

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



How not to Shop

Carmen Reid

Personal shopper Annie Valentine is about to hit the big time: presenting a glamorous TV makeover series!

But too late, Annie discovers this is TV on a shoestring. They're paying her buttons and her budget zip. Can she make do with Primark when all she wants is Prada?

While Annie performs miracles with the minimum, boyfriend Ed is left at home with one son (deep green), one daughter (deeply teen) and one sexy, Russian blonde (don't ask).

He's not happy. He wants more together-time. He wants a dog. He may even want ... a baby! But could non-stop, fame-seeking Annie ever handle that?

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How not to Shop

Carmen Reid

Chapter One

Dr Yasmin 'cosmetologist' at work

White cotton coat (medical supplier)

White gauze mask (same)

Black and pink silk high-collared dress

(Alexander McQueen)

Pink peep-toe slingback heels (Christian Louboutin)

Total est. cost: £900

'And how does that feel now?'

'JUST HOLD NICE and still, this is going to be a little uncomfortable.'

Annie's heart began to pound. When a straight-backed professional in a pristine white coat, paper mask and latex gloves, carrying a syringe, tells you something's going to be 'a little uncomfortable' you know it's going to hurt like . . .

'Nice and still,' the outrageously expensive Harley Street 'cosmetologist' repeated as Annie instinctively nudged her face away from the tip of the needle.

Then *yow!!* the point was in and she could feel her first ever hit of Botox coursing coolly into the offending frown lines between her eyebrows.

Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! It hurt. Why had she not been told how much it hurt? And the 'Doctor', though really she was probably just a souped-up dental nurse with a very snazzy client list, was going to do her brow lines next. There was even less skin up there on her forehead. That would really sting.

Dr Yasmin's assistant pressed a tissue to the side of Annie's face to catch the tears of pain slipping silently from her eyes.

To take her mind from this horror, Annie let her eyes roll towards the corner of the room, where four large shopping bags were stacked in a fat heap against a chair.

She hadn't wanted to let those bags out of her sight and now, just stealing a quick glance at them helped to soothe her. Those four bulging carriers represented something very important. Crucial. Fundamental. Those four glossy bags symbolized the end of her old career and the beginning of a whole shiny, brand new phase.

A veteran of self-improvement, Annie Valentine was about to move on and up in the biggest way imaginable. She had worked in London's most glamorous, most high-end fashion emporium, The Store, for nine whole years and now she was leaving.

She had been The Store's top, best known and most trusted personal shopper. She had shopped for styled and made over women from every walk of life. In short, there was nothing about fashion buying clothes that Annie didn't know. In several swift minutes, Annie could size you up from head to toe and teach you more about what shapes, sizes, colours and styles you should be wearing than a that time spent schlepping hopelessly in and out of changing rooms could possibly have done.

Working for The Store had transformed her over the years too. The hair in her tight, high ponytail had become increasingly blonde. The slightly too short and slightly too curvy figure had been lifted and lengthened with expensive high heels, ramrod posture and a hefty dose of Lycra in all the right places. Now that she was in her . . . erm . . . late-thirties, she was at Dr Yasmin's because she wasn't

going to let some pesky little frown lines give the game away.

Annie knew she was leaving more than just a job. Over those nine years, The Store had become her second home. When she'd lost her husband, she'd been able to lose herself in The Store; when she struggled to meet the school fees for her two children, her clients from The Store had rallied round to give her extra out-of-hours work. Even the new man in her life, Ed, though he understood not one shred about fashion, understood completely the importance of The Store in Annie's life.

But she was about to leave! Leave her job and her monthly commission (not to mention her regular bonuses for best saleswoman) and her hugely tempting staff discount (the kind of discount which meant there were labels she could previously only have dreamed about hanging in her wardrobe) and the staff who had become best friends.

Annie was about to walk away from it all because she had been offered the perhaps once in a lifetime chance to become a real, live TV STAR. Oh yes! She still had to pinch herself to believe it.

After two auditions and a screen test, finally, the call had come. Now Annie and her ridiculously wealthy client-turned-friend, Svetlana Wisneski, were going to be the makeover gurus on a new Channel Five show, *Wonder Women*.

Well, OK, to be honest, Annie wasn't wildly enthusiastic about the series name either, but maybe there was still time for a rethink.

The shopping bags in the corner of Dr Yasmin's office contained the framework of the TV presenter's wardrobe Annie had bought for herself today in a six-hour non-stop retail session.

Inside the bags – two from The Store, one from Prada and one from H&M – was the culmination of nine years of shopping expertise.

In expectation of the money she was about to earn, Annie had allowed herself to buy several amazing treasures, like the complicated ankle boots from the best shoemaker in London and the jewelled leather long-lace sandals by inimitable Miu Miu.

Then there were slightly more practical items: scoop-necked tops, beads and bracelets from H&M, a pair of vibrant, stretchy dresses by her favourite American designer and two architectural, nipped-in (whisper it, *Westwood*) jackets.

She'd also chosen sling-backed, red patent pumps for walking briskly from shop to shop with the women she'd be making over, and an extravagant bright blue, creamily soft, Chloé silk shirt.

But the most wonderful purchase of all was the Prada skirt wrapped up in layers of tissue paper and stored carefully as a museum exhibit. The kind of skirt that you didn't get your hands on just by turning up at the Prada shop and hoping for the best. No way. She'd been on the waiting list for that pleated, crinkled, dip-dyed fashion masterpiece for seven weeks, knowing full well it would fly out of the store doors without ever hitting a hanger.

Everything she'd bought was vibrant and colourful because she knew television drank in colour and she suspected that the women she'd be making over would be dressed in the dowdy, sludgy colours of the unconfident or fashion-inexperienced.

The shopping trip had cost . . . well . . . including the Jimmy Choo ankle boots . . . Oh. My. Lord. Just over £4,000. Then the Botox with snazzy Dr Yaz, another £600. Ouch.

Ed had warned her. He'd told her not to get too carried away with the TV presenter preparation until she knew *exactly* how much money she was going to be paid and *exactly* how long the job would go on for. But it had been hard not to get very, very excited. Channel Five! And had the producer Donnie ('call me Finn') Finnigan, not told her over and over again how much 'potential' he could see in 'sense' in *Wonder Women*? Had he not bandied about phrases like 'bigger than Trinny and Susanna' and 'Look out, Gok Wan'?

Filming was due to start in just a few weeks, so really she had to have something to wear! Finn was just waiting to 'hear the final details' of 'the commission' and he'd promised to get back to Svetlana and Annie this afternoon. So, just as soon as Dr Yaz had finished with her instruments of torture, Annie was going to meet Svetlana, so that they could be together when the news arrived.

'Come to my house,' Svetlana had drawled on the phone in her rich and melodious Ukraine-beauty-meets-serious-Mayfair-millions accent.

'Your house?' Annie had echoed with surprise. Although Svetlana had rarely bought so much as a belt without Annie's advice for about six years, this was Annie's first ever invitation to Svetlana's four-storey, prime Belgravia Divorce Settlement.

But they would be working together now. Annie was no longer a member of Svetlana's service personnel: she was on the verge of becoming her colleague, her slightly more equal – her friend, even. It was interesting new territory. At least in the old roles, they'd both known exactly where they were. Svetlana, the ex-wife of two multimillionaires and one billionaire, and Annie her trusted personal shopper . . . in London. Obviously there was another personal shopper in Paris, one in New York and one a little under-used in Moscow. ('Just for fur, she know nothing, bumpkin from Siberia.')

'And how does that feel now?' Dr Yasmin asked cheerfully.

Although the real answer was: Like you're sticking a long, sharp needle into my forehead! Annie managed a more polite, 'Just fine,' as the assistant continued to dab at her trickling tears.

Ed would never approve of what she was doing here. Very sweetly, he always told her he loved her just the way she was. Although, honestly he had no idea. She shuddered to think what she would really look like if she stopped waxing, plucking, highlighting, manicuring, applying make-up and dressing with care and concentration.

If he ever found out about the Botox and the shopping spree, he'd have one of his rare, but nevertheless unpleasant, freak-outs. But there was no need for him to find out, was there? She kept her own severely tested credit cards well away from his gaze and stored the bills carefully on-line. Plus, apparently men never, ever noticed when you'd had Botox. This was something she was doing, on Svetlana's recommendation, for the searching gaze of the small screen.

At last, the syringeing was over and Annie was allowed to sit up and survey the results in the mirror.

'Now, it may look a little puffy or bruised over the next few days and I always warn my clients . . .' the doctor began.

Oh no, she was going to do the warning bit again and Annie had tried so hard to blank it out the first time: partial paralysis, cardiac arrest, stroke, blah, blah . . .

But no, the doctor had new information. 'It may be hard to express anger, shock or intense emotion. You may have to tell people how you are feeling,' she said.

'Right.' Annie nodded, looking fixedly at her forehead. The lines had gone! Totally gone! Erased! This was amazing! She was coming back here every three months just as soon as her TV salary was hot in her hands. The doctor had performed nothing short of a miracle.

'That is brilliant, thank you!' she exclaimed, trying to give the doctor a delighted smile, but feeling a dull tug from the top of her head as her forehead tried, but failed, to move with her expression.

'That feels strange,' she added.

'Yes, it takes a little time, but you get used to it.'

Dr Yasmin removed her paper mask and gave a careful, lower face only smile which Annie at once understood.

When she was back in reception paying her hefty bill, Annie's mobile began to buzz. She checked

the screen as she picked it up, wondering if it was her daughter Lana, 16, making an after-school phone call because she'd run out of pocket money, or her son, Owen, 12, making an after-school phone call because he'd run out of food.

No. It was Ed.

Annie answered, then wished she hadn't, slightly panicked that somehow he would be able to tell over the phone that she'd spent close to five grand on her ever-expanding wardrobe and her newly flattened face.

'Annie?' Ed asked.

'Hello, babes!' she replied. 'Good day at school?'

Ed taught at her children's school. Despite her previous conviction that she would never, ever find another good man no matter where in the world she looked, as it happened, she'd not had to look far. She'd just had to look closely, many, many times, before she'd finally spotted him.

'Fine,' he replied.

Before he could say anything else, she rattled off: 'Did you get the dry cleaning?'

'Yes.'

'And the cat food? And post the parcel for me?'

'Yup to both.'

'And write out the cheque for Lana's tennis thing?'

'Yes, ma'am,' he joked.

'Thank you, you're very good.'

'Very, very good,' he reminded her. 'Bet you've not done anything about the Jeep windscreen, have you?'

Oh brother.

The large, ramshackle black Jeep in which she still bowled around London had a serious windscreen chip. Her name was on the insurance policy, so she was supposed to have phoned to sort this out.

'Sorry, I'll try and remember that,' she told him.

'Where are you anyway?' he asked. 'When are you coming home? And what would you like to eat?'

'Whatever you're making,' she suggested. 'It's always good. I'm going to be out a bit longer. Svetlana wants to see me at her house, in Mayfair! And we're expecting the call, you know, from the TV producer.'

'Ooh! The money call?'

'Here's hoping.'

'I have my early retirement plans all worked out,' Ed teased.

'Am I in them?'

'Oh yeah, don't worry, you'll be invited onto the yacht for a little cruise once in a while. When you can take time out from your hectic TV schedule.'

'That's big of you! And you all bronzed and buff, sailing your boat about all year long . . .'

'Yup, a total Annie magnet.'

'Nice . . .' Annie thought about that for a little moment, but then had to leave the yacht and return to reality. 'And how is everyone else?' she asked.

'They're fine,' Ed replied. 'Lana's still at school, working on something until six, then she's here for something to eat, then she's going to Greta's to talk about their project, allegedly. Owen's practising his violin for a bit then I'm taking him to Scouts.'

Family life was relentless. 'Are you OK doing all that?' She felt guilty now. 'I thought there was something you wanted to go and see?'

Ed was a music teacher, a musician and an avid concert-goer. For Ed, going to a concert, gig or general thrash about with instruments was his relaxation time; if he didn't do it several times a week he got grumpy.

'No, no I'm fine,' he insisted, 'honestly. Head off to Mayfair. Go meet The Ukrainian.'

Outside Dr Yasmin's surgery, Annie flagged down a cab. Extravagant, but she couldn't take the bus could she? Not with a Prada shopping bag and a face full of Botox.

Plus, if she saved some time with a cab now, she might make it home while Ed was still off dropping Owen at Scouts. That way, Annie would be able to haul her four carrier bags' worth of boots upstairs and into her office without having to answer any awkward questions.

She glanced at her watch . . . yes, but she would have to hurry. At the thought of what Finn was going to tell them within the hour, her stomach gave a lurch.

Chapter Two

Svetlana in her gym

White Lycra catsuit (Move Dancewear)

Gold and diamond watch (Cartier)

One-carat diamond earrings (second husband)

Three-carat diamond and ruby ring (third husband)

Total est. cost £197,600

‘Maybe you have to come train with me . . .’

FROM HARLEY STREET to Mayfair was a twenty-minute taxi journey through some of the very smartest streets in London. Past the flagship stores of Oxford Street, down by the swanky car showrooms of Park Lane and into streets of the finest, most fabulous red-brick houses London had to offer.

Quiet streets where the black railings were polished to a shine, where front doors were as dark and glossy as patent leather and even the plants and flowers in the window-boxes looked manicured.

Then there were the pedestrians. Were security guards posted on the edge of Mayfair to stop people from coming in unless they’d styled and highlighted their hair, changed into one of this season’s designer outfits and bought a very, very expensive bag?

The cab driver pulled up in front of a house so impressive that Annie double-checked she had the right number before she dared to ring the bell.

Yes, it was definitely number 7, according to the piece of paper she’d tucked into the back of her big leather Filofax. Oh good grief, she was going to have to update, she really would have to put away the leather and paper organizer and make another foray into the world of digital data. Surely she could handle a BlackBerry now, couldn’t she? They even came in pink and she would back everything up straight away, so there wouldn’t be another total wipeout trauma like back in the days of her early Palm Pilot.

When the shiny black door opened, a *maid*, a real, live maid – small and dainty, possibly Filipino – in a black dress with a white apron on top, greeted her.

‘Ms Valentine?’ the maid asked with a smile, ‘Ms Wisneski is expecting you. Please to come in and be comfortable with us.’

‘Thank you,’ Annie said and gave the maid as much of a smile as the fresh Botox would allow.

Still weighed down with her four bulging bags, Annie bustled into the hallway where she had to stop and gawp.

Walls had obviously been removed and skylights inserted. Clever, very expensive architects had been at work. Although Annie had stepped in through the door of a Victorian red-brick house, she was now standing in a dazzling white, modernist creation. And the paintings! They looked familiar, as if possibly-seen-on-the-walls-of-a-gallery-before familiar.

Svetlana – tall, lusciously beauty-queen-gorgeous and only admitting to ‘thirty-something’ – had been married three times so far, to increasingly wealthy men who had either died, or left her for increasingly younger and more beautiful women. At the end of her third marriage, she’d hired her own barrister and been to the divorce courts to claim an eight-figure settlement which the *Daily Mail* had headlined: ‘Guzzling ex-wife taps gas baron’s fortune.’ It had earned her an at-home photo shoot . . .

OK! magazine and plenty of press coverage ever since.

After all, she was still the mother of Igor Wisneski's two sons. And the little boys (aged nine and seven) were the only direct heirs to a staggering fortune.

Svetlana's divorce court battle had brought about another happy result. She was now engaged to Harry Roscoff, the recently divorced (entirely Svetlana's fault) QC who had taken on her case and fought it so successfully. Fourth time around, Svetlana's marriage was going to be very different. Harry had already insisted she take independent legal advice to ensure that no matter how the relationship turned out, she would keep all her hard-won assets and never be a penniless ex-wife again.

'Not that I am ever going to leave you, my darling,' he'd insisted. 'But if you leave me, you can take the lot. My life won't be worth living anyway.'

This time, despite the impending wedding, Svetlana wasn't moving and she definitely wasn't selling. Her Mayfair home was her security. Harry was coming to live with her.

'You think I go through all that marrying for nothing?' she'd asked Annie.

'Why get married again?' Annie had wanted to know. 'If Harry's your husband, then one day he can claim against your estate.'

'No. We have contract,' she'd insisted, before adding with her most charming smile, 'I love weddings! I love to be bride!'

Just like its owner, the Divorce Settlement house was drop dead beautiful, extremely high maintenance and flawlessly tasteful . . . if a touch extravagant. Annie's eye travelled to the staircase where the original wooden steps and banisters had been replaced with a wrought iron and marble installation.

'Ms Wisneski is upstairs with her trainer,' the maid explained.

'Oh, right,' Annie tried out another smile. 'Shall I wait somewhere until she's finished?'

'No, no,' the maid insisted, 'she says to come up and visit her.'

So Annie began to follow the little woman up the stairs, their footsteps ringing out against the polished grey marble.

The maid opened a door on the first floor and announced Annie's presence. 'Miss Valentine to be visiting with you Miss Wisneski.'

As Annie took in the huge white room, decked out with mats, mirrors and an elaborate metal weights machine which looked like a torture rack, Svetlana gushed 'Annnnnnah!' enthusiastically. She didn't come over to make her usual greeting of a rapid fire of Ukrainian kisses, but then, she was bent over backwards in the crab position with her head hanging upside down.

'Hello my love,' was Annie's cheerful greeting, 'how's it going?'

'Good!' Svetlana insisted, with some effort. 'Lisa is just working on my abs. I pay her to keep them as strong as a dancer's.' She slapped her stomach, which was so flat and so firm it sounded as if she smacked her hand against the wall.

'And twenty-six . . . twenty-eight . . . thirty and up,' Lisa barked. She was a tiny blonde with the kind of taut physique only seen on dedicated fitness fanatics like Madonna or Paula Radcliffe.

Svetlana, dressed in a shiny white catsuit, which displayed every single one of the ripples, nipples and breathtaking curves that had turned her into Miss Ukraine and many other Mrs since the bounced up onto her feet.

'And pli e,' Lisa instructed.

Obediently, Svetlana placed her heels together, toes turned out and began bending and straightening her legs elegantly. Only when she'd done about forty or so did there seem to be even the tiniest display of effort.

Annie watched in open admiration. She knew perfectly well she'd struggle to do even one of the pliés, let alone be counting towards one hundred.

'You've been shopping!' Svetlana pointed at Annie's bags, without breaking the rhythm of her bends.

'Yeah!' Annie set the carriers down and began to pull things out eagerly. There was a real possibility she was going to look like a blimp on TV next to Svetlana, but at least she'd be an incredibly well-dressed blimp.

'Yes! Oh yes! I love it,' Svetlana enthused as Annie showed her a dress, then the boots and finally the skirt.

Meanwhile, Lisa kept up her flow of strict instructions and Svetlana began to lift dinky dumb-bells in hundreds of different directions to give her arms and back the seriously sexy definition that Annie had in the past urged her to show off with strapless Valentino and backless Armani dresses.

'And my head,' Annie pointed to her frozen forehead: 'have you noticed?'

'I see now,' Svetlana said, looking closely. 'You are going to be wonderful on screen –' she gave a little clap of excitement – 'but maybe you have to come train with me and Lisa, I heard the camera puts on ten pounds.'

'Oh,' Annie said, a little taken aback. Secretly, she'd been hoping her brand new pair of extra-firm Magic Knickers would see to the meaty little spare tyre which was firmly welded to her middle.

'Lisa not mind, as long as I make sure her Christmas bonus is good. Very good,' Svetlana added, shooting Lisa a wink.

Lisa turned to Annie and looked her up and down in an entirely uncomplimentary way. The idea of an extra client tagging along on training sessions was clearly not to her liking.

'Well, I'd have to assess her,' Lisa said, 'and do a physical, first. That would be extra.'

'Oh Lisa!' Svetlana exclaimed. 'With Lisa everything is extra.'

'I've got a long waiting list,' Lisa said and then, giving Annie another hyper-critical look, added 'and I only work with the dedicated.'

They were spared any further investigation of the Annie working out with Svetlana nightmare scenario by the loud bleeping of Svetlana's phone.

Well, at least, Annie assumed that's what the tiny sparkling piece of chrome technology was that Svetlana swept up and clamped quickly to her ear.

'Hello, Svetlana speaking . . . oh Finn! How wonderful to hear from you. Yes, Annie is right here.'

At the flick of a switch, Annie could now hear Finn too.

All of a sudden, she didn't seem to be able to breathe. This was too big. It felt as if too much depended on this one phone call.

'Great news, girls!' he began in his tone of non-stop positivity. 'The deals have finally been signed. Phew! We're all set. We're definitely going ahead with a six-part series of *Wonder Women*. It's going to air first on the Home Sweet Home channel.'

Svetlana and Annie glanced at each other in surprise. Home Sweet Home? Neither of them had even heard of it before.

'What's this?' Svetlana interrupted. 'Zis not Channel Five.'

'Erm . . . no, I know,' Finn had to admit, 'it's one of the smaller digitals. But it's very up and coming and I think it has just the right following for this show,' he sounded all brimful of enthusiasm again. 'We are so confident this will be bought up by one of the big channels. Home Sweet Home is just the start! So very, very good news, girls. Congratulations. Woohoo!' he added.

Annie and Svetlana couldn't help smiling at each other.

‘Now, just one little thing . . .’ Finn continued. ‘They weren’t happy with us using total unknown so we do have to bring in a slightly bigger name to co-present.’

Annie could feel the panicky beat of her heart. Was that good? Was that bad? She had no idea. So, wouldn’t be just her and Svetlana, then . . . there would be someone else.

‘Do you know Miss Marlise?’ Finn asked.

While Svetlana shook her head, an image of a domineering, bossy, sourpuss popped into Annie’s mind. Miss Marlise? Hadn’t she been in some programme that the children . . .?

‘From *The Apprentice*?’ Finn prompted.

Oh good grief! Annie remembered her. She’d been awful. A total witch.

‘Well, she’s on board,’ Finn continued, ‘so it’s all systems go, we just need you to sign up for your deals and we can start researching, then shooting, ASAP.’

‘So what are you going to pay us?’ Svetlana asked bluntly, although she’d already told Annie she would do this for free because she had always, always, ever since she’d crossed the Miss World podium in a silver spangled bikini, wanted to be on television.

‘Well . . . erm . . . obviously Miss Marlise is a name and has sucked up a big chunk of our presenters budget,’ Finn began, slightly hesitantly now, ‘and it’s only on Home Sweet Home channel at the moment. But stick with me, girls, because when it’s bought up by a bigger channel there will be much more money in the kitty for all of us.’

Annie realized her nails were digging into her palms. This did not sound good. This was not going to be the big pay cheque she was expecting, was it? Never mind, she told herself, it was a start, sometimes you had to step back to step up.

‘So,’ Finn paused for breath, ‘right. OK, for the first six episodes, which will take about three months to complete, we’re going to pay you £1,200, per episode . . .’

Annie was doing the maths. Six times £1,200, was only £7,200! That was terrible: that was much much worse than she’d expected. It was about a quarter of what she’d expected. And she’d give notice on her job!

‘Split between you,’ Finn added.

Split between us? How could she do three months of work for just £3,600? Annie looked down at her bags. She’d just spent £1,000 more than that.

Despite the paralysed facial muscles and the doctor’s warning, Annie managed to roar, ‘WHAT?’ in a way that perfectly expressed her anger, shock *and* intense emotion.

Chapter Three

Annie's farewell outfit

Slinky red knit dress with fabulous neckline and long sleeves (Vivienne Westwood, with staff discount)

Purple patent T-bar heels (Timi Woo, direct from China)

Chunky purple beads (Topshop)

Tiny diamond stud earrings (Tiffany's via eBay)

Sheer red seamed stockings (Topshop)

Total est. cost: £580

'The show must go on'

IT WAS TWO minutes to 9 p.m. and Annie was fiddling. She was fiddling with the rows of champagne glasses laid out on the trestle table in the personal shopping suite. She was twitching the pink tablecloth to make sure it was hanging perfectly. She was making tiny alterations to the way the champagne bottles were facing.

This was it. This was definitely it.

After nine years, she was about to leave The Store for good. The glossy and glamorous, luxurious high fashion department store in London's Knightsbridge that she had been lucky enough to call her workplace for all this time. Well, yes, OK, she had left it once before, but that had been an unfair dismissal and she'd come back within months.

This was *really* leaving. This was exiting in a blaze of glory. For good. For ever.

She cast her eyes about the richly carpeted suite with its pink velvet curtains and bright pink sofa. There would be no more hanging out here with her clients, old and new. No more gazing critically in those full length mirrors with them, no more delving through the racks of wonderful, wonderful clothes brought up from the glittering white and glass floors of dazzling fashion.

There was no doubt in Annie's mind that almost as much as the people here, she was going to miss the clothes. Not to mention the staff discount which had let her build a vividly colourful and totally eclectic wardrobe. From Prada to Primark, from Alexander McQueen to Zara, her wardrobe (now stretched across *three* wardrobes, plus all the boxes and bags in the spare room) covered the entire spectrum.

Over in one corner of the suite was the little cubicle which had served her as an office for all this time. She'd already unplugged her laptop and packed it away in its case. She'd taken down the family snaps from her walls, heaved a huge collection of fashion magazines into the recycling bin and packed up all the assorted belongings that had accumulated in her desk drawers over the years: lost buttons, snagged stockings, pins, pens, badges, Polaroids of customers, thank-you letters from delighted clients.

It had taken nearly an hour, and plenty of quiet tears, to get through it all. Now, at 9 p.m. exactly. The Store was shutting its doors for the night and the staff, along with Annie's family and friends were coming up to the suite to drink her health and wish her well.

'You all right there, my love?' Paula, her beautiful, lean, black, soon to be ex-assistant, called out as she sped into the room on teetering heels with an enormous platter of canapés in her arms.

‘Yeah, definitely!’ Annie tried to chirp back brightly, but it didn’t sound quite convincing.

Paula set down the canapés, then swooped over and treated Annie to a long-limbed hug.

‘I’m gutted that you’re leaving us,’ Paula told her. ‘I’d be insulted if you weren’t upset, girl. But it’s so great for you. You’re going to be on the telly. You’re going to be a star! From now on the Annie Valentine touch isn’t just for the ladies who can afford to shop here, it’s for everyone!’

Well, everyone who watches the Home Sweet Home Channel, which, by the way, I hadn’t even heard of until yesterday, Annie thought.

With a lump building in her throat, she told Paula, ‘That is so sweet, babes, that is just so sweet’ and hugged her tight.

‘Let’s take a look at you,’ Paula said, stepping back to scrutinize the woman who had been her mentor.

Annie’s hair was tied up in its trademark high ponytail. Her lightly tanned face with hazel eyes, small features and ready smile looked bright and alert. Paula thought this had everything to do with Annie’s session down on the cosmetics floor with the very talented girl at the Bobbi Brown counter. She didn’t know about the Botox.

‘You look gorgeous,’ Paula was quick to compliment her. ‘You’re rockin’ the Westwood. On fire.’

The red dress, which pulled and nipped, plumped and tucked in all the right places on Annie’s bosomy curves, wasn’t new. It was a tried and trusted favourite which she knew wouldn’t let her down.

As she’d always tell her clients, ‘Big, nerve-racking events are not the best time to try out new outfits. You’re safer wearing something that you’ve worn before and can rely on. Why do you think brides are always so anxious?’

‘God save the Queen!’ Annie joked, which was her and Paula’s code for Westwood. (‘God save the Queens’ meant Dolce and Gabbana.)

‘Long live the Queen,’ Paula added.

‘I’m really, *really* going to miss my staff discount,’ Annie admitted with a sigh.

‘Annie Valentine, I bet you are,’ Nadine, one of the shop assistants, who was just entering the suite, had to agree.

She was leading in a posse of about ten others, so the party was definitely about to start.

‘She won’t need a staff discount,’ Dale from Menswear countered, ‘will you my love?’ He came and wrapped his arms round Annie’s waist. ‘She’s going to TV, she’s going to be rich! We’ll be reading about her in *heat* magazine and buying her books at Christmas, won’t we, doll?’

Annie felt a lurching, sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. If only they knew how much she was giving up. She felt she was risking everything for just the vaguest chance at small screen glory.

To excited whoops, a cork flew from a champagne bottle. Glasses were passed around, filled and clinked together.

Annie could see Geoff and the two ladies from Accounts coming in; they’d been in the pub already waiting for kick-off. Now there was Dinah, Annie’s sister, hesitantly entering the room.

But still no sign of Ed and her children, or her best friend Connor, or her boss, Helena Montserrat.

Dinah, Annie’s younger sister – she also had an older one, Nic – was a very important person in her life. She lived close by in north London, with her husband Bryan and daughter Billie. She was a more anxious and less impulsive person than Annie, who kindly did a lot of Annie’s worrying for her, but she was a close confidante and supporter in every twist and turn of Annie’s life.

‘Hey you!’ Dinah called out and gave a little wave. A much more arty and experimental dress than her big sis, she was wearing something vibrantly lilac and blue-green from the latest Warehouse

collection. Whereas Annie liked labels and long-lasting 'key pieces', Dinah liked cheap, chain store or, even better, second-hand fashion.

'Dinah!' Annie said, and wrapped her arms round her sister, 'I'm so glad you could come!'

'Wouldn't have missed it for anything,' Dinah assured her. 'Ed and the kids here yet?'

'No, but I'm sure they're on their way.'

'What about the Mung Bean?' This was their current nickname for Connor, their actor friend. Connor had recently moved to LA, because according to his new US agent he was 'totally hot, right here, right now' and he had to capitalize on it. According to Connor's reports, living in LA had not allowed him to carry on the easygoing, boozy lifestyle he'd enjoyed as an actor in London. No. Living in LA seemed to involve endless meetings, eating only tofu and mung beans and sweating it out with a personal trainer for five hours a day, which was all so vain and ridiculous that Annie and Dinah saw it as their duty to tease him at every possible opportunity. As Connor was in London for four days – for an audition, not just Annie's party – now was their chance.

'So is the whole contract thing sorted out then?' Dinah asked her sister in a low voice, but meeting her eyes.

'Oh!' Annie exclaimed, not wanting to talk about it here.

'The deal?' Dinah pressed: 'did you get what you were looking for?'

'Babes, I got enough to keep a squirrel in nuts and that's all I'm saying about it,' came Annie's fierce reply.

'Oh no!' Dinah whispered, 'is it bad?'

'It's the worst,' Annie whispered back.

'What are you going to do?'

But it was too late, Annie was being swooped on from all sides. So many people to talk to. Annie felt as if she was being passed from group to group like the parcel at a children's party.

She caught sight of Ed and her children in a far corner, talking to Dinah and Paula, but it was a few minutes before she could break away from the group she was with and get over to them.

'You all look gorgeous!' she cried. 'You've made such a fantastic effort for me.'

Owen, who had adopted the internationally accepted 'smart' outfit of a 12-year-old – ironed shirt, ironed chinos, passably clean Converse – was the first to get a hug. He accepted it without complaint even though his mum had ruffled the hair he'd carefully smoothed over to one side.

Lana was kissed on the cheek, then Annie took a moment to admire her new blue dress. Although it was worn with a self-conscious teenage slouch and some badly applied eyeliner, to Annie, Lana still looked beautiful.

Ed had made a huge effort. Somehow, he'd brought his unruly mop of hair under control and he replaced his usual baggy, tweedy, woolly look with the stylish jacket, shirt and tie that Annie had picked out for him long before she'd even known she was in love with him.

'Hey you,' she said softly, brushing his lips for hello, 'you look seriously cute.'

He smelled good too.

'Aha,' he agreed, 'I had to live up to your dress.' He ran a hand down her back.

'Total Annie magnet. It's OK, go out there and mingle. We'll be fine. We know we get you back at the end of the evening.'

'Have you seen the snacks?' Owen pointed to the trestle table, which was now covered with food. 'Awesome!'

Suddenly Annie's face – Bobbi Brown, Botox and all – was buried in the amply warm and friendly bosom of Delia, the second floor's cleaning lady.

‘Annie Valentine,’ she boomed in English accented with deepest Jamaican, ‘what’s I goin’ to do without choo? If you be needing any cleaning on them fancy TV places, you let Delia know right away you hear? I don’t think Mr Geoff here is goin to mind me saying that, are you?’ Delia gestured to the head of personnel. ‘If there was a job for him on TV, he’d be the first to go, wouldn’t choo Mr Geoff?’

Geoff obliged with a loud laugh.

Annie felt the lurch of unease again. This was supposed to be her big, big moment. The sort of exit from the everyday that everyone dreamed of making. All these people that she’d worked with for so long were so excited for her, so pleased for her and really, she was walking off into nothing. In for £3,600 for a digital channel. Some show no-one would ever hear about. She felt as if she should pre-empt a pause on this party or at least put out the word that she might be coming back. *Think of this as temporary*, she wanted to go around the room saying: *it might not work out!*

‘Ooooooh!’ one of the floor assistants exclaimed with excitement, ‘isn’t that Connor McCabe over there?’

Annie turned to catch her first glimpse of Connor for several months. It was enough to make the sick feeling recede slightly. Whatever her problems were, Connor usually had a way of cheering her up.

She scrambled through the crowd towards him, but he was already surrounded by a group of fans shaking hands, or just staring at him with intent, excited looks on their faces. He was a big TV star now and had recently done a movie, so he was really well known. He’d just featured in a double-page spread in *Hello!* for goodness sake!

‘Connor!’ Annie greeted him, ‘you came.’

‘Oh yeah, at the sight of you,’ he joked, treating her to a bear hug.

‘You look fabulous,’ she told him, and it was true. Bronzed, buff, dark hair, twinkly movie star eyes and big broad shoulders, teeny tiny waist. He was gorgeousness personified. But oh, so tragically, for the women anyway, he was gay.

‘Can I just speak to you for a micro-moment?’ Annie asked, holding her thumb and forefinger millimetres apart.

‘Yup, where can I put my bag anyway?’

She ushered him slightly away from the buzz of the party and into her tiny office.

‘This is so great,’ he told her as they crammed into the bare white space together, ‘I am so proud of you. A major new development!’

‘OK, a little less Hollywood please,’ she warned, ‘this is me you’re talking to now. Not some snazzy producer.’ She scanned his face.

‘How are you?’

‘I’m fine,’ he said, smiling reassuringly.

‘And Hector?’

‘Great,’ Connor answered for the partner he’d taken out to LA with him: ‘getting even buff and browner than me.’

‘It’s fantastic to see you,’ Annie couldn’t help telling him. ‘I miss you. Spend every free minute you have over the next few days at my house. OK?’

Connor nodded his agreement.

‘But there is a problem,’ Annie went on immediately, knowing she only had a few moments this evening with the one person in her life who knew all about TV. ‘It’s airing on a tiny digital channel and they’ve brought in a third presenter. She’s a name, so they have to pay her properly and I’m supposed to do this series, the whole series, for £3,600.’

Connor's face didn't change. She'd expected him to gasp with astonishment, or at the very least shoot up an eyebrow or two.

'Is there a lot less money in television than I thought?' Annie asked: 'is this something you've not told me? Is working on TV something that only people with a private income can do?'

'No! Don't be silly,' Connor replied, 'but starting salaries are low. Everyone puts up with them because they want their shot at the big time. And that's what you've got to do.' He took hold of her ponytail and ran it smoothly through his hand.

'OK,' he went on, 'have you and Ed got enough to live on for the next few months if you take the new job?'

'Ha! I've been trying to work out how we can scrape through . . . maybe just. But *only just*.'

'OK. Scrape,' Connor told her. 'Scrape and work your butt off for the TV company. Something else will come of this. I promise. If the show is great, someone big will buy it. If you're fantastic, someone else will hire you. What's the worst that can happen?'

Annie noticed the transatlantic twang, not to mention vocabulary he was developing.

'The worst that can happen? Let's see,' Annie began in exasperation, 'my children can't go to St Vincent's any more, because I can't afford the fees, I lose our house because I can't afford my share of the mortgage and The Store doesn't take me back, so I'm unemployed.'

'Well . . . yes, that's all quite bad,' Connor admitted, 'but what are you honestly going to do? Give up now,' he challenged, 'before you've even started?'

'No,' Annie said, with a hint of a smile.

'No way!' Connor confirmed. 'So, I have two things to say to you: get out there with a big successful smile on your face, because the show must go on. And never, ever make another deal without my agent.'

Helena's speech was very kind. Although Annie's boss had only been in the job for five months or so, she let everyone know what a valuable member of staff she was losing. She finished by assuring Annie that if it didn't work out in front of the camera, she'd be welcomed straight back behind the velvet curtains, and this stiffened Annie's resolve to leave. She was going to go forward now. She couldn't come back. Even if she wasn't going to work in TV beyond her three-month contract, she couldn't come straight back to this same job. It was definitely time to move on.

Annie's eyes met Paula's and suddenly her vision blurred. Then she was blubbing hopelessly into a cocktail napkin and hoping that Trish, the make-up artist, had thought to use waterproof mascara.

The goodbyes took too long and felt too sad and final. What had begun all fizz and nerves, like a wedding, was ending with weeping and hugs like a funeral. Until finally, Annie was outside on the pavement with her family around her for comfort.

Both Ed and Owen had their arms around her waist as they walked away from The Store, while Larissa kept up a cheerful commentary on her impressions of the evening.

'How are you doing?' Ed wanted to know.

'I'm OK,' Annie tried not to snifle, 'I'll be fine . . .'

'You were great,' he reminded her. 'What did Helena call you again? Annie V, queen bee of the shoppers. Here –' he held out a crumpled, but clean, man-sized tissue fished from his trouser pocket. 'I came prepared.'

'Thank you.' Annie pressed it to her eyes.

'So, TV star, are we going home by taxi or by limousine?' Ed joked.

'Oh look!' Annie began to break into a jog, 'there's the bus!'

Chapter Four

Ed's school uniform

Tweed jacket (can't remember)

Thin silk tie (Cancer Research)

Checked shirt (Hackett's via Annie)

Chinos (Garnet)

Battered briefcase (his mum's)

Total est. cost: no idea

'It's my turn to bring in the biscuits'

'SO WHEN YOU say you don't know what to wear, what do you mean exactly?'

Ed was still lying in bed, although the alarm clock had gone off exactly seven minutes ago.

Annie was already up. She'd slept restlessly and woken early. She'd spent a whole forty minutes in the bathroom, twiddling with make-up and tweezers and re-doing her ponytail about twenty-seven times until it was satisfactory.

Because today was the first day of her new life. Today, at 9 a.m. sharp, a car was arriving to whisk her off to the studio where she would meet the rest of the production team and make the very first steps towards filming.

The night before, Annie had thought it was all sorted, her crucially important first outfit of the first day. She'd laid it out so carefully: the new Chloé blouse, a tight red skirt, purple tights and the black patent shoe-boots which had looked just so sexy, so slinky and so perfect then. But now, as she held up the boots and the skirt up in front of the full-length bedroom mirror, she wasn't so sure. Was the outfit not a bit over the top? A bit too much for day one? There wasn't going to be any actual filming today, it was 'team talk' and 'getting to know each other' sort of stuff. That's what Finn had told her.

'You're not wavering, are you?' Ed asked, propping himself up on his elbow to get a better look at her, 'You've spent hours and hours over the past few days organizing your TV wardrobe haven't you? And weren't some very expensive purchases involved?'

'I'll be taking some of those back,' she reminded him.

'Yeah . . . might be an idea,' he agreed.

The night she'd returned from Svetlana's house with news about the TV deal and her slim salary, she'd needed to pour them both a generous glass of wine.

At first Ed had been even more shocked and disappointed than she had.

'Do you still want to do this?' he'd asked, but then answered the question himself: 'Of course you do. You've left The Store and it's a great chance for you.'

'Can we manage?' she'd wondered. 'It's just three months and I'll try and sell some stuff on eBay . . . at least make a few pounds that way. But we still have the mortgage and school fees and . . .'

'You have to give TV a try. We'll manage,' he'd assured her. 'I've got some savings that will help tide us over.'

'You have savings?' she was astonished.

As a woman who lived on the very extreme edges of her budget, whose credit card bills were a source of monthly concern, the idea of savings was just so alien. But then this was Ed, a different kind

of person altogether.

‘Why do I know nothing about your savings?’ she’d asked.

‘I wonder!’ he’d answered with a smile. ‘Maybe because I don’t want my savings to be translated into “really great investments” like Miu Miu shoes or Hermès handbags.’

‘Oh Hermès!’ she’d informed him, ‘Hermès is so over, only corporate lawyers carry those things.’

Facing the mirror now, with her tight orangey-red skirt in one hand and her ankle boots in the other, Annie had to confess, ‘I’m having a last-minute panic. It’s not so unusual, you know.’

‘No,’ Ed agreed. He pushed back the duvet, and went through his endearing morning ritual of yawning, stretching his arms up, then running a hand through his tangled mop of brown, curly hair before coming over to stand naked behind her.

He put his arms around her waist, kissed her neck, then they looked at each other via the mirror in the front of them.

‘Please stop fussing,’ he told her, ‘you’re going to look great, because you always look great.’

‘But that’s because I fuss!’ she told him.

‘Well, I know, but try not to worry. You’re going to be brilliant at this. I just know it,’ he assured her, ‘you’re really, really good with people and you’ll be a natural on TV.’

With Ed’s warm hands on her stomach, Annie’s churning nerves calmed. With Ed’s warm hands holding her, she could almost believe his soothing words. With Ed’s support, she sometimes felt she could do just about anything.

‘You’re great,’ she told him, putting her hands over his, ‘I really don’t know what I would do without you.’

‘You’d be just as fantastic,’ he insisted.

‘No, I definitely wouldn’t!’ she objected. ‘And you need to know that.’

She held his hands tightly in hers for a few moments. ‘Thank you for having so much faith in me,’ she told him: ‘it helps. It definitely helps.’

‘Wear the boots,’ he urged, ‘and I love you in that skirt, it makes your bum look like a ripe . . .’ he pinched her buttock to make the point.

But that was it: she dropped the skirt on the floor in horror. If the camera was going to add ten pounds to her already quite ripe enough behind, the skirt would be staying here.

‘Let’s just try not to burn too big a hole into my savings over the next few months,’ Ed warned as he watched the skirt being tossed aside.

‘No! Definitely not, I’m going to be working so hard,’ she said, ‘I won’t have the chance to go shopping or spend anything.’

At this, Ed’s eyebrows shot up and a broad smile broke over his face. ‘Right well . . . this will be very interesting,’ he said, certain that just because Annie didn’t work in a shop any more, that was hardly going to stop her being seduced by beautiful things.

‘And no cheating with your credit cards,’ he warned. ‘You’re on a tiny budget!’

With a parting kiss, he went to take a shower, leaving Annie, still in a frenzy of indecision, in front of the mirror.

‘KIDS!’ she directed a loud shout at the ceiling, because Owen and Lana had attic bedrooms directly above, ‘GET UP!’

It was ten past eight when Ed, Lana and Owen were finally dressed, breakfasted and ready to walk to school. Annie stood at the front door to kiss each of them goodbye.

Ed was first in his music teacher uniform of tweedy jacket, thin silk tie, slightly too baggy chinos

holding a battered brown briefcase. His hair was still all over the place because he liked it that way but Annie made him stand still so she could take off his little gold-rimmed glasses and clean them for him.

‘C’mon,’ he hurried her, ‘I have to get to the staffroom early today . . .’

‘Ooooh, the headmaster’s handing out big new promotions,’ she winked at him.

‘No, it’s my turn to bring in the biscuits.’

‘Ah.’

‘High powered, eh?’ He put his arms round her waist and kissed her firmly on the mouth.

‘Good luck, you’re going to be great.’

Then it was Lana’s turn.

‘Bye-bye, babes,’ Annie told her, kissing her on the cheek. She was very proud of her daughter right now. The sulky, Goth, irritating phase seemed to be over and in its place Annie had a model teenage daughter. Maybe this was a phase too. But, please, please, let this phase last for ever.

Lana’s long, dyed black locks had been replaced with a natural brown choppy bob, her uniform was neat and ironed and her skirt was respectably within sight of her knee. Plus, she was working impressively hard for her exams. She’d even gone straight to her room to do homework as soon as they’d come in from the party the other night.

Annie knew who she had to thank for this improvement. Lana had had this charming boyfriend Andrei (yes, yes, Annie perhaps hadn’t appreciated his charms as much as she should have done when Andrei was around) but although Lana and Andrei had called it a day, his swotty, sporty influence seemed to have had a very good effect on Lana.

Owen, now 12 was maybe in need of a good influence of his own. As she bent down to kiss him, she couldn’t help noticing his overgrown, unbrushed shock of hair and his anorak, half on, half off with the hood twisted inside the collar. Even his bags were in a muddle; his rucksack and his swimming bag had got tangled up together in the journey to his shoulders. On his feet were shoes as scuffed and muddied as they’d been yesterday morning when she’d decided to give them a good clean. And the laces were still fastened with Velcro because Owen coping with laces in the rush to get to school had tipped everyone close to the edge.

‘Lunches!’ Annie remembered and ran back to the kitchen to get the three lunchboxes.

They were easily capable of making their own packed lunches, but this was Annie’s thing. Usually, she wasn’t home in time to make dinner, plus Ed enjoyed doing dinner, so Annie’s love and nurturing were channelled into the lunchboxes. Every day there was a freshly made sandwich and a yoghurt then a selection of extras: fresh fruit, berries or raw vegetables sliced up in little Tupperware boxes. Or nuts, dried fruit, cartons of juice and always a little something. A wrapped sweetie, a square of chocolate, a tangerine with a love heart carved on the side, a row of kisses drawn on a napkin. She wanted them to know that, although she was busy, she didn’t stop thinking about them.

Handing Owen his lunchbox, Annie had to ask her son, ‘Why are you carrying a placard?’ even though Ed was holding the front door open and it really was time to go.

‘Raffle tickets,’ Owen answered.

‘Yeah, I noticed that,’ Annie informed him, because the words RAFFLE TICKETS had been drawn across the placard in large capitals then coloured in orange, red and yellow, ‘but tickets for what?’

‘I’m in the eco-committee,’ Owen said breezily.

‘Are you?’

This was the first Annie had heard of it.

‘Yeah!’ Ed confirmed, ‘hasn’t he told you? He’s really chuffed, they’re having a big sale—’

‘To raise money for the WWF,’ Owen confirmed.

When Annie looked at him questioningly, Lana filled her in with an exasperated sigh: ‘The World Wide Fund for Nature, Mum.’

‘We really have to go,’ Ed reminded them.

‘Well that’s great,’ Annie said proudly, ‘but why am I always the last to know these things?’

Ed gave her a reassuring wink. He didn’t like her to beat herself up. She was a good mother, just a bit busy – like almost every other mother he knew.

‘Your mum will buy ten quids’ worth of tickets tonight,’ Ed promised Owen as he ushered him out of the door.

‘Hey, I thought I was on a budget!’ Annie warned them.

‘Will you go and get dressed?!’ Ed ordered, pointing at his watch.

As soon as her family had gone for the day, Annie fled back upstairs to the bedroom. A frenzied burst of wardrobe ransacking followed in which at least twenty different outfits were chosen, put together, even tried on in some cases, and then discarded.

This was the curse of being a personal shopper and wardrobe adviser: there was too much pressure on Annie to wear the perfect outfit.

The problem was, she felt totally unsure about today. This was her first meeting with everyone . . . was she supposed to dress up? Dress down? Look authoritative? Or friendly? One of the gang? Or the star? It was enough to make her scream.

Carefully, she studied her latest outfit in the mirror and wondered if it was right. Having tried on five different dresses and several skirts, she was now in trousers, which was highly unusual. She was a dedicated dress wearer. But the wide-legged grey trousers with heels, a waistcoat and this funky pink blouse looked pretty good, and she’d add a long trailing scarf plus necklaces. Would that be TV-ish? A little bit creative? Arty?

Maybe not.

No.

She’d change – try something else.

The loud honk of a car horn blasted through her thoughts.

They were here! This was her car! It was now or never, she had to get her bag and go. She looked in the mirror and hated the trousers. Hated them. This was all a terrible mistake. Nevertheless, she grabbed her favourite, most luxurious handbag, threw in her purse, and headed out of the front door.

At the side of the road, waiting for her was a rather beaten-up looking estate car. The man in the driver’s seat was waving to her cheerily. As she approached, he slid the window down and called out: ‘Hello glamour puss, you must be Annie Valentine then?’

‘Hello,’ she replied, ‘Are you taking me to the studios?’

‘Yup, Bob Barratt, *Wonder Women* cameraman at your service,’ he gave a jokey salute and leaned across the front seat to open the front passenger’s door for her.

‘Come sit up front with me, it’s nice and friendly and that way you won’t get tangled up in all the clobber on the back seat.’

Annie jumped in and shook Bob’s hand enthusiastically. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that the entire back seat and boot of the car was filled with equipment: cameras, camera bags, tripods, cables, lights and a selection of jackets – waterproof, waxy, down, plus a pile of baseball caps.

‘I like to travel light,’ Bob joked as he fired up the engine, ‘so . . . it’s a forty-minute journey. Time for us to get acquainted.’ He turned to shoot her a cheery smile and pushed up the brim of today’s

baseball cap to get a better look at her. 'You were sort of on my way, so Finn suggested I pick you up. Saves him a taxi fare, I suppose. I think saving will be the name of the game on this show. Mind you it's like this all over TV now . . . I've been in the business for twenty-eight years and I've never seen anything like it.'

'Twenty-eight years? You don't look nearly old enough,' Annie was quick to tell him.

'Aha!' Bob laughed the compliment away.

If he'd started at 18, that would make him about 46, she guessed. He was a fit-looking 46, carrying his slim jeans and rugged brown leather jacket well. Gunmetal grey hair curled out from beneath his cap, and laughter lines were deep set into his darkly tanned face. He either went on holiday a lot, or he was a very outdoorsy, weather-beaten kind of guy. He seemed relaxed, quick to smile and joke, so Annie tried to relax too.

'So you're new to TV?' Bob asked as the car pulled out into the stream of traffic.

'Yeah, first day,' she confided.

'Well, the number one rule is to be very, very nice to the cameraman,' he joked. 'I'm the one who picks which angle to shoot you from, Missus. I can make you look like Marilyn Monroe or Marilyn Manson. So be nice.'

'OK,' she agreed, 'now if you could just tell me everything else that I need to know . . .'

It took a full fifty minutes to get to the studios. The traffic was bad, plus Bob insisted on pulling over at a drive-thru to get them both cups of coffee and a breakfast bun: 'You never know when you'll eat next. Have to have a good breakfast,' he insisted.

Finally, the car was parked up and Bob unloaded the heavy camera bags and tripod.

'Follow me,' he said. 'Time to go in and meet the family.'

As they were signed in at the reception area, Annie realized that she was growing clammy with nerves. Along several narrow corridors they went, until Bob opened the door on a small room already busy with people.

Annie was relieved to see that Svetlana was there. Perched elegantly on a chair, she was sipping tea from a china teacup, wearing a drop-dead glamorous cream dress. Svetlana liked to emphasize her blondeness, her immaculate complexion and her perfect curves in all the shades of pale.

Before Annie had even managed to utter a hello, a thin girl in a tight grey jacket and skinny leather trousers stepped in front of her, looked her up and down critically and barked out, 'Trousers? I thought we'd all agreed that on this show, *I* wear the trousers.'

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