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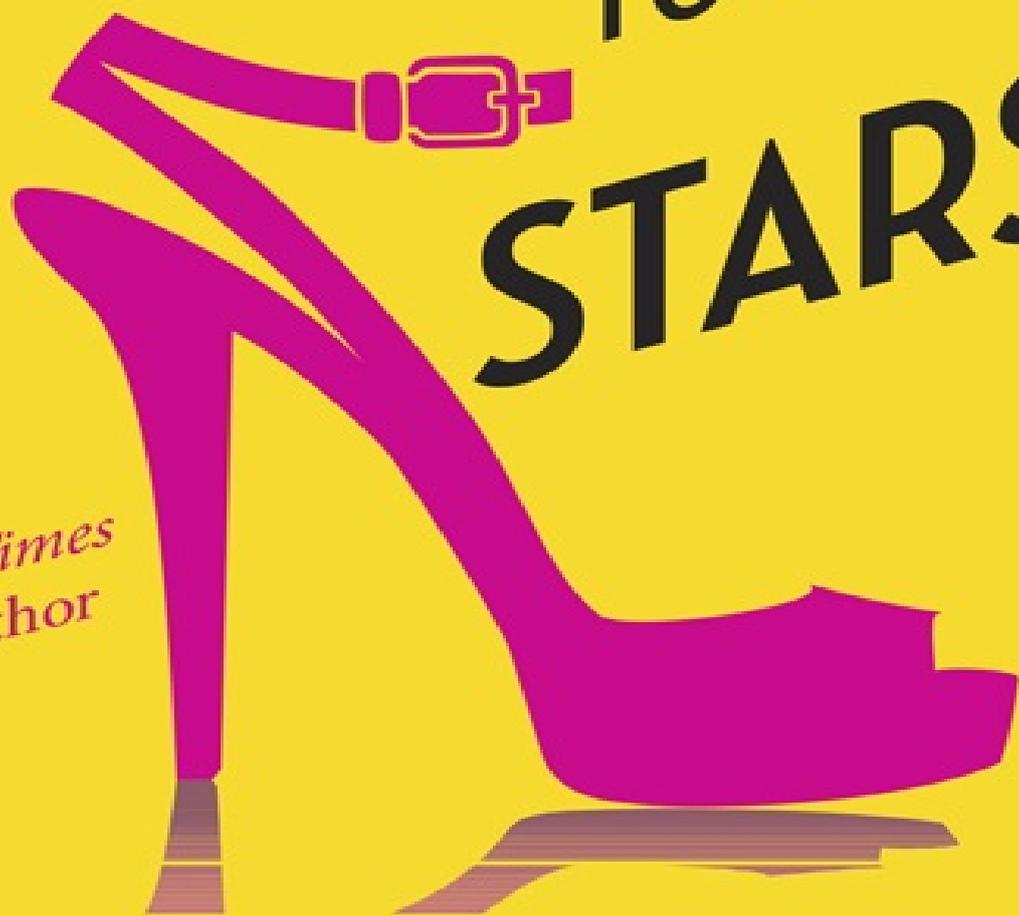
SHOPAHOLIC

TO THE

STARS

A NOVEL

*#1 New York Times
bestselling author*





Sophie Kinsella

*SHOPAHOLIC TO
THE STARS*

A NOVEL



THE DIAL PRESS
NEW YORK

Shopaholic to the Stars is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Published in the United States by The Dial Press, an imprint of Random House, a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin

Random House Company, New York.

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Published in the United Kingdom by Bantam Press, an imprint of Transworld Publishers, a member of The Random House

Group, London.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Kinsella, Sophie.

Shopaholic to the stars : a novel / Sophie Kinsella.

pages cm.—(Shopaholic)

ISBN 978-0-8129-9386-8 (hardback)

ISBN 978-0-8129-9387-5 (eBook)

1. Bloomwood, Becky (Fictitious character)—Fiction.

2. Shopping—Fiction. 3. Motion picture industry—Fiction.

4. Families—California—Los Angeles—Fiction. 5. Hollywood (Los Angeles, Calif.)—Fiction. 6. Humorous fiction. I. Title.

PR6073.I246S59 2014

823'.914—dc23 2014020683

www.dialpress.com

Illustrations on pages [this page](#), [this page](#), [this page](#), and [this page](#): © iStockphoto.com

Jacket design and illustration: Keith Hayes

v3.1_r3

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CUNNINGHAM'S

Rosewood Center ♦ W 3rd St. ♦ Los Angeles, CA 90048

Dear Mrs. Brandon,

Thank you for your letter. I'm glad you enjoyed your recent visit to our store.

Unfortunately, I cannot comment on whether the woman shopping at the MAC counter on Tuesday was "Uma Thurman wearing a long dark wig." I therefore cannot tell you "exactly which lipstick she bought" or "whether she's just as lovely in real life" or pass on your note "because she must want a friend to hang out with and I think we'd really get on."

I wish you all the best for your forthcoming move to Los Angeles. However, in answer to your other query, we do not offer introductory discounts for new residents of L.A. to "make them feel welcome."

Thank you for your interest.

Mary Eglantine

Customer Service Department



INNER SANCTUM LIFESTYLE SPA

6540 HOLLOWAY DR. • WEST HOLLYWOOD, CA 90069

Dear Mrs. Brandon,

Thank you for your Letter—I'm glad you enjoyed your recent visit to our spa.

Unfortunately, I cannot comment on whether the woman in the front row in your yoga class was Gwyneth Paltrow.

I'm sorry that it was hard to tell because "she was always upside down."

I therefore cannot pass on your query as to how she achieves "such a perfect headstand" or whether she has "special weights in her T-shirt," nor can I pass on your invitation to an organic tea with kale cakes.

I'm glad you enjoyed our gift-and-lifestyle shop. In answer to your further question, should I meet your husband in the street, rest assured I will not tell him about your "tiny splurge on organic underwear."

Thank you for your interest.

Kyle Heiling
Achievement Manager (Eastern Arts)

Beauty on the Boulevard

9500 BEVERLY BLVD.

BEVERLY HILLS, CA 90210



Dear Mrs. Brandon,

Thank you for your letter.

Unfortunately, I cannot confirm whether the woman browsing at the La Mer stand was “Julie Andrews in dark glasses and a head scarf.”

I therefore cannot pass on your comments “How hot was Captain von Trapp in real life?” or “I’m sorry I sang ‘The Lonely Goatherd’ at you; I was just very excited” Nor can I pass on your invitation to “come round for a fun sing-along with apple strudel.”

In answer to your further inquiry, we do not throw “Welcome to L.A.” parties or offer free gifts to new arrivals, not even teeth-whitening kits to “help them fit in.” However, I wish you every success with your imminent move to L.A.

Thank you for your interest.

Sally E. SanSanto

Customer Service Consultant



ONE

OK. Don't panic. Don't *panic*.

I'll escape from this. Of course I will. It's not like I'll be trapped here in this hideous confined space, with no hope of release, *forever* ... is it?

As calmly as possible, I assess the situation. My ribs are squashed so that I can hardly breathe, and my left arm is pinned behind me. Whoever constructed this "restraining fabric" knew what they were doing. My right arm is also pinned, at an awkward angle. If I try to reach my hands forward, the "restraining fabric" bites into my wrists. I'm stuck. I'm powerless.

My face is reflected, ashen, in the mirror. My eyes are wide and desperate. My arms are crisscrossed with black shiny bands. Is one of them supposed to be a shoulder strap? Do those that webbing stuff go round the waist?

Oh God. I should never *ever* have tried on the size 4.

"How are you doing in there?" It's Mindy, the sales assistant, calling from outside the cubicle curtain, and I start in alarm. Mindy is tall and rangy, with muscled thighs that stand three inches apart. She looks like she probably runs up a mountain every day and doesn't even know what a KitKat is.

She's asked three times how I'm doing, and each time I've just called out shrilly, "Great thanks!" But I'm getting desperate. I've been struggling with this "Athletic Shaping All-in-One" for ten minutes. I can't keep putting her off forever.

"Amazing fabric, right?" says Mindy enthusiastically. "It has three times the restraining power of normal spandex. You totally lose a size, right?"

Maybe I have, but I've also lost half my lung capacity.

"Are you doing OK with the straps?" comes Mindy's voice. "You want me to come in the fitting room and help you adjust them?"

Come in the fitting room? There's no way I'm letting a tall, tanned, sporty Angeleno come here and see my cellulite.

"No, it's fine, thanks!" I squawk.

"You need some help getting it off?" she tries again. "Some of our customers find it tricky the first time."

I have a hideous vision of me gripping the counter and Mindy trying to haul the All-in-One off me while we both pant and sweat with the effort and Mindy secretly thinks, *I knew all along that British girls were heifers.*

No way. Not in a million years. There's only one solution left. I'll have to buy it. Whatever it costs.

I give an almighty wrench and manage to snap two of the straps up onto my shoulder. That's better. I look like a chicken trussed up in black Lycra, but at least I can move my arms. As soon as I get back to the hotel room, I'll cut the whole thing off myself with a pair of nail scissors and dispose of the remains in a public bin so Luke doesn't find them and say *What the hell is this?* or *You mean you bought it even though you knew it didn't fit?* or something else really annoying.

Luke is my husband, and he's the reason I'm standing in a sports-apparel shop in L.A. We're moving out to Los Angeles as soon as possible because of his work, and we're here on an urgent house-hunting trip. That's our focus this week: Real estate. Houses. Gardens. Rental agreements. Very much so. I've only popped to Rodeo Drive very, *very* quickly between house appointments.

Well, OK. The truth is, I canceled a house appointment to come to Rodeo Drive. But I had to. I have a genuine reason for needing to buy some emergency running clothes, which is that I'm running in a race tomorrow afternoon. A real race! Me!

I reach for my clothes, grab my bag, and walk stiffly out of the cubicle to see Mindy hovering nearby.

"Wow!" Her voice is bright but her eyes are shocked. "You look ..." She coughs. "Awesome. It's not too ... tight?"

"No, it's perfect," I say, attempting a carefree smile. "I'll take it."

"Great!" She can barely hide her astonishment. "So, if you want to take it off, I'll scan it for you..."

"Actually, I'll wear it." I try to sound casual. "Might as well. Can you put my clothes in my bag?"

"Right," says Mindy. There's quite a long pause. "You're sure you don't want to try the size six?"

"No! Size four is perfect! Really comfy!"

"OK," says Mindy after a silence. "Of course. That'll be eighty-three dollars." She scans the bar code on the tag hanging from my neck, and I reach for my credit card. "So, you're into athletics?"

"Actually, I'm running in the Ten Miler tomorrow."

"No way!" She looks up, impressed, and I try to appear nonchalant and modest. The Ten Miler isn't just any old running race. It's *the* race. It's held every year in L.A., and loads of high-profile celebrities run it, and they even cover it on E! And I'm in it!

"How did you get a place?" Mindy says enviously. "I've applied for that race, like, every year."

"Well." I pause for effect. "I'm on Sage Seymour's team."

"Wow." Her jaw drops, and I feel a spurt of glee. It's true! I, Becky Brandon (née Bloomwood), am running on the team of a top movie star! We'll do calf stretches together. We'll wear matching baseball caps! We'll be in *Us Weekly*!

“You’re British, right?” Mindy interrupts my thoughts.

“Yes, but I’m moving to L.A. soon. I’m out here to look at houses with my husband, Luke. He has a PR company and he works with Sage Seymour,” I can’t help adding proudly.

Mindy looks more and more impressed. “So are you and Sage Seymour, like, *friends*?”

I fiddle with my purse, delaying my reply. The truth is, despite all my hopes, Sage Seymour and I aren’t exactly friends. In fact, the real truth is, I still haven’t met her. Which is so unfair. Luke’s been working with her for ages, and I’ve already been out to L.A. once for a job interview and now I’m out here again, finding a house and a preschool for our daughter Minnie ... but have I even *glimpsed* Sage?

When Luke said he was going to work with Sage Seymour and we were going to move to Hollywood, I thought we’d be seeing her every day. I thought we’d be hanging out by her pink pool in matching sunglasses and going for mani-pedis together. But even Luke hardly ever seems to see her; he just has meetings with managers and agents and producers all day long. He says he’s learning the movie business and it’s a steep learning curve. Which is fair enough, because previously he’s only advised financial companies and big conglomerates. But does he have to be so resolutely non-starry-eyed? When I got a tiny bit frustrated the other day, he said, “For God’s sake, Becky, we’re not making this huge move just to meet *celebrities*.” He said “celebrities” like he was saying “earwigs.” He understands nothing.

The great thing about Luke and me is that we think alike on nearly everything in life, and that’s why we’re so happily married. But we have just a few teeny points of disagreement. Such as:

1. Catalogs. (They are not “clutter.” They’re *useful*. You never know when you might need a personalized kitchen blackboard with a dinky little bucket for the chalk. Plus I like reading them at bedtime.)
2. Shoes. (Keeping all my shoes in their original boxes forever is not ridiculous; it’s *thrifty*. They’ll come back into fashion one day and then Minnie can wear them. And, meanwhile, I should look where he’s stepping.)
3. Elinor, his mother. (Long, long story.)
4. Celebrities.

I mean, here we are in L.A. The home of celebrities. They’re the local natural phenomenon. Everyone knows you come to L.A. to see the celebrities, like you go to Sri Lanka to see the elephants.

But Luke didn’t gasp when we saw Tom Hanks in the lobby of the Beverly Wilshire. He didn’t blink when Halle Berry was sitting three tables away at The Ivy (I think it was Halle Berry). He didn’t even get excited when we saw Reese Witherspoon across the road. (I’m sure it was Reese Witherspoon. She had exactly the same hair.)

And he talks about Sage as if she’s just another client. Like she’s Foreland Investments. He says that this is what she appreciates about him: that he’s *not* part of the circus. And then he says I’m getting overexcited by all the Hollywood hoopla. Which is totally untrue. I am *not* overexcited. I’m exactly the right amount excited.

Privately, I’m disappointed in Sage too. I mean, OK, we don’t exactly know each other, but we did speak on the phone when she was helping me with a surprise party for Luke. (Although she’s got a new number, and Luke won’t give it to me.) I would have thought she might be in touch, or invite me round to her house for a sleepover, or something.

Anyway, never mind. It'll all come good tomorrow. I don't want to boast, but it's total due to my own quick wits that I'm in this Ten Miler race. I just happened to be looking over Luke's shoulder at his laptop yesterday when a round-robin email came in from Sage's manager, Aran. It was entitled *First come first served* and read: *Dear friends, there's a last-minute place available on the Ten Miler team due to an injury dropout—anyone interested in running and supporting Sage?*

My hands were on the keyboard, pressing REPLY and typing, *Yes, please! I would love to run with Sage! Best wishes, Becky Brandon*, before I was even aware I was moving.

OK, so maybe I should have consulted Luke before pressing SEND. But it was “first come first served.” I had to act fast!

Luke just stared at me and said, “Are you nuts?” Then he started going on about how this was a proper race for trained athletes, and who was going to sponsor me, and did I even possess any running shoes? Honestly. He could be more supportive.

Although, actually, he has a point about the running shoes.

“So, are you in the movie business too?” Mindy asks as she hands me the receipt to sign.

“No, I'm a personal shopper.”

“Oh, OK. Which store?”

“It's ... actually, it's ... Dalawear.”

“Oh.” She looks taken aback. “You mean, the store for—”

“Older women. Yes.” I lift my chin. “It's a great store. It's really exciting. I can't wait!”

I'm being super-positive about this job, even though it's not *exactly* my dream. Dalawear sells “easy-wear clothes” for ladies who rate “comfort over style.” (It actually says that on the poster. I might try to persuade them to change it to “comfort *as much as* style.”) When I went to the interview, the woman kept talking about elasticated waistbands and washable fabrics and not once about directional fashion. Or even fashion.

But the truth is, there aren't that many personal-shopping jobs popping up in L.A. at the last minute for a newly arrived Brit. Especially a Brit who may only be in the country for three months. Dalawear was the only store that had an opening, because of a maternity leave. And I rocked the interview, though I say it myself. I enthused about their “all-purpose floral shirtwaist” dresses so much, I almost wanted to buy one for myself.

“Can I please buy some running shoes too?” I change the subject. “I can't exactly run in these!” I gesture at my Marc Jacobs kitten heels with a little laugh. (For the record, I did once climb an entire mountain in a pair of shoes just like these. But I mentioned that to Luke yesterday as proof of my athletic ability and he shuddered and said he'd blanked that whole incident from his memory.)

“Sure.” Mindy nods. “You'll want our technical store, Pump! It's right across the street. They stock all the shoes, equipment, heart-rate monitors ... Did you get a biomechanical assessment in the UK?”

I look at her blankly. A bio-what?

“Talk to the guys across the street; they'll get you set up.” She hands me a carrier bag holding my clothes. “You must be super-fit. I've worked out with Sage Seymour's trainer. She's hard-core. And I've heard about the team regimen. Didn't you, like, go to Arizona for training?”

This conversation is unnerving me a tad. Hard-core? Team regimen? Anyway, I mustn't

lose confidence. I'm perfectly fit enough to run a race, even if it is in L.A.

"I haven't been on the regimen *exactly*," I admit. "But obviously I have my own ... er ... cardio ... program ... thing...."

I'll be fine. It's just running. How hard can it be?

As I head back out to Rodeo Drive, I feel a swoosh of exhilaration as the warm spring air hits me. I'm going to love living in L.A.; I just know it. Everything people say about it is true. The sun shines and the people have super-white teeth and the houses look like film sets. I've looked at several houses for rent and they *all* have pools. It's as if a pool is a normal thing like a fridge.

The street around me simply glistens with glamour. It's lined with expensive, shiny shopfronts and perfect palm trees and rows of luxurious-looking cars. Cars are a whole different thing here. People drive by in their colorful convertibles with the roof down, looking all relaxed and friendly, as if you might stroll up to them while they're pausing at the light and start a conversation. It's the opposite of Britain, where everyone's in their own self-contained metal box, swearing at the rain.

Sunlight is glinting off all the shop windows and sunglasses and expensive watches on people's wrists. Outside Dolce & Gabbana, a woman is piling a whole load of bags into a car and she looks just like Julia Roberts except with blonder hair. And a bit smaller. But apart from that, just like Julia Roberts! On Rodeo Drive!

I'm just trying to edge closer to see what bags she's got when my phone buzzes, and I pull it out to see *Gayle* on the screen. Gayle is my new boss at Dalawear, and we're having a meeting tomorrow morning.

"Hi, Gayle!" I say in cheerful, professional tones. "Did you get my message? Are we still on for tomorrow?"

"Hi, Rebecca. Yes, we're all good at this end ..." She pauses. "Except for one hitch. We still didn't get your reference from Danny Kovitz."

"Oh, right." *Drat*. Danny is one of my best friends and is quite a famous fashion designer. He promised to give me a reference for Dalawear, only it's been ages now and he hasn't done anything about it. I texted him yesterday and he promised he would send an email within the hour. I can't believe he hasn't.

Actually, that's not true. I can totally believe it.

"I'll call him," I promise. "Sorry about that."

The truth is, I never should have asked Danny for a reference. But I thought it sounded so cool, having a top fashion designer on my résumé. And I'm sure it helped. They couldn't stop asking me about him in the interview.

"Rebecca ..." Gayle pauses delicately. "You do know Mr. Kovitz? You have met him?"

She doesn't *believe* me?

"Of course I know him! Look, leave it with me. I'll get the reference. I'm really sorry for the delay. See you tomorrow."

I end the call and instantly speed-dial Danny, trying to stay calm. There's no point getting cross with Danny; he just wriggles and becomes all plaintive.

"Oh my God, Becky." Danny answers the phone as though we're mid-conversation. "Yo

would not believe what I need for this trek. It's, like, who knew you could get freeze-dried lasagna? And I have the *cutest* little teakettle; you *have* to get one."

This is why Danny is even more distracted than usual at the moment. He's about to start training to do some celebrity charity expedition across the Greenland ice sheet. Every single person who knows Danny has told him he's mad, but he's adamant he's going to do it. He keeps saying he wants to "give something back," but we all know it's because he fancies Damon, the lead singer from Boyz About, who's also doing it.

Although how you get it together with someone on a Greenland expedition, I have no idea. I mean, can you even kiss? Do your lips stick together in the freezing air? How do Eskimos manage?

"Danny," I say sternly, wrenching my mind away from an image of two Eskimos stuck together on their wedding day, flailing their arms to break free. "Danny, what about my reference?"

"Sure," says Danny without missing a beat. "I'm on it. How many pairs of thermal underwear should I take?"

"You're not on it! You promised you'd send it yesterday! I've got to go and see them tomorrow and they don't believe I even know you!"

"Well, of course you know me," he says, as though I'm an idiot.

"They don't know that! This is my only chance of a job in L.A., and I need to have your reference. Danny, if you can't do it, just tell me and I'll ask someone else."

"Someone *else*?" Only Danny can manage to sound mortally offended when he's in the wrong. "Why would you ask someone else?"

"Because they might actually do it!" I sigh, trying to stay patient. "Look, all you need to do is send a little email. I'll dictate it, if you like. *Dear Gayle, I can recommend Rebecca Brand as a personal shopper. Signed, Danny Kovitz.*" There's silence down the phone, and I wonder if he's taking notes. "Did you get that? Did you write it down?"

"No, I didn't write it down." Danny sounds indignant. "That is the crummiest reference I've ever heard. You think that's all I have to say about you?"

"Well—"

"I don't give out personal references unless I mean them. Unless I've crafted them. Your reference is an *art form*."

"But—"

"You want a reference, I'll come and give you a reference."

"What do you mean?" I say, confused.

"I'm not writing three crappy lines on an email. I'm coming to L.A."

"You can't come to L.A. just to give me a reference!" I start to giggle. "Where are you anyway? New York?"

Since Danny hit the big time, it's impossible to know where he'll be at any moment. He's opened three new showrooms this year alone, including one in the Beverly Center here in L.A. Which you'd think would tie him down, but he's always scouting out yet more new cities or going on "inspirational research trips" (holidays).

"San Francisco. I was coming anyway. I need to buy sunblock. I always get my sunblock in L.A. Text me the details. I'll be there."

"But—"

“It’ll be great. You can help me choose a name for my husky dog. We each get to sponsor one, but I may sponsor a whole team. It’s going to be, like, such a life-changing experience...”

Once Danny starts talking about life-changing experiences, it’s hard to cut him off. I’ll give him twenty minutes to talk about Greenland, I decide. Maybe twenty-five. And then I *must* go and buy my trainers.



TWO

OK, I officially have the coolest running shoes in the world. They're silver with orange stripes and they have gel bits and mesh bits and I want to wear them all day long.

This sports shop is incredible! You don't just buy a pair of trainers here. You don't just put them on and walk around and say, *I'll take them*, and then throw six pairs of sports socks into your basket as well because they're on sale. Oh no. It's all very technical. You do a special running test on a treadmill, and they take a video and tell you all about your "gait" and find the perfect solution for your athletic needs.

Why don't they do this at Jimmy Choo? They should have a little catwalk where you walk along to cool music and maybe strobe lighting, and they'd take a video. And then the expert would say, *We feel the black-and-white stiletto perfectly suits your awesome supermodel gait*. And then you'd take the video home to show all your friends. I am so suggesting it next time I'm in there.

"So here's the heart monitor I was telling you about..." The sales assistant, Kai, reappears holding a little metal and rubber bracelet. "Like I said, it's our most discreet model, new to the market. I'm excited to hear your opinion."

"Cool!" I beam at him and put it on my wrist.

Kai has asked if I'd like to join in a customer study of this new heart monitor, and why or why not? The only sticky moment was when he asked what heart monitor I was using currently, and I didn't like to say "none," so I said "the Curve" and then realized that's Luke's new BlackBerry.

"Would you like some more coconut water before you start?"

More coconut water. That's so L.A. Everything in this shop is so L.A. Kai himself is ripped and tanned and has exactly the optimum amount of stubble, and bright turquoise eyes, which I'm sure are lenses. He looks so like Jared Leto that I wonder whether he went to a surgeon with a picture torn out of *Us Weekly* and said, *This one, please*.

He's already dropped into conversation that: 1. He's modeled for *Sports Illustrated*. 2. He's currently working on a script about a sportswear consultant who becomes a movie star. 3. He won Ohio's Best Pecs three years running and has had his pecs specially insured. He asked me, within about thirty seconds whether I worked in the film industry, and when I said no, he

my husband did, he gave me a card and said, "I'd love to meet with him to discuss a venture he might be interested in." The idea of Kai and Luke sitting at a table discussing his pe nearly made me snort out my coconut water.

"So if you'll kindly step up here." Kai ushers me onto the treadmill. "I'll be taking a record of your heart rate, so we'll raise it with some aerobic activity and then lower it with rest periods. Just follow the treadmill and you'll be fine."

"Great!" As I step up, I notice a massive rack of exercise clothes being wheeled onto the shop floor by two sales assistants. Wow. They look amazing—all different shades of purple and grays, with abstract logos and really interesting shapes.

"What's that?" I ask Kai as the treadmill starts to move gently along.

"Oh." He looks at it without interest. "That's from our clearance fashion floor."

Clearance fashion floor? No one mentioned a clearance fashion floor. Why didn't I know about the clearance fashion floor?

"Weird." He peers at his computer screen. "Your heart rate just spiked, and we didn't even start the intense activity yet. Oh well." He shrugs. "Let's get going."

The treadmill starts to move along more briskly, and I up my walking pace to match. But I'm distracted by the rack of clothes, because an assistant is putting sale signs on every garment! I spot a 90% OFF sign and crane my neck to see what it's attached to. Is that a t-shirt? Or a minidress? Or—

Oh my God, *look* at that cardigan. I can't help gasping aloud. That is stunning. It's longlined in what seems to be gray cashmere, with an oversize neon-pink zipper, all the way up the front and the back. It's *gorgeous*.

"So now we'll rest for a moment..." Kai is concentrating on his screen. "You're doing great so far."

The treadmill slows, but I barely notice. I'm feeling stabs of alarm. A pair of passing girls has seen the rail and fallen on it in delight. I can hear them exclaiming with glee, showing clothes to each other and dumping them in their baskets. They're taking everything! I don't believe it. The sale of the century is going on ten yards away, and I'm stuck on this stupid treadmill. As long as they don't see the cardigan. I will them silently: *Don't look at that cardigan....*

"OK, this is strange." Kai is frowning at his screen again. "Let's pause the test."

"Actually, I need to leave," I say breathlessly, grabbing my handbag and shopping basket. "Thanks. If I need a heart monitor I'll definitely get this one, but I must go—"

"Rebecca, have you ever been diagnosed with arrhythmia? Heart disorder? Anything like that?"

"No." I'm stopped in my tracks. "Why? Have you picked something up?"

Is he joking? No. His face is serious. He isn't joking. I'm gripped with fright. What have I got? Oh my God, I'll be in the *Daily Mail* health pages. "*My one-in-a-million heart condition was picked up in a simple exercise store test. Shopping saved my life,*" says Rebecca Brandon—

"Your heart response wasn't typical. It spiked, but not at the moments I was expecting. For example, it spiked just now when you were resting."

"Oh," I say anxiously. "Is that bad?"

"Not necessarily. It would depend on a lot of things. Your general heart health, your cardio fitness ..."

As he's talking, my eye wanders over to the sale rack again, and to my horror I see that one of the girls has picked up my cardigan. *No! Nooooo! Put it down!*

"It's happened again!" says Kai in sudden animation, and points at the screen. "Do you see? Your heart rate rocketed!"

I look at Kai, and at the screen, and then at the cardigan with the neon-pink zip, and it all falls into place. Oh God, is *that* why my heart rate zoomed up?

This is so embarrassing. Stupid dumb heart. I can feel myself blushing bright red, and I hastily look away from Kai.

"Well!" I say in flustered tones. "I have no idea why that happened. None! Just one of those mysteries. Mysteries of the heart. Ha-ha!"

"Oh. OK." Kai's face snaps as though in recognition. "Ooo-kay. I think I get it. I've seen that a couple times."

"Seen what?"

"OK, this is a little awkward..." He flashes me a perfect smile. "It was physical attraction to me, right? You don't need to be uncomfortable. It's normal. It's why I had to give you personal training. The clients became ... I don't know, would you say 'infatuated'?" He glances complacently at himself in the mirror. "You looked at me and your response was beyond your control. Am I right?"

"Not really," I say honestly.

"Rebecca." Kai sighs. "I know it's embarrassing to admit, but believe me, you're not the only lady to become attracted to me—"

"But I wasn't looking at you," I explain. "I was looking at a cardigan."

"A cardigan?" Kai plucks at his T-shirt, confused. "I'm not wearing one."

"I know. It's over there. It's on sale." I point it out. "*That's* what I was looking at, not you. I'll show you." I take the opportunity to dash over and grab the cardigan, which, thank God, the girl has replaced on the rack. It's super-soft to the touch and the zip is amazing, and it's reduced by 70 percent! I'm sure my heart is racing again, just from holding it.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" I enthuse, heading back toward Kai. "Isn't it fab?" Suddenly I realize I'm not being very tactful. "I mean, *you're* very good-looking too," I add encouragingly. "I'm sure I'd be attracted to you if it weren't for the cardigan."

There's a pause. Kai looks slightly stunned, to be honest. Even his turquoise contact lenses seem a bit less sparkly.

"You'd be attracted to me 'if it weren't for the cardigan,' " he echoes at last.

"Of course!" I say reassuringly. "I'd probably get infatuated, just like those clients of yours. Unless there were any other amazing clothes to compete with," I add, for honesty's sake. "I mean, like a Chanel suit on ninety-nine percent sale. I don't think any man could beat that!" Kai gives a little laugh, but Kai's face has gone a bit rigid.

"I never had to compete with clothes before," he says, almost to himself. "*Clothes.*"

I'm noticing that the atmosphere isn't *quite* as easy and fun as it was before. I think I might just go and pay for my trainers.

"Thanks for the heart test anyway!" I say brightly, and take off the bracelet. "Good luck with the pecs!"

Honestly. What a bighead that Kai is. I know he has stunning turquoise eyes and a great body, but he doesn't have a neon zip, does he? Lots of men have stunning blue eyes, but only one cardigan has a cool oversize neon-pink zip. And if he thinks he's never competed with his clothes before, then his girlfriends have been lying to him. Every woman in the world sometimes thinks about shoes in the middle of sex. It's a well-known fact.

Anyway. Don't think about stupid Kai. On the positive front, I've got the best, most whizzing trainers in the world. And, OK, they cost four hundred dollars, which is a lot, but I'll just have to think of this as an investment in my career. In my *life*.

"So, I'll box those for you," says the sales assistant, and I nod absently. I'm imagining myself standing at the start of the race with Sage, and her glancing down at my feet and saying, *Good shoes*.

I'll give her a friendly smile and reply carelessly, *Thanks*.

Then she'll say, *Luke never told me you were such a serious athlete, Becky*.

And I'll say, *Are you kidding? I love running*. (Which isn't quite true yet, but I'm sure it will be. Once I start this race, the endorphins will kick in and I'll probably become addicted.)

Then Sage will say, *Hey, we should train together! Let's meet up every morning*.

And I'll say, *Sure*, very nonchalantly.

Then she'll say, *I train with some friends, but you'll love them; do you know Kate Hudson and Drew Barrymore and Cameron Diaz and ...*

"Will you be paying by credit or cash, ma'am?"

I blink at the assistant and fumble for my card. "Oh. Right. Credit."

"And did you choose your water bottle?" the sales assistant adds.

"I'm sorry?"

"We're offering a free bottle with every shoe purchase." He gestures at a nearby poster.

Well. This four hundred dollars seems more and more of a bargain.

"I'll just have a look. Thanks!" I beam at him and head toward the display of bottles. Maybe if I'm carrying a cool bottle, Sage will notice that too! There's a whole wall of them—chrome, matte black, and all sorts of colors in silicone. As my eye travels upward, I spot a label: *LIMITED EDITION PRINT*. I squint, trying to see—but they're on the fifth shelf. Honestly. Why would you put the limited-edition-print bottles on the fifth shelf?

There's a stepladder nearby, so I drag it over and climb to the top. Now I can see the bottles properly, and they're amazing: all with gorgeous retro prints. I can hardly bear to choose—but in the end I narrow it down to three: one with red stripes, one with amber swirls, and one with black-and-white flowers. I'll pay for the extra ones, I decide, because I can give one each to Minnie and Suze as souvenirs.

I carefully put the bottles down on the top step of the ladder and turn to survey the shop. I have an amazing view up here. I can see all the aisles, and I can see that the woman at the cash register needs her roots touched up, and I can see—

What?

Wait a minute.

I stiffen in disbelief and peer more closely.

In the far corner, there's a girl I hadn't noticed before. She's incredibly thin, wearing pale skinny jeans, a gray hoodie up over her head, and dark glasses that hide her face. And I wonder she's dressed so furtively. Because she's stealing.

I stare in utter shock as I see her putting a pair of socks into her oversize handbag (Balenciaga, this season), and then another. Then a third. Then she looks around, kind of shrinks down into herself, and walks swiftly toward the exit.

I've never seen a shoplifter in action before, and for an instant I feel stunned. But next moment a boiling outrage is rising through me. She took them! She shoplifted! She shouldn't do that! People shouldn't *do* that!

What if we all did that? I mean, I bet we'd all like to have free socks, but we don't just take them, do we? We pay. Even if we can't really afford it, we *pay*.

My stomach is churning as I watch her leave. I feel really angry. It's *not fair*. And suddenly I know I can't just let her go. I have to do something. I'm not sure what—but something.

Leaving the water bottles behind, I bound down the ladder and out of the shop door. I can see the shoplifter ahead of me, and I increase my pace to a run, dodging pedestrians as I go. As I get near, my heart is thumping with apprehension. What if she threatens me? What if she's got a gun? Oh God, of *course* she's got a gun. This is L.A. Everyone has guns.

Well, too bad. Maybe I will get shot, but I can't wimp out now. I reach out a hand and take her on her bony shoulder.

"Excuse me?"

The girl whips round and I tense in fright, waiting for the gun. But it doesn't come. Her sunglasses are so huge I can barely see her face, but I make out a thin, pale chin and a scrawny, almost malnourished neck. I feel a sudden stab of guilt. Maybe she's on the street because maybe this is her only source of income. Maybe she's going to sell the socks to buy food for her crack-addict baby.

Part of me is thinking, *Just turn away, Becky. Let it go*. But the other part won't let me. Because even if there's a crack-addict baby, it's wrong. It's *wrong*.

"I saw you, OK?" I say. "I saw you taking those socks."

The girl immediately stiffens and makes to run away, but I instinctively grab her arm.

"You shouldn't steal stuff!" I say, struggling to keep hold of her. "You just shouldn't! You probably think, *So what? No one got hurt*. But, you know, shop assistants get in trouble when people shoplift. Sometimes they have to pay for the goods from their wages. Is that fair?"

The girl is wriggling desperately to get away, but I'm gripping on to her arm with both hands. As the mother of a two-year-old, you learn a lot of immobilization skills.

"And then all the prices go up," I add, panting. "And everyone suffers! I know you might think it's your only option, but it's not. You can turn your life around. There are places you can go for help. Do you have a pimp?" I add, trying to sound sympathetic. "Because I know they can be a real pain. But you could go to a safe house. I saw a documentary about it, and they're brilliant." I'm about to elaborate when the girl's sunglasses slip to one side. And I get a glimpse the side of her face.

And suddenly I feel faint. I can't breathe. That's—

No. It can't be.

It is. It *is*.

It's Lois Kellerton.

All thoughts of crack addicts and safe houses disappear from my head. This is surreal. This can't be happening. It has to be a dream. I, Becky Brandon, am clutching the arm of the Hollywood actress Lois Kellerton. As I peer at her unmistakable jawline, my legs start to

shake. I mean, *Lois Kellerton*. I've seen all her films and I've watched her on the red carpet and I've—

But what—

I mean, *what* on earth—

Lois Kellerton shoplifted three pairs of socks? Is this some kind of prank show?

For what seems like the longest moment, we're both motionless, staring at each other. I'm remembering her as Tess in that brilliant adaptation of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. God, she made me cry. And there was that sci-fi one where she got deliberately stranded on Mars at the end in order to save her half-alien children. I cried *buckets*, and so did Suze.

I clear my throat, trying to gather my thoughts. "I ... I know who you—"

"Please," she cuts me off in that familiar husky voice. "Please." She takes off her dark glasses and I stare at her in fresh shock. She looks terrible. Her eyes are red-rimmed and her skin is all flaky. "Please," she says a third time. "I'm ... I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Are you employed by the store?"

"No. I'm a customer. I was up a ladder."

"Did they see me?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

With a trembling hand, she grabs the three pairs of socks from her bag and offers them to me.

"I don't know what I was doing. I haven't slept for two nights. I think I went a little crazy. I never did anything like this before. I never will again. Please," she whispers again, shrinking inside her hoodie. "Take the socks. Take them back."

"Me?"

"Please." She sounds desperate. At last, awkwardly, I take the socks from her.

"Here." She's scrabbling in her bag again and produces a fifty-dollar note. "Give this to the employees."

"You look quite ... um ... stressed," I venture. "Are you OK?"

Lois Kellerton raises her head and meets my eyes, and I'm suddenly reminded of a leopard I once saw in a Spanish zoo. That looked desperate too.

"Are you going to tell the police?" she breathes, so quietly I can barely hear her. "Are you going to tell anyone?"

Oh God. Oh *God*. What do I do?

I put the socks in my bag, playing for time. I should tell the police. Of course I should. What difference does it make if it's a movie star? She stole the socks and that's a crime, and I should perform a citizen's arrest right now and march her off for justice.

But ... I can't. I just *can't*. She looks so fragile. Like a moth or a paper flower. And after all she's giving the socks back, and she's making a donation, and it sounds like she just had a moment of madness....

Lois Kellerton's head is bowed. Her face is hidden inside the gray hood. She looks as though she's waiting for an execution.

"I won't tell anyone," I say at last. "I promise. I'll give the socks back and I won't tell anyone."

As I release my grip on her, her thin hand squeezes mine. Her dark glasses are already back on her face. She looks like an anonymous skinny girl in a hoodie.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you. What’s your name?”

“Becky!” I reply eagerly. “Becky Bloomwood. I mean, Brandon. I was Bloomwood but I got married, so my name changed....” Argh. Stop gabbling. “Um, Becky,” I finish lamely.

“Thank you, Becky.”

And before I can say anything, she’s turned and gone.



THREE

Next morning, my head is still sparking in disbelief. Did that actually happen? Did I actually meet Lois Kellerton?

When I returned to Pump!, clutching the socks, it turned out they hadn't even noticed the socks had gone. For an awful moment I thought they were going to accuse *me* of stealing them. But thankfully a sales assistant took over the incident and called up the CCTV footage and we all watched as a thin girl in a gray hoodie put the socks in her bag and slipped out. I was tingling all over as I watched. A tiny part of me wanted to yell, *Don't you see who it is? Don't you see?*

But of course I didn't. I'd made a promise. Besides which, they'd never believe me. On the video you can't see her face at all.

Then we watched the footage as I chased her out of the shop. All I can say is, I am never buying an Athletic Shaping All-in-One again. I wanted to *die* when I saw my bottom bulging through the shiny fabric.

Anyway. On the plus side, everyone was really impressed by what I did, even if they were more interested in arguing about whether the socks should have been fitted with security tags. My story was that the "mystery girl" dropped the socks as I chased her down the street and that I couldn't catch up with her. I didn't know what to do about the fifty-dollar note, so in the end I pretended that I'd found it on the floor and handed it over. I left my name in case the police need a statement, then hurried back to our hotel, where I *finally* cut that awful Athletic All-in-One off myself. (I bought a pair of shorts and a tank top from Gap instead.)

Lois Kellerton. I mean, *Lois Kellerton*. People would die if they knew! (Well, Suze would. But I haven't told anybody. When Luke and I finally met up for supper last night, he wanted to hear all about the rental houses I'd looked at, and I didn't want to admit I'd spent quite so much time on Rodeo Drive ... and besides which, I made a promise. I said I'd keep it a secret and I have. Today it feels as though the whole event was a weird little dream.

I blink and shake my head to dislodge it. I have other things to think about this morning. I'm standing outside Dalawear, which is on Beverly Boulevard and has a window display of mannequins in "easy-wear" dresses and pantsuits taking tea on a fake lawn.

I'm not meeting Danny for another twenty minutes, but I wanted to get here early and

remind myself of the store and its layout. As I wander in, there's a lovely smell of roses in the air, and Frank Sinatra is playing over the sound system. It's a very *pleasant* store at Dalawear, even if all the jackets seem to be one style, just with different buttons.

I've gone through separates, shoes, and underwear when I come to the evening-wear section. Most of the dresses are full-length and heavily corseted, in bright colors like periwinkle blue and raspberry. There are lots of big rosettes at the shoulder or waist, and beading, and lace-up bodices, and built-in "slimming" undergarments. Just looking at them makes me feel exhausted, especially after my Athletic Shaping All-In-One experience. Some clothes just aren't worth the hassle of trying to get them on and off.

I'm about to take out my phone to text Danny when there's a rustling sound, and a girl about fifteen appears out of the dressing room to stand in front of the full-length mirror. She's not the most together-looking girl. Her dark-red hair is in a fuzzy kind of bob, and her nails are bitten and her eyebrows could do with a bit of a tweeze. But, worst of all, she's wearing a jade-green strapless, swooshy gown that totally swamps her, complete with a rather revolting chiffon stole. She looks uncertainly at herself and hitches the bodice over her bust, where it really doesn't fit. Oh God, I can't bear it. What is she doing here? This shop isn't for teens.

"Hi!" I approach her hurriedly. "Wow! You look ... um, lovely. That's a very ... form-fitting dress."

"It's for my end-of-year prom," mutters the girl.

"Right. Fantastic!" I let a pause fall before I add, "They have some pretty dresses in Urban Outfitters, you know. I mean, Dalawear is a brilliant choice, obviously, but for someone your age ..."

"I have to shop here." She shoots me a miserable look. "My mom had some gift cards. She said I could only get a dress if it didn't cost her anything."

"Oh, I see."

"The saleslady said green would set off my hair," she adds hopelessly. "She went to find me some shoes to match."

"The green is ... lovely." I cross my fingers behind my back. "Very striking."

"It's OK, you don't have to lie. I know I look terrible." Her shoulders slump.

"No!" I say quickly. "You just ... it's a tiny bit full for you ... perhaps a bit fussy..." I tug at the layers of chiffon, wanting to trim them all off with a pair of scissors. I mean, when you're fifteen, you don't want to be dressed up like a Christmas cracker. You want to be something simple and beautiful, like—

And then it hits me.

"Wait here," I say, and hurry back to the underwear section. It takes me about twenty seconds to grab a selection of silk slips, lace slips, "shaping" slips, and a "luxury satin slip with boned bodice," all in black.

"Where did you get those?" The girl's eyes light up as I arrive back in the evening-wear section.

"They were in another section," I say vaguely. "Have a go! They're all in small. I'm Beck by the way."

"Anita." She smiles, revealing train-track braces.

While she's rustling around behind the curtain, I search for accessories and find a black

beaded sash plus a simple clutch bag in dark pink.

“What do you think?” Anita emerges shyly from the changing room, utterly transformed. She’s in a strappy lace slip that makes her look about three sizes smaller and shows off her long legs. Her milky skin looks amazing against the black lace, and her short, stubby hair seems to make more sense too.

“Amazing! Just let me do your hair...” There’s a basket of complimentary water bottles on the counter, and, quickly opening one, I wet my hands. I smooth down her hair until it looks sleek and gamine, cinch her waist in with the beaded sash, and give her the pink clutch to hold.

“There!” I say proudly. “You look fabulous. Now, stand with some attitude. Look at yourself. Don’t you just rock?”

Once she’s got a pair of heels on, she’ll look a million dollars. I sigh happily as I watch her shoulders relax and a sparkle come to her eye. God, I love dressing people up.

“So I found the shoes in your size ...” comes a trilling voice behind me, and I turn to see a woman in her sixties approaching Anita. I met her when I came for the interview before, and her name’s ... Rhoda? No, Rhona. It’s on her name badge.

“Dear!” She gives a shocked laugh as she sees the teenage girl. “What happened to the gown?”

The girl’s eyes slide uneasily to me, and I step in quickly.

“Hi, Rhona!” I say. “I’m Becky; we met before—I’m starting work here soon. I was just helping Anita with her look. Doesn’t that slip look great worn as a dress?”

“Well, goodness!” Rhona’s rigid smile doesn’t move an inch, but her eyes fix me with daggers. “How imaginative. Anita, sweetheart, I’d love to see you in the green full-length.”

“No,” says Anita stubbornly. “I’m wearing this one. I like it.”

She disappears behind the curtain and I step toward Rhona, lowering my voice.

“It’s OK,” I say. “You don’t need to see her in the green. It didn’t work. Too big. Too old. But then I suddenly thought of the slips and—bingo!”

“That’s hardly the point,” says Rhona, bristling. “You know what the commission on the green gown is? You know what the commission on a slip is?”

“Well, who cares?” I say indignantly. “The point is, she looks lovely!”

“I’m sure she looked far lovelier in the green gown. I mean, a slip.” Rhona looks disapproving. “To a prom. A *slip*.”

I bite my lip. I can’t say what I really think.

“Look, we’re going to be working together, so ... shall we agree to disagree?” I hold out my hand placatingly, but before Rhona can take it, there’s an exclamation from behind me and two arms twine themselves round my neck.

“Becky!”

“Danny!” I wheel round to see his pale-blue eyes shining at me through heavy eyeliner. “Wow! You look very ... um ... New Romantic.”

Danny never puts on any weight or looks a day older despite leading the least healthiest lifestyle on the planet. Today his hair is dyed black and gelled into a kind of droopy quiff. He’s wearing a single dangly earring and tight jeans tucked into winklepicker boots.

“I’m ready,” he announces. “I have my reference. I learned it on the plane. Who do I say to? You?” He turns to Rhona and makes a small bow. “My name is Danny Kovitz—yes, the

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