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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Secret Shopper Unwrapped**

Written by Kate Harrison

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# The Secret Shopper Unwrapped



KATE HARRISON



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November 6 –  
Shopping Days to Christmas: 48



There's blood on the High Street. So how do you avoid falling victim to the worst recession in a lifetime?

Well, today's the day to start. Bonfire Night is over, but the fireworks are just beginning. Clear out the sparklers and the Halloween pumpkins, hang up the tinsel, stick on *Now That's What I Call Christmas Shopping*, and prepare for the fight of your shopkeeping life.

From *Surviving the Credit Crunch Christmas:  
a Day-by-Day Guide for Retailers*

## CHAPTER ONE

# Emily

Once upon a time, there were three little girls.

(Can you still call yourself a girl at thirty-three? Maybe I'll never feel like a grown-up.)

Life was tough. The lowest point came three Christmases ago. One of the girls lost her childhood sweetheart to a Swiss banker and took far too long to work out that Heidi the husband-stealer had done her a massive favour. One girl lost her job, before landing a better one. And one lost her brilliant artist husband to the great gallery in the sky, and with it her purpose in life . . . before she found herself again.

Most important of all, we three girls found each other, when we became mystery shoppers. We were Charlie's Shopping Angels, using our secret cameras to record the best and worst in customer service. Along the way we happened to become the best of friends.

And we all expected to live happily ever after. Because isn't that what's supposed to happen?

'Mummeee! Done a poo! Wipe time!'

'Will?' I call out. 'It's your turn to sort Freddie out.'

'I'm in the middle of decorating the shop.'

'But I'm in the middle of something too.' OK. Maybe being in the middle of an idle daydream and a Kit Kat doesn't trump being eight feet up a ladder hanging dried cranberry garlands, but my secret-shopping buddies would stand up for my right to

enjoy a moment of Me Time. Sandie would say it's my duty to be assertive, to make up for centuries of female oppression, and Grazia would insist that a woman must be adored for mystique, not mundane tasks. All the same, I feel a little guilty.

The love of my life grunts. I hear heavy footsteps down the treads of the ladder and then up the steps to the flat.

'Mummeee!'

'Will's on his way, sweetheart.'

I take another bite of the Kit Kat. Where was I? Oh yes. Happy ever afters. The trouble is, fairy tales are so much more clear-cut than real life. In my wildest dreams, I never imagined I'd end up with an ex-husband (Duncan Prince, as far away from charming as it's possible to be) or that my son would have a stepdad who is anything but wicked. Unless you mean wicked in the cool and brilliant sense, willing to wipe bottoms and mop up midnight tears.

But happy ever after has not turned out to be what I expected at all. In my mind, happiness was like a tableau at Madame Tussaud's: me, Will and a toddler-sized Freddie, on the steps of our newly purchased shop, laughing, ready to sell dreams and beautiful things. We're looking our best: I'm a size ten (which I haven't been since Long Before Baby) and my hair's more blonde than mousy in the sun, with a designer fringe I've never quite managed with kitchen scissors. Will towers over me, cute as ever, and for once he's lost that permanently anxious look of his. Like waxworks, we were fixed in time, forever smiling.

But life's not like that. Instead we're a work-in-progress. Freddie is no longer a toddler. He's three and a half, with more personality than the entire line-up of *Britain's Got Talent*. He knows he's adored, not least because he has two male role models: the wonderful Will, plus Daddy, who is good for rough-and-tumble but would never be caught wiping anyone else's bottom (or tears, for that matter).

And two years after opening the shop, Will and I are still

smiling, but we're not selling nearly enough of anything. In fact, the profits at Bell's Emporium are now lower than they were when we started out, which was definitely not the business model. Then again, no one predicted the credit crunch would bugger up our happy ever after.

'Wheee!'

A pair of arms envelops my hips, using my body as a brake.

'Hello, Little Londoner. I hope you've washed your hands.'

Keen eyes stare up at me. He sidesteps the question completely. 'I'm not from London. I'm from Heartsneeze!' And then he fakes a sneeze, our little joke. Everything's a joke to Freddie.

We giggle. Heartsease Common is a funny place, a village in search of a purpose, with a few too many commuters and not quite enough community to connect us all together. Though the Emporium has helped. It used to be a dusty, loss-making hardware store that Will kept going despite the best efforts of his head office to close it down. And when the suits finally handed down the death sentence, the two of us brought it back to life, and renamed it Bell's Emporium after the original Mr Bell, who opened his first store on this spot almost a century ago.

'Shall we have a look at what Will's done in our shop?'

'Okey dokey,' says Freddie.

We head down the stairs from our flat, via the staffroom – more of a cubby-hole really – and then go through the door that always reminds me of Mr Benn's, onto the shop floor.

Will frowns when he spots us. 'Shut your eyes! I haven't finished yet!' He runs his hands through his dark curls – his hair needs cutting, as usual, but when would he find the time? – and tries to block the window display with his long body. He's a perfectionist, and we both know that more than ever before, getting this right *really* matters.

'Wow!' says Freddie, unable to keep his eyes closed.

I open my eyes, too.

Freddie's right. It is *very* wow. Thank Donner, Blitzen and the spirit of Father Christmas for that.

It could have gone either way. I'd decided on a classic red theme this year, before realising that Christmas comes in many shades of red: cranberry and poinsettia and holly berry and Santa suit and blood orange and reindeer-nose red. And then all the decorations arrived yesterday and they all clashed horribly, but it was too late to get new ones from the wholesaler's (and I think they're about to go bust anyway), so Will said he'd do his best with what we had.

So now we only have today, our precious Sunday off, to transform the shop from the haunted Halloween Hovel theme we'd adopted in September, into an irresistible Christmas Crunch-busting *destination* store. It's something we still haven't cracked: everyone agrees that the Emporium is fabulous fun. Big-hearted. The best shop for miles around. They're just never quite sure what we're selling . . . which I have to admit is a bit of an issue when you're trying to get the customers through the door.

We took down the fake cobwebs and the rubbery spiders this morning, and when I explained to Freddie that we had to pack them away neatly 'for next year', Will raised his eyebrows.

'What's that meant to mean?' I said huffily.

'Just that I love you for your optimism. As well as for everything else,' he said, and kissed me on the forehead.

We make a good team, Will and me. When one of us is feeling jaded or touchy or just plain knackered, the other one can normally summon up enough positivity for both of us. But we're having to face facts: optimism doesn't pay the rates, or the VAT man, or our suppliers (who're demanding payment up front: they say it's nothing personal, but when I can't sleep, I wonder if they've seen the writing on the wall for us).

'William Michael Powell, I do believe you've cracked it.'



He blushes, as he does at every compliment. Other women like a man with a brooding stare or abs of steel, but Will's blushes do it for me every time. Number one, they're so sweetly boyish. Number two, they, um, remind me of other blush-worthy moments . . . and the fact that it was Will who made me feel like a sexy momma again, after so long feeling just like a frumpy mum.

'You think it'll do, then?'

I take another look. Even though it's not quite finished, it's riotous. The reds clash vibrantly, like a crimson-and-fire grotto. The smell puts the sneeze into Heartsneeze, a potent and spicy perfume of cinnamon, cloves, oranges and gingerbread. Will put on one of Freddie's singalong Christmas CDs to help him get on with the decorating, and the manic cackling and warbling adds an additional dimension to the sensory overload.

OK, so it's nothing like the tasteful displays at the West End stores. It's more like the best pantomime bazaar in an opulent production of Aladdin, stuffed with festive treasures, from ruby-red candles and sparkly tree decorations, to crystal tableware and jewel-studded bedroom slippers. How could anyone *not* know what we're about? We sell all the things that make a home feel like a home, a family feel like a family, and a life feel worth living.

'It's brilliant.'

He picks up a piece of shocking-pink tinsel, shapes it into a circle and places it on my head. 'I now crown you the Queen of all things Christmassy.'

He leads me to the mirror. Oh, it was love at first sight when I saw that mirror at the wholesaler's. It's like something from a French courtesan's boudoir, a fur-coat-and-no-knickers affair, with gilded, blowsy roses carved into the wooden frame. I can't believe that someone hasn't bought it yet.

Then again, I'll be gutted when they do. It's been here eleven months, it's part of the furniture.

‘See, it’s your colour,’ says Will, and I’m about to protest that shocking pink has never been my colour, too harsh against my fair hair and pale skin, when I see the two of us reflected back. I’ve never seen myself as beautiful, but when he looks at me like that, I can almost imagine that this short, plump, West Country girl really is a princess.

‘Perfect,’ I say.

He leans forward to kiss me, and when Freddie protests at being left out, Will lifts him up and kisses him too. ‘It will make people buy, won’t it, Em?’

Ah. There’s the catch.

‘Of course it will,’ I say, though what do I know? Will’s the one who has retail in his blood, who worked so hard to try to keep this place going when it was Bells & Whistles, the doomed hardware store. And he still failed.

That’s another thing that keeps me awake at night. What if the store is cursed? Since I moved into the village, I’ve heard a few stories about the previous occupants: the original Mr Bell, who lost his wife on the Titanic. Or the son who drank himself to death.

I’d never say anything to Will, of course – he’d tell me off for letting my notorious imagination run out of control – but maybe even Mr Selfridge himself couldn’t have made this place work.

I look up through the window, past the garlands and the holly and the berry-shaped fairy lights, and I see Sandie crossing the common. She marches towards the store, like a sergeant major coming to inspect the troops. I feel myself standing to attention, tucking a misbehaving curly strand of hair behind my ear and trying to pull the creases out of my T-shirt.

‘Right, boys. Time for you two to go off and play football or darts or whatever other manly pursuits you want to enjoy. The girls are taking over.’

‘Pub or poker, Fredster? What do you reckon?’ Will winks at me.

‘What’s poker?’ asks Freddie.

‘It’s a very, very boring card game played by men with whiskers and women who smell of wee,’ I say hurriedly. Even though that’s bridge. I don’t want bloody Duncan accusing me of filling Freddie’s head with gambling terminology.

‘I reckon it’s got to be the pub, then, mate,’ Will says, taking my son’s hand. ‘Don’t change the display too much while I’m gone. I don’t want to come back and find it all girly.’

‘I wouldn’t dare. Not when I’m already outnumbered by the men in my life.’ I give Freddie a quick hug before letting the two of them go upstairs to get mittened up. Then I go outside to view the displays from the front. Though of course, I’ll adore it whatever it looks like, just like I adore everything about the shop, except for its takings.

I have to hope that it gets the Customer is King Consultancy’s seal of approval . . .

Sandie is a big softie at heart, but you’d never know it to watch her now. Her face is set into a steely expression, and even though she’s let her hair grow a little from the helmet-head crop she had when we first met, there’s something inscrutable about her. She’s not working today, but she’s still dressed for business, in a chocolate-brown trouser suit a shade or two lighter than her skin. I catch a glimpse of leather boots at the ankle, polished to military standards.

Really, if I didn’t know better, I’d be terrified.

‘Hey, Sandie,’ I say, waving at her. She smiles but holds up her hand to stop me getting closer. All her concentration is focused on Bell’s Emporium – friendly greetings can wait. And as I’m getting her £120-an-hour expertise for the price of a cup of tea, I’m not arguing.

She begins her appraisal in the middle of the road, walking

up and down to check the display from all angles. Then she takes several paces towards the store and pauses again, standing on the pavement in front of the window pane for a good two minutes.

‘Can I hug you yet, Sandie? Or are you still carrying out your inspection?’

‘What?’ she looks confused. ‘Oh. Yes. Yes, sorry, you know what I’m like. I can never find the “off” switch.’

I lean in to kiss her. ‘That’s what we love about you.’ I breathe in her perfume. ‘And what’s that? It’s fabulous.’

‘Isn’t it? Bought it in Paris last weekend. New limited edition Chanel. So secret I can’t even divulge the number.’ Her eyes widen with excitement. Fragrance and retail are her twin passions. OK, there’s Toby too, and she’s awfully fond of him, but I suspect he’d come a poor third if she was asked to choose.

‘Well, whatever it’s called, it smells like heaven. Are you coming in now, or are you going to give me the Customer is King verdict out here?’

‘I’ll come in.’ She walks ahead of me, into the store. The first time we came here, when this was still a spit-and-sawdust hardware store, there was nothing welcoming about the entrance at all – in fact, I could barely manoeuvre my way in without knocking over mops and buckets and tins of paint. Now we’ve de-cluttered, with just one or two seasonal items at the door. Except, they’re *last season’s*. She looks down at the broomstick and pumpkin display and frowns.

‘Sorry it’s not quite finished. We’re midway through the re-dressing.’

‘First impressions, Emily. You’ll never get a second chance to make a first impression.’

‘Point taken,’ I say, feeling suitably scolded. Sandie keeps walking and once she’s in the main shop area, she closes her eyes, sniffs, then opens them again, before turning three hundred and sixty degrees. She inspects the shelf displays and, as I

follow her gaze, I suddenly notice gaps between the reindeer tea-light holders, and an ugly lack of symmetry in the way the pine-cone table decorations are arranged.

I move towards them to even them out, but she shakes her head.

‘That’s easily fixed.’

Something in her tone makes me stop. ‘But you’ve spotted something else that isn’t?’

She turns her back on me, pretends to inspect further. Finally she sighs. ‘I think . . . you’ve done a great job.’

‘But?’

‘I know I sound like a broken record, Emily, but it’s the same problem as before.’

I sigh. ‘Why would people come all the way out here unless we’re being clear about what we’re offering?’

She nods. ‘It’s not the products you’ve chosen. They’re great. You have a terrific eye . . .’ She tails off.

And now suddenly the smell is cloying and the colours seem to clash again and I feel a fool for imagining that Christmas could save us. The door opens behind me, and I turn to see Grazia striding into the shop. She is dressed extravagantly, in red and black – I do hope that’s *fake* fur on her collar – with deep crimson lipstick and a wild halo of curly black hair.

‘Emily! Sandie!’ she cries, and is about to embrace us when she looks around the shop. ‘This is magnificent! The colours, oh, they make me feel so festive, immediately.’

My mood is restored instantly. I am ridiculously susceptible to other people’s opinions. We air-kiss.

‘You are looking splendid, Emily. Your hair is so wonderful with that wave in it, you are the twin of Marilyn Monroe.’

There is, of course, no way I look like Marilyn’s twin. More like Little Miss Muffet, after too much curds and whey.

‘And Sandie, so smart as always. Really! Do you ever let your hair down?’

‘Not if I can help it,’ says Sandie, smiling.

But Grazia doesn’t hear her, because Grazia is already in shopping mode. She places item after item on the counter by the till. ‘I must have this napkin ring set, and the napkins to accompany it . . . oh, and this centrepiece for the table is so *English*. Adorable.’

Sandie and I watch her whizz around the small space, her stiletto heels tapping against the wooden floor like a crazed metronome.

‘You know, Grazia, you don’t have to,’ I say.

‘Have to what?’

‘Buy our entire stock from us. Apart from anything else, there’s no room for all this in your flat.’

‘Pah!’ She dismisses me with a flick of the hand. ‘I have had enough minimalism to last my entire lifetime. This winter, I am choosing excess!’

I don’t believe a word of it. Ever since Will and I set up the shop together she’s been acting as fairy godmother. She loaned Will the money for the lease and the stock, pulled favours to get us write-ups in the glossy mags, and press-ganged wealthy friends into visiting us out here in the sticks. OK, she’s had money to burn since she sold off her late husband’s paintings, but she can’t keep bailing us out for ever.

Eventually she runs out of steam. She leans on the counter, looking slightly flushed.

‘I’ll check those out for you later, Grazia. I think we could do with a drink first. Shopping’s thirsty work, after all. And then there’s the small matter of a forthcoming birthday to be celebrated.’

We head up to the flat, but before I can get out the tea-bags, Grazia’s produced a bottle of Cristal from underneath her coat. I can’t find any wine glasses in our cupboard, so she runs back downstairs again and brings up three rose-pink crystal flutes

from the glassware display. ‘Add it to my account,’ she says, with a wink.

‘Cheers, girls,’ I say, as I open the bottle, letting the cork pop up to the ceiling, missing the glass light fitting by millimetres.

Sandie gives me a reproving look. ‘You know how many people lose their sight every year from champagne corks?’

‘Party pooper!’ says Grazia, and her vehemence makes me giggle.

We clink glasses together and take a sip – I’ve gained quite a taste for the finest champagne since Grazia turned into the merry widow.

‘How long has it been?’ I say, once we’ve each downed the best part of a glassful.

‘Too long,’ says Sandie. ‘And before you say it, yes, I know it’s all my fault. I’m just completely run ragged. Can you keep a secret?’

‘We *are* secret shoppers!’ I say indignantly.

‘I’m in final negotiations to take over one of Charlie’s biggest contracts.’

‘Bloody hell! Go Sandie!’ I say. Charlie used to be our boss at the old mystery-shopping company, though he was the biggest mystery of all, hiding behind a shadowy Internet alias.

Grazia frowns. ‘He will not like that.’

It’s true: he even threatened to sue Sandie when she first set up the Customer is King Consultancy, but he backed down when he realised she wasn’t the type to get rattled.

Sandie shrugs. ‘I’ve left his work alone for over a year, but it turns out most of his contacts don’t trust him any further than they can throw him. Which means I’m picking up more work than I can handle. I even sent Gramma on an assignment the other day.’

I’ve never met Sandie’s grandmother, but she has a formidable reputation. ‘Where?’

‘Couple of burger takeaway joints.’

How did she get on?’

‘Actually she was great. Very picky. Her toilet inspection was the most thorough I’ve ever seen. And she was very hot on trans-fats. Only problem is that she’s so intimidating that even the kid behind the counter gave her service worthy of the Ritz. Speaking of which: Grazia?’

‘Not more hotels, Sandie,’ sighs Grazia. ‘I am so tired of sleeping in someone else’s bed.’

I giggle. ‘Now that sounds interesting.’

‘Alone. Alas. Though I am planning to make changes in that direction.’

‘Who is it? Who?’ I clap my hands together – when we started secret shopping we were all single, and now that I’ve found Will and Sandie’s got Toby, there’s nothing I want more than for Grazia to find someone and live happily ever after too. Widowhood just isn’t her style – she’s far too passionate.

‘No one in particular. I have decided that as tomorrow is a *milestone* birthday, shall we say, it is time for me to move on from Leon.’

‘A milestone?’ says Sandie. ‘You told us you were forty-one. Though, now I think of it, I’m sure you told us the same last year. And the year before.’

‘I will be forty-five,’ Grazia says. ‘I did not mean to lie. I have been in denial. But enough of this denial! Time to act.’

‘Who are you going to *act* with?’ I ask.

She shrugs. ‘Let us say, I am considering a number of candidates.’

They’ve never gone in for confessions, my colleagues. They take the bloody secret bit far too seriously. ‘Go on. Give us a clue.’

‘I cannot say. But it will be someone distinguished. A gentleman.’

‘You still can’t resist that posh Englishman thing, can you?’ I say.



‘Leon was hardly the epitome of posh. He was definitely nouveau riche. Which is why I am, this time, ruling out any man who has not attended one of the major public schools. I do not want to be reminded of my late husband. And a privately educated man should have good manners, at least.’

‘I wouldn’t bank on it,’ Sandie says ruefully. ‘And they tend to have very close relationships with their mummies, who are usually quite terrifying.’

Now I turn my gossip antennae towards Sandie. ‘Has Toby finally told his mother about you, then?’

‘Only because she was trying to matchmake him with yet another highly suitable girl from the Home Counties. She really has no idea at all that he’s already been propositioned by half of them. That is, she didn’t have any idea until he put her right.’

‘And does she know . . . um . . .’ I tail off, unsure how to put it.

‘That I’m a Brummie? That I’m a shop girl? Or that I’m black?’

‘Er. All three, I suppose.’

She groans. ‘He’s told her we met at work. She threw enough of a wobbler over that to be going on with, he said. He insists she’s not racist but there’s a big difference between observing cultural diversity on BBC documentaries from the comfort of your Gloucestershire estate, and seeing it in your own living room, holding your darling son’s hand.’

‘Drawing room, surely?’ says Grazia.

‘So when are you meeting her?’

Sandie groans again. ‘She’s only gone and invited me for Christmas. The *whole* of Christmas. The full Christmas Eve through to Boxing Day stately home experience at Bambourne Manor.’

I gulp. ‘But what about your grandmother?’

‘That’s what I said to Toby. She’ll go ballistic if I leave her alone at Christmas. He said she could come too.’

‘You could always say no to the lady of the manor . . .’ I suggest.

She exhales loudly. ‘I tried that. Toby sulked for twenty-four hours before admitting he’s pretty terrified of his mother himself and wouldn’t want to cross her. He thought she was about to put him over her knee and give him a spanking when he admitted that we’d been seeing each other for almost a year without her knowledge.’

‘I think it is a marvellous opportunity,’ says Grazia. ‘The roaring fires, the dinner, the carol service in their own chapel, the Boxing Day hunt. I take it they do hunt?’

‘I’ve no idea. They probably hunt down lower-middle-class interlopers with the gall to get ideas above their station.’

‘It might turn out OK. I thought it’d be bloody awful when I met Will’s parents. You know his dad was high up in the Army? I was convinced I’d be frogmarched off the premises for being a divorced mother of one from the wrong side of Somerset. But they were good as gold.’

‘From what Toby has told me about Mother Garnett, I have this horrible feeling I won’t be welcomed into the bosom of the family.’

‘One of the best things about being a foreigner is that I escape definition,’ Grazia says. ‘Which is why nothing you say will put me off the landed gentry.’

Sandie smiles. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll see if I can scout out any gentlemen of a certain age for you before I get thrown out of the house party.’

‘Ah, I plan to have got the whole troublesome business of sex out of the way well before then.’

Sandie and I stare at each other. Grazia never fails to amaze me. ‘What’s the rush? I mean, you’ve been widowed for four years now. Shouldn’t you wait till you find Mr Right?’

‘You always were the great romantic, Emily. But I am simply being realistic. Every day when I wake and examine myself in

the mirror, the truth stares back at me. I must shift myself, while I still have a vestige of my former good looks to attract a man.'

'Don't be daft, Grazia, you're gorgeous.' And she is. She is the most glamorous woman I know.

But she holds up her hands and for the first time, I look beyond the French manicure, and see that the skin on the backs of her hands is *crêpey*. 'Emily, Emily. I am simply being realistic. Beauty has a best-before date. Even the most stunning Italian frescoes show their age and then crumble to dust. In my case, it may be time to consider restoration work, though it will never be quite the same.'

'If you say so,' I tell her, 'but if I was a man I'd shag you, no worries. And I hope you'll tell us after the event. In the meantime, shall we do a toast? To Grazia getting her groove back on her birthday?' I hold up my glass – Grazia's glass, really, I must remember to charge her for it – and the others join in.

'To Grazia's groove,' says Sandie.

'To my long-lost libido,' says Grazia. 'But enough. We have wasted too much time on men now. You mentioned assignments?'

'Yup.' Sandie puts her glass down. 'Actually I think I have the perfect ones for both of you.'

I shake my head. 'I can't take the time off, Sandie, not when the shop is at such a critical point.'

'It won't count as work. Freddie will love it—'

'You can't get round me that way.'

'—and so will you. It might even give you ideas for the shop.'

I sigh, feeling my resistance melting away. 'Go on then, tell me. I know you won't stop until you have.'

'It's Operation Grotto Fabulous. I need a mother and child to tour the major Christmas displays and grottos across London

and the South East. Rate-my-Santa. Come on, Em. I know you're a sucker for tinsel.'

'Well . . . I couldn't do all that many.'

'As many as you can take on. Even a few would help. And there are some gorgeous ones this year. The Snow Queen. Hansel and Gretel's Gingerbread Feast. The Wind in the Willows. Even Garnett's is on the list. I'll save the best ones for you.'

I nod. Actually I can't imagine anything more fun than touring the loveliest winter-themed stores, and watching Freddie's face as he meets more Father Christmases than a little boy has any right to. It certainly beats standing in our own shop, trying to do a Derren Brown on the passers-by to hypnotise them into coming in. 'Send me through the details.'

'And what do you have for me, Sandie?' asks Grazia. 'I mean it about the hotel rooms. I already have another five booked in before Christmas. Room service becomes so samey. If I see another club sandwich, I may go loco and stab the poor waiter with the cocktail stick.'

Sandie pretends to look hurt. 'And there was me thinking you liked that life. Right. I'll send Gramma next time. No . . . what I have in mind for you, well, I hope you won't take this the wrong way. It's based purely on your profile. And, um, well, you did say . . .'

'Spit it out.'

'The operation is called Deep Freeze. It's about beauty salons. The, um, medical kind.'

A muscle twitches in Grazia's left cheek. But then she laughs. 'You would like me to check out cosmetic surgery?'

'You don't have to go through with it,' Sandie says hastily. 'It's one of Charlie's old contracts, from the people who regulate the clinics. They just want to check on standards, including overselling. But they specified a glamorous woman over forty as the mystery shopper, and while Gramma is

certainly over forty, she fails the other stipulation quite comprehensively.'

Grazia smiles calmly. 'Stop. No more. I will do this Deep Freeze, of course. I was considering the non-surgical options in any case, so this will be a piece of cake.'

'Thanks. Both of you. I feel better now I have my top shoppers on board. All I need now is the perfect person for my third festive project.'

'And it's not something we could do?' I ask, feeling slightly hurt that she doesn't trust us.

'Em. You're impossible. A minute ago you said you didn't have time for anything else. Besides, you don't have the qualifications, I'm afraid.'

All my insecurities flood back: I took my GCSE Maths three times before admitting defeat. The fact that a) I worked in a bank and b) my ex-husband was a prodigy who did mental arithmetic in exchange for drinks in our local made my incompetence even more shameful, as he never failed to remind me. '*Well, with me around, babe, you don't need a head for figures. You just need a figure that turns heads.*'

Ha. And I fell for those lines for more than a decade. Shame they didn't teach common sense to GCSE level.

'So what is this oh-so-bloody-tricky assignment that's beyond Grazia and me?'

'Operation Christmas Crunch. And unless either of you have a secret history as a store security guard, then you don't have what it takes. Because this one involves tracking the prevalence of the only seasonal figure who pops up more often at this time of year than Santa Claus.'

'Simon Cowell?' I guess.

'I'm talking about the Shop Lifter.'