Right now!* Tell him how much I adore Kelly. Been a fan for years, darling. Oh hang on angel.' There's a muffled silence for a second, and then I hear Eddie shouting out to his boyfriend, Ciaran. 'Is my best suit back from the dry cleaners?' More silence follows. '*Whaat?* Never mind watching *Top Gear* on your iPad mini. Check it! Check the wardrobe right now. I need the suit for work tomorrow. It's vital.' Eddie huffs. 'Honestly, that boy has no sense of urgency. This is my moment. And I'm going to need representation. A manager! I'm going to call that blonde woman. Claire off the telly. That's right. The one who represents Pete.'

'Pete?' I mutter, racking my brains. I've never heard Eddie mention having a famous friend called Pete.

'Yes, Pete! As in *Peter Andre*?' Eddie says in a stagey voice, like he's his best friend forever and I'm the only person on the whole planet who doesn't know it.

'Don't you think you're being a bit hasty?' I venture, having already decided I'm having no part of this. And how come Tom never mentioned it? I'm going to call him ... but not to get him to ask Kelly to include Eddie. No. To tell him that he's bang out of order and it's probably illegal anyway. They can't just rock up at Carrington's and start randomly filming Annie and me. What about our privacy? It's stalking! That's what it is. And what about our human rights? I'll phone up that court in The Hague; they're

bound to know if I have the right to go to work without worrying about my backside being plastered across the TV screen of every blooming home in the country. The whole world, in fact! If you count all those ex-pat satellite viewers in places like the Costa del Sol. And not forgetting hotels and laptops. These days you can be anywhere and still get your favourite TV channels. Oh God.

Now the initial shock is starting to wear off, I'm devastated. And really hurt if I'm totally honest. I feel like a fool. A fool for thinking that Tom trusted me. Obviously not enough to share this monumental revelation, and it can't have happened overnight. He must have been 'in talks', as he likes to say, with the TV channel for absolutely ages, but he didn't even think to utter a word about it. And like a fool I fell for his smouldering looks and fun-loving attitude. And I took in Mr Cheeks for him. I even read up on Renaissance art just so I could appear cultured and educated, show an interest in his passion for painting. It just goes to show that you can't trust anyone these days. And those big hardback arty books don't come cheap either.

I glance back at the screen in time to hear Kelly talking directly into the camera.

'Seems these shop girls are more interested in having a good time than serving *you*.' And to emphasise her point, she sticks her index finger out, just like Lord Kitchener in that wartime poster. All she needs is the leather queen moustache.

'*Awks!*' Eddie sniggers like a smartarse, making me wish I could reach inside the phone to slap him.

'Stop it.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, sweetcheeks, really I am. Ignore her. It's probably all for the cameras. You know how these TV personalities like to mix things up a bit. Honestly, it's not that bad. Quite exciting, in fact ... just think, you're going to be an actual star – nothing less than you deserve, of course,' he states. 'The camera obviously loves you, petal, and one day you'll look back and laugh too. Promise. It's just the shock of the surprise, that's all. I'm your best friend, and as such it's my job to tell you if you look ridic ... but you don't, you honestly don't. Quite the opposite. Sassy and magnificent.' I ignore him.

'But how dare she?'

Something isn't right, because we never neglect customers. I don't understand how they've managed to make it look as though we do. Sam squeezes my free hand tightly and gives me a reassuring but tentative grin. 'And who says, "shop girls" anyway, these days? Talk about old-fashioned!'

'Don't worry, lover, I bet you know much more than she does about retail sales. Just focus on the fabulous perks that are going to be surging your way,' Eddie says. 'Yep. It's move over *TOWIE* and *Made In Chelsea* and Hello *Carringtonnnnn's!*' he sings, like he's about to star in the next West End musical theatre smash hit.

Well, we'll see about that.

'I have to go,' I say in a trance-like state to end the call, and I drop my phone down onto the carpet. I really thought Tom and I had something. Something really special. I had even started to think he might be the real deal. Everyone says you just know when you meet your one, and that's exactly how I felt right from the very first moment I saw him. I was standing by the help-yourself salad bar in the staff canteen with my cheeks flushing and my mouth actually hanging open. He's the quintessential tall dark gorgeous guy. Kind. Especially to animals. Calm. Impeccably mannered. Generous. Intelligent. Artistic. Gentle. Sometimes cheeky. Fantastic in bed. But how wrong was I? If he doesn't even trust me enough to mention something as epic as Carrington's starring in a reality TV show, then what does that say about our relationship? He obviously doesn't feel the same way. And I'm so glad I held back on mentioning the L word. I grab my phone back up and punch out his number. I can't wait to hear what he has to say for himself.