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Cupcakes at Carringtons

Written by Alexandra Brown

Published by Harper

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ALEXANDRA BROWN

Cupcakes at Carrington's

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Harper

An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2013

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-748823-0

Set in Birka by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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1

It's Tuesday morning in Mulberry-On-Sea, and Eddie is glaring with disapproval at my New Look heels as I step inside the staff lift and close the metal concertina cage door.

'You know I just saw Sam outside. That cupcake queen totally blanked me,' he says, preening into the mottled mirror on the lift wall.

'Oh you know Sam. She probably had her mind on other things like giant macaroon mountains or gold glitter sprinkles.' The mention of Sam highlights my rumbling stomach so I make a mental note to pop up to her café on the fifth floor, Cupcakes at Carrington's, for a red velvet cupcake with butter cream icing. My favourite. Mm-mmm. And a good catch-up on all the gossip of course. Sam overhears all kinds of stuff. When Cynthia from the florist down on Sunray Crescent was having it away with Trevor, the town sheriff, she was the first to know. Trevor's sister is a regular in the café and blabs all the juicy details to her mate over a cream horn and a steamy hot chocolate. 'I take it you had a

good weekend?’ I add, glancing at Eddie in the mirror as I bouf up my shoulder-length brunette bob. Last night, I used those giant sleep-in rollers, but after getting caught in a sudden downpour on my way to work, it now looks more floppy spaniel ears than big hair fabulous.

‘Yes, so-so . . . went to an impromptu *Sex and the City* themed party on Sunday,’ he replies, in his best diva voice.

‘And let me guess, you were channelling your inner Samantha?’ I laugh, shaking my head. Eddie adores her character.

‘Of course.’ He waves an imperious hand in the air before turning towards me. ‘And I’m so glad I took Monday off. The pornstar cocktails were divine, but there’s a limit, even for me,’ he says, clutching the side of his head.

‘Never mind the pornstars, tell me about the men.’ I’m keen to hear about another one of his scandalous weekends, if only to take my mind off the one I spent alone.

‘Oh, wall-to-wall Carries of course,’ he sniffs.

‘*Aaand* . . .?’ I smile, fishing for more information.

‘*Aaand* what?’

‘You know . . . your “Smith” – was he there too? Come on, tell all, you know you want to.’ I give him a playful nudge of encouragement. He hesitates.

‘Nope.’ He looks away. ‘But it’ll be Valentine’s Day in

six weeks or so. And . . . well, if he doesn't want to spend it with me then it's his loss,' he adds with a flourish, before pulling a face.

'I thought you two were totally loved-up?' I say, steering the conversation away from the most romantic day of the year. It's not that I don't like being single. I do. Sometimes. And I'm only twenty-seven. But Valentine's Day can be tricky. Especially when everyone else is bound to be whooping it up with ten-course taster menus followed by cosy strolls along the seafront under velvety moonlit skies, and I'm home alone with a bar of chocolate to keep me company. And unless my love life takes a serious upturn – I'll be doing the same again this year. I think of the last Valentine's Day I spent with Brett nearly two years ago, it was our third together. I'd felt happy and loved-up, blissfully unaware that I was going to be dumped within a few weeks. He left me for someone else – a tall blonde with big hair and a sylph-like figure compared to my average height and bootylicious curves, as Brett used to say. My heart constricts a little, but I'm over him. I force myself to concentrate on Eddie's love life instead.

'So did I.' Eddie shrugs.

'So what's changed then?'

'Well, not returning my calls for starters.'

'I'm sure it doesn't mean anything. He'll probably call you today,' I say, knowing how sensitive Eddie can be.

'Maybe . . .' He looks away.

‘So what do you know then, Ed?’ I ask, quickly changing the subject. Eddie is the boss’s boy assistant – his BA. Unusual I know, but Walter Davenport, who’s the managing director of Carrington’s department store, where we work, didn’t earn his nickname ‘The Heff’, as in Hugh Hefner, for no reason. Whisper has it that after Walter’s wealthy heiress wife found out about his dalliance with yet another girl less than half his age, she imposed a lifelong ban on him having female PAs. This cued the arrival of Eddie, who is a voracious gossip queen. Rather fittingly he’s privy to all kinds of useful – and indeed sometimes useless but delicious anyway – snippets of information.

‘Well you know me, never one for gossip,’ he says, perking up and smoothing an already immaculate HD eyebrow with his little finger, while I try and resist the urge to smile at his blatant delusion. ‘Anyway, enough about me. Although admittedly it is a scintillating subject.’ He pauses momentarily and places a hand on his pristine fitted jacket, as if he’s pledging allegiance.

‘Oh come on Ed. Don’t be such a tease,’ I plead, now dying to know what he knows.

‘*Weell.*’ He pauses for dramatic effect and a naughty smile dances across his lips. ‘You didn’t hear it from me, right?’ His eyes dart from side to side.

‘Of course. My lips are sealed.’ I make a quick zipping action across my glossed mouth before throwing an imaginary key away.

‘Seems The Heff has been getting very intimate with one of those über-swanky retail consultancies up in London. You know, the ones where they charge upwards of a thousand pounds per day to tell you what you already know. Twenty-seven phone calls in the last fortnight alone! Methinks he may be looking for a change of direction before winding down for retirement,’ he says triumphantly, just as the lift shudders to a halt, signifying our arrival at the next floor and stealing my moment to probe him for more details.

Eddie flashes a warning look in my direction as we simultaneously turn to face the cage door. The Heff is bent over right in front of us, busy tying the lace of his left brogue. Using both hands, I slide the door open, hoping it doesn’t get stuck again. Last week I was on my tea break, travelling to the café to see Sam, and ended up trapped on the third floor for nearly two hours waiting for Charles, our Rastafarian handyman, to come back from visiting his sister Esther in hospital and prise the cage door open for me.

‘Good morning, or is it afternoon yet?’ Walter guffaws. He makes the same joke every day. After returning to a standing position, he strides into the lift and turns to slide the door closed.

‘Morning,’ Eddie and I both say in unison as we shuffle backwards until we’re standing side by side behind him, breathing in the spicy aftershave fumes that permanently beat around his lofty frame.

‘Georgina! You’re looking delightful today as ever.’

‘Thank you Walter,’ I mutter, smiling to myself at his dated old-school charm. He’s like it with all the girls in the store.

‘How’s business in Women’s Accessories these days?’

‘Very good,’ I reply enthusiastically, even though we all know sales have dwindled dramatically throughout the whole shop for at least the last year or so. And the new superstore down on the industrial estate hasn’t helped matters, either, not when you can get a whole new wardrobe, with accessories, for less than fifty quid in there. ‘The new luggage line is doing exceptionally well. We’ve sold two pieces already. The local designer has delivered a few more of her handmade exclusive silk purses in candy pink, which I’m hoping to sell as Valentine gifts. And I can’t wait for the limited edition Chiavacci Kelly bags to arrive from Italy.’

‘Jolly good. Keep up the good work. The Chiavaccis could make all the difference. We’re lucky to be getting them – only made ten: six in the US, two in Dubai . . . and us.’ The Heff slides a hand through his silver hair and, puffing his chest out triumphantly, he starts rocking gently on his heels, stretching his braces out in front of him. I sneak a sideways look at Eddie, who pokes his tongue out and then quickly retracts it, just like a lizard. I try not to laugh as the ancient lift creaks through a few more floors. ‘That’s us,’ The Heff booms, slapping his hands together and making me jump. He flings the

cage door open and, like an athlete off the blocks, wastes no time in setting off. I let out a little sigh of relief. Eddie dashes out behind him and then pauses momentarily to look back at me over his shoulder.

‘Not a word now,’ he says in his perfected stage-whisper voice and blows me a kiss as the lift starts moving again.

I travel down to the ground floor, pondering on Eddie’s gossip, trying to fathom out how it might affect me if it were true. What does Walter know? The feeling lingers, making me edgy. These days nobody is changing jobs unless they really have to.

I step out of the lift and make my way along the dimly lit staff corridor that winds the entire length of the ground level. It still has the original 1920s Tiffany glass wall lights. After pressing the security pad to release the heavy fire entrance doors, I arrive on the shop floor. My feet immediately sink down a couple of centimetres into a new plush carpet as I wade over towards my section at the front of the store.

‘Georgie Girl! How are you today?’ Ciaran hollers in his lovely Southern Irish accent. He’s a waiter in Sam’s café, and he’s calling me from behind two massive bundles of cellophane-wrapped napkins. ‘Not like you to be this late – it’s practically lunchtime.’

‘Ha ha very funny,’ I laugh, glancing at my watch. ‘It’s not even opening time. Anyway, what are you doing down here? Shouldn’t you be upstairs making banoffee coffees?’

‘What happened, you get stuck in this silly new carpet?’ he says, ignoring my banter and placing the napkins down on a counter nearby. He treats me to a huge grin before shooting me with his pretend finger pistol. I like Ciaran – we’re Twitter mates and underneath the flirty swagger he’s a sweet guy, but he can be so naïve at times, especially when it comes to women.

‘Yeah, something like that,’ I lie. The truth is I was up until nearly midnight filling in one of those income and expenditure forms for the bank. I’m hoping they’ll let me reduce the monthly payments on a personal loan. And then I spent at least an hour lying in bed trying to unwind so I could fall asleep. I must have just slept right through the alarm.

Pinning my gold Carrington’s name badge into place, I reach my till point, which I think is the best one on the floor. It’s right at the front of the store, next to the floor-to-ceiling window display, giving me a panoramic view of the cobbled street with its white colonnaded walkway, pretty pansy hanging baskets and romantic olde-worlde streetlamps. During quiet times, and we’ve had a few recently, I love watching all the people milling up and down outside, or huddled in a deckchair enjoying a musical performance on the bandstand opposite. And on a clear early morning, when the town is still empty, I can see as far as the peppermint-green railings down by the harbour and out to the glistening sea beyond.

Carrington’s is an Art Deco institution set in a prime

location in the seaside town of Mulberry-On-Sea, where everyone knows us and most of the locals have grown up coming to the store. For anything from school uniforms to wedding gift lists to baby clothes, they all turn to Carrington's.

Tourists stop to take pictures of our impressive powder-blue building with its intricate white cornicing around enormous arched windows. The store is nearly a hundred years old, and not quite as glorious as it was in its heyday, but still a landmark on the south coast. Owned by a family firm spanning three generations, Carrington's offers old-style elegance alongside the latest merchandise.

The shop floor in front of me is lit up like a Valentine's theme park. Red and silver lights are entwined around the original ornate Art Deco marble pillars, which are dotted throughout the high-ceilinged space. Giant Perspex hearts containing merchandise hang on lengths of invisible thread, giving an illusion of floating handbags, shoes and glittery costume jewellery. Even the traditional cherrywood gilt-inlaid panelled walls have twinkly rose-shaped fairy lights draped all over them. The display guys have done an amazing job in replacing all the post-Christmas sales stuff and getting the store ready for our next big seasonal promotion, Valentine's Day.

Even though I'm single at the moment, I still love this time of year. The atmosphere in store is always so fun and flirty, and that makes me enjoy working here even

more. All six of the podiums situated by the entrance doors showcase various items amidst scattered rose petals and miniature Cupid figurines, luxury scented candles, thick embossed rainbow-coloured stationery and silky lingerie, drawing customers in, showing a teaser of what's on offer within. All designed to entice customers to touch the merchandise, to place a coveted bag over a shoulder or run a finger across the shoestring strap of an exquisite La Perla negligee.

After all, it's 'all about the merch' as we say, and every decent retail assistant knows that customers who try it buy it. True fact. And there's everything on offer to our customers. Handbags, shoes, cosmetics, all mingled in together with a glorious surge of euphoric optimism. A promise of reinvention, of a better life.

And I just adore the look on customers' faces when they emerge through the shiny brass revolving doors, flushed with adrenalin as they try to decide where their retail experience will begin. Savouring every moment. It's one of the reasons I work here. But my memories of the store go back a long way. I grew up in Mulberry-On-Sea and Mum used to bring me here on Saturdays and we'd shop and eat fairy cakes in the old-fashioned tearoom with its Formica tables and white-pinnied waitresses. We always had such a good time, just being happy together. This was years before Sam turned it into Cupcakes at Carrington's, a cosy café serving red velvet cupcakes and sponge cake with pinkberry-infused frosting.

Plonking my handbag in the little locker secreted behind the glass-topped counter, I rummage around for my mobile. I locate it nestled inside a red payment reminder letter that arrived this morning from the gas company. After flicking the phone onto silent mode, I slip it inside my trouser pocket and quickly shove the letter back to the bottom of the bag, vowing to deal with it later.

The smell of newness mingled with expensive perfume wafts over from the various cosmetics concessions. All three of the security guys are getting into position by the entrance doors. I give Annie, one of the other sales assistants, a quick smile as she plumps up a gorgeous midnight-blue Mulberry tote with rose-gold detailing. As I busy myself placing trays of rainbow-coloured chunky cocktail rings on top of a display cabinet, Betty, our mumsy switchboard supervisor, puffs her way over to me, pulling her hand-knitted cardy in tighter around her rotund frame.

‘A rather lovely-sounding man from the Fiat garage called for you,’ she just about manages, in between gasping for air and reaching for her glasses that are bobbing on the end of a chain around her neck.

‘Oh?’ I crease my forehead, wondering why he called the main number and not my mobile.

‘He said if you want to call him back he’ll be delighted to chat things through with you. I tried putting him through but your extension is engaged.’ I swivel around

to the phone and see the handset hasn't been replaced properly.

'Sorry Betty, I didn't realise, it won't happen again,' I say, knowing we're not supposed to have personal calls come through the switchboard.

'Don't worry duck.' Smiling, she hands me a pink Post-it note with the return number on before making her way back over to the staff security door.

'So, come on then. Are you buying a new car?' Ciaran says, placing his elbow on the counter and leaning in towards me.

'Oh, err . . . just thinking about things at this stage,' I say, fiddling with my hair. The truth is I can't afford the monthly payments on my car any more, let alone the petrol to put in it. I'm hoping the garage will buy it back so I can clear the finance. And I just wish my last pay review hadn't been quite so non-existent. I'd been hoping for at least a small rise, but nothing. Zilch. In fact, when I work it out, I've probably taken a pay cut, if I take into account the hike in tax and everything else these days. I force the worry from my mind, and resolve to keep all spending to absolute essentials only. Mortgage, food, utilities and the occasional red velvet cupcake . . . I shove a smile on my face.

'Fiats aren't very fast though, are they?' Ciaran says, rolling his eyes.

'Oh, I'm not bothered about all of that,' I say, trying to sound convincing. Better make sure I shift a few more

of the high-end handbags just in case the garage doesn't go for it. Two per cent of the sales price of every £2,000 Bottega Veneta soon adds up. And I've got eight of them. I do a quick commission tally in my head and hope for the best.

'So how was your weekend?' I ask, changing the subject. I can see that he's desperate to tell me something, he's swivelling his eyes around like Inspector Clouseau, but before he has a chance to answer, his girlfriend Tina appears. After placing a possessive arm around Ciaran's waist, she flicks her high ponytail, sneaks a smug glance in my direction and turns her face towards his.

'What was all that about?' she pants, desperate not to miss out on a bit of gossip, and not bothering to excuse herself for having barged in on our conversation.

'Nothing, we were just chatting about cars.' He grins. 'Oh,' she says, dismissively. 'Well, have you heard about Emma in Stationery?' She pauses to make big eyes, but before Ciaran can answer she carries on. 'She's pregnant again.'

'But didn't she just come back from maternity leave?' Ciaran says, looking puzzled, and I can't help laughing as he pulls a monkey face. Tina shoots another stare at me.

'She's so lucky. Just imagine all that time off. I can't wait until it's our turn.' Tina tilts her head back and closes her eyes for a moment, as if imagining the whole experience as her very own nirvana before looking to

Ciaran for his response. A fleeting look of panic appears on his face, which is quickly replaced with a half-smile. He opens his mouth to say something else, but she puts a finger on his lips before he can talk.

In addition to being Ciaran's girlfriend, Tina is the accounts manager, or at least that's the title she gave herself. She adds up the sales receipts, checking the money and allocating our commission before someone from the office up on the executive floor authorises it all. But most of all, she bosses people around, especially Lauren, a nineteen-year-old first-job girl on one of those NVQ schemes. Anyway, Tina's excelled herself by making Lauren organise the next Christmas party already. A memo was stuck on the staff-room wall requesting the £15 payment by cheque and our dinner choices by the end of next week . . . and the turkey carcass is barely cold after last year's do.

'Oh I think it's so romantic,' Tina smiles.

'Sure it is. Anyway, got to go, only came down to collect these from the delivery guy. Tweet you later,' Ciaran says, winking at me and grabbing up the napkins before sauntering off towards the fire door. Tina scurries off after him, moaning about his Twitter addiction and how much of a flirt he is. Poor Ciaran! What's wrong with a bit of Twitter? How else would I get to talk to famous people like Cheryl Cole or Mr I Am with his 'boom boom and dope' lines?

2

‘Hello. Cupcakes at Carrington’s . . . how may I direct your *caaall*?’ This throws me for a second. It’s definitely Sam’s bubbly ‘everything is lovely in the world’ voice, but there’s an East Coast American accent attached to it now.

‘Sam, is everything OK?’ I ask, tentatively, as I duck into the little recessed vestibule behind my counter. We’re not really supposed to make personal calls during opening hours, but everyone does, and as long as the shop floor is quiet and we’re discreet, it’s all right.

‘Oh, thank God it’s only you,’ Sam says, back in her normal voice.

‘What’s going on?’ I hesitate, and then brace myself for the answer. I’ve known Sam since school and, despite my abrupt exit halfway through, catapulting our lives in totally different directions, we managed to stay in touch and be best friends ever since. But she has dragged me through some real harebrained escapades over the years. Sam’s always been a real foodie, so when Miss Sims retired and some genius here decided the

Carrington's tearoom needed an overhaul, I rang her right away.

At the time, Sam had just been sacked from her personal shopper job at Harvey Nichols because she'd spent more time concentrating on the 'personal' part of her job title than actually trying to sell things to the customers. But her ex-boss had been so impressed with her sterling spending efforts that she'd been given a platinum store card by way of a sweetener. So, after a cash injection from her mega-wealthy dad, Sam made the move down from Chelsea to Mulberry-On-Sea and now reigns supreme over her gorgeous café. It has a honey-hued interior and reclaimed train seats upholstered in crimson velvet, sectioned into booths, so you feel as though you're actually in a real vintage steam train, complete with golden glow lighting from frilly-shaded table lamps. It's very nostalgic in an *Orient Express* kind of way. And the food is to die for – salted caramel cupcakes, rainbow salads, delicious artisan breads and the most fabulous afternoon cream teas you can possibly imagine. Homemade scones piled high with strawberry jam and gooey clotted cream, surrounded by delicate finger sandwiches crammed with every filling imaginable.

'Oh nothing. It's just some guy called Justin. He says we met a few months ago at a club. Well, anyway he keeps calling and texting.'

'Hmm . . . why don't you just tell him you're not interested?'

‘Well I tried, but he’s being very persistent. Anyway, I’m hoping the other guy calls and I can pretend to be unavailable?’ she says, dramatically. ‘Hence the screening, this way I can take orders over the phone and still make myself appear elusive and mysteriously hard to get at the same time.’ She laughs, seemingly satisfied with her elaborate plan.

‘So who’s the other guy then?’ I ask, feeling confused. The last time we spoke, just a couple of days ago, she was going on about some guy called Steve. Sam changes her men like the rest of us switch TV channels, making it near on impossible to keep up with her.

‘Oh my God. I can’t believe I haven’t told you about him yet. It *must* be love. I’m losing my mind already. He’s only “the one”. I met him when I was having my monthly dinner date with Dad on Friday, up in London at The Ivy. He was on the next table, and well he’s a lawyer, maritime or something, and he lives here but commutes to London. And he’s a gentleman, not full of himself like all those shouty Cityboy types, but anyway, Dad knew his boss, so we got chatting and he’s absolutely drop-dead, knicker-ripping gorgeous. Not that he’s done that yet, but I’m working on it.’ I try and push the image of Sam’s knickers being ripped from her body, from my mind.

‘Are you still there?’ I say, having heard about ‘the one’ a zillion times before.

‘Yes. Err sorry,’ she sighs, no doubt having lost herself in some fantasy moment. ‘What did you want?’ she says,

dreamily, followed by, ‘Oh my God, sorry that sounded so rude.’

‘Charming,’ I say, feigning mock hurt. ‘Just wondered if you’re free later for a gossip and to ask if you can keep one of those delicious red velvet cupcakes for me please?’

‘Oh sorry hun, none left.’

‘*Whaat?* But you must have. It’s not even tea break time yet.’ I can’t believe it.

‘A guy came and bought the whole batch for his office Christmas party.’

‘But it’s January! That’s outrageous, why couldn’t he have his party at the actual proper time in December, like everyone else?’ I say, fighting a sudden urge to hunt the guy down and beg for a cake – they’re that good.

‘Ciaran served him. You know I’d have kept one back otherwise . . . Talking of Ciaran, have you seen him recently?’

‘Yes, he was down here earlier, why?’

‘Did he seem different to you?’ she says, lowering her voice.

‘Not really, why?’

‘He’s up to something, I’m sure of it. I reckon he’s got his eye on someone.’

‘Don’t be daft. He’s with Tina.’

‘Even more reason to look elsewhere,’ she snorts. ‘Why else does he keep disappearing then? And it’s not to see Tina, because she’s in here demanding to know where he is all the time.’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Never mind, maybe it’s my imagination. Anyway, what delicious delight can I tempt you with instead?’

‘I’ll have one of those vanilla slices.’

‘A *millefeuille*, do you mean?’

‘Think so, the one with layers of puff pastry and loads of deliciously thick custardy cream-type stuff inside, topped with combed fondant icing an—’

‘Sorry, can you hang on a sec?’ I hear the whoosh of the steam from the coffee machine as I lick my lips, willing her to have one left. I’m practically salivating at the mere thought. ‘Right, that’s all done. I’ve popped one in a box inside the fridge, what time will you be up?’

‘Lunchtime?’ I want to use my tea break to organise the Valentine’s raffle. With the dwindling sales recently, every bit helps.

‘Oooh, can you make it later? I’ve got to pop out to the cash and carry. How about fiveish?’ It’s early as we don’t close until six today, but I can always ask Annie to cover the last hour. I covered three times for her last week.

‘Sure, look forward to it.’

‘OK hun. Bye for now. Oh, I almost forgot, you don’t mind if “the one” comes along on Saturday, do you? I can always ask him to bring a friend. Just imagine, we could double-date on Valentine’s Day – if you like him, of course.’

‘No. Err . . . yes,’ I say, thinking no more blind dates. I’ve been caught out like this before. Her man of the moment brings along a friend who usually turns out to be the beer-bellied guy with the body odour problem. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Nathan. How sexy is that?’ she squeals.

‘Mmm. Nice. Well it’s your birthday after all, and if he really is “the one” then you’ll want him there,’ I say, wanting her to be happy. ‘But no blind dates, do you hear me?’

‘Pardon?’ Sam giggles, before ending the call. I drop the receiver back on the phone and peer down at my trousers, only to see that I now look as though I’m wearing a pair of fluffy Ugg boots too.

‘What’s with the carpet?’ I say to no one in particular. It’s my boss, the floor supervisor, James, who replies.

‘Blame upstairs,’ he says, approaching my counter. He’s carrying two crystal weights with lengths of silver ribbon attached to crimson heart-shaped balloons. ‘Here,’ he says, handing them to me. ‘Save you having to go down to the basement to organise them.’ He’s wearing a new slim-fit shirt that nicely accentuates the V of his firm chest. I quickly look away, praying he didn’t spot me checking him out.

‘Thanks. And I’m sorry,’ I say, gesturing to the phone. He waves a hand.

‘Ahh, no problem. It’s fine if there aren’t any customers around.’ He smiles casually. I take the balloons, reflecting

on how thoughtful he is. His hand brushes mine and he immediately apologises, while a little shiver of excitement pulses through me. It's just such a shame that he's married, and that he's my boss, because he's so hot. I remember when he interviewed me for the job. The sandy-blond hair that kept bobbing into his eyes as he looked down at the questions on the desk in front of him. His emerald-green eyes probing me for the answers every time he looked back up, and the fact that he's oblivious to it – well, it just makes him so damn sexy. 'You OK? You look tired.' He grins, and a warm glow flickers within me. He's the first guy I've felt anything for since the disastrous break-up with Brett. We had been virtually inseparable for three years and his betrayal hit me really hard.

'Thanks a lot. Do I really look that bad?' I say, instantly hoping he'll disagree.

'No. No I didn't mean it like that,' he replies, momentarily patting my arm by way of apology, and I take a deep breath. After Brett left I swore off men completely – I really wasn't interested in going through that sort of pain again – but it's reassuring to know my heart hasn't been completely shattered, and that maybe I'm ready to start dating again.

'So what's with this carpet?' I ask, quickly changing the subject. 'And have you seen the state of these?' Feeling flustered, I peer down at my legs.

'Well, I wouldn't say they were a state exactly. They

look fine to me.’ His cheeks flush for a second and he clears his throat. I feel embarrassed. ‘Shame about the fluff though,’ he finishes, with a gentle laugh. ‘Somebody decided to splash out and re-carpet the entire shop. Staff canteen included.’

‘What a waste of money. Before you know it we’ll be closing down and switching to “online purchasing only”,’ I snort. The edgy feeling from earlier swirls around inside me again.

‘Trust you, always thinking about the bottom line.’ He shakes his head.

‘Well, I don’t see you complaining when I shift all of the high-end stock,’ I tease. But the truth of it is that my section of the shop-floor space does make the most money. The others say that it’s because I’m shameless and not averse to using my wily powers of persuasion when boyfriends and husbands rush in to buy a last-minute gift. But it’s not my fault if they opt for the biggest hobo bag after I let slip how the lucky woman will squeal with delight and love them forever on unwrapping such a gift. All the while discreetly nudging the small version to the far end of the counter, and therefore out of mind . . . as demonstrated by Mrs Grace herself on my induction day. Mrs Grace rocked Women’s Accessories for fifty years before retiring and handing the mantle to me. She now helps out part-time in the stock room, as she had to come back to work because her husband Stan was ‘driving her round the twist’ and

spanking all their pension money on his ‘filthy birds’, which she later explained were actually pigeons.

‘True. You’re really good at what you do and that’s why I need your help this afternoon.’

‘This afternoon?’ I say, my eyes widening at the prospect of a change in routine.

‘Yep, a wealthy customer is arriving to do a spot of personal shopping and he’s expressed a particular interest in our high-end designer handbags. Malikov someone or another, I think “his people” said.’ James makes sarcastic quote signs with his fingers. ‘Six times they’ve called today demanding to speak to security ahead of his arrival. And then banging on about CCTV cameras and how we must respect his privacy.’

‘Malikov?’

‘That’s right, Konstantin Malikov, a Russian businessman apparently.’ James flashes his perfect white smile at me. ‘Oh yes, it just so happens that Mr and Mrs Malikov are keen to spend some time here in the south of England whilst their only daughter is settled into Dean Hall.’ The mention of Dean Hall injects a flash memory moment of the few years I spent at boarding school before everything changed and my whole world fell apart. ‘And naturally they are looking to offload some of their wealth in our fine establishment.’

The memory is instantly replaced with excitement at the thought of my share of the sales commission. James often asks me to help him with the personal shopping

customers, and over the years we've developed a strategy, a kind of double act that has reaped some fantastic sales. James looks as though he's about to say something else when a pumped-up version of 'Love Is In The Air' pounds through the sound system, signifying opening time. There's an old dear with a tartan shopper waiting by the door to come in.

'Was there something else?' I ask James on seeing his hesitation.

'It'll keep,' he says over his shoulder as he strolls off towards the escalators.