



CHARLOTTE PHILLIPS

Secrets of the Rich & Famous

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Charlotte Phillips

Secrets of the Rich & Famous

Аннотация

Join me, journalist Jen Brown (aka Little Miss Ordinary), as I research my next article: can anyone bag a Chelsea millionaire if she looks the part? I'm discovering that glossy, I-haven't-spent-any-time-on-my-appearance look isn't quick... To make sure I can fake it with the best of them at the whirlwind of intimidatingly glam Christmas parties, I've blagged myself a secret weapon: the help of genuine billionaire and deliciously gorgeous film director, Alex Hammond. His bone-melting kisses do count as helping, right?

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‘I could do with a new approach, I’ll admit,’ she said slowly. ‘So how about we strike a deal?’

‘Go on,’ he said slowly.

‘What I need right now is an adviser. To help me get my article back on track. Someone who knows the world I’m writing about and can give me a few pointers.’

He stared at her.

‘You want me to help you trick some unsuspecting millionaire into thinking you’re a rich socialite?’

‘In a nutshell, yes. But not in a direct way. I just want to be able to ask your opinion on a few things, that’s all. Clothes, locations—that kind of thing.’

There was something so alluring about her—and it messed with his body, not just with his mind. Her upturned face was imploring, the blue eyes clear.

‘I’m no threat to you. I honestly have no interest in making trouble for you. And we’re not that different. You told me you started out with ideas above your station and that’s what I’ve got. I just need this chance.’

He looked into the pleading blue eyes. He must be mad.

About Charlotte Phillips

CHARLOTTE PHILLIPS has been reading romantic fiction since her teens, and she adores upbeat stories with happy endings. Writing them for Mills & Boon® is her dream job.

She combines writing with looking after her fabulous husband, two teenagers, a four-year-old and a dachshund. When something has to give, it's usually housework.

She lives in Wiltshire.

Secrets of the Rich & Famous
Charlotte Phillips



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For my family, with love and thanks.

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CHAPTER ONE

How To Marry A Millionaire In Ten Easy Steps

by Jennifer Brown

If you can't earn it, marry it!

Champagne receptions, exotic locations, sumptuous food and designer everything. This is the world of the rich and famous, but is it a world of hype? A rich façade which can be infiltrated by following a few rules, wearing the right clothes? Or is there more to snaring one of the UK's most eligible bachelors than a makeover and a pair of fake designer heels?

No rich man will look twice at a woman he believes to be after his money, so to fit into the world of the rich you must look as if you belong there. You must seem like his equal, as if you have money and a beautiful life of your own.

Join me on my undercover mission to find out if an ordinary Miss High Street like me, with a day job and a mortgage, can reinvent herself on a budget to join the world of the beautiful people and win the ultimate prize: the heart of a millionaire!

Rule #1: Move to the right postcode, even if you have to live in a shack

JEN BROWN stood rigid behind the bedroom door in the dark, arm raised, the vase in her hand poised to be broken over the intruder's head the second he entered the room. As the door swung open one last thought dashed through her mind before

cold panic set in and impulse took over. She wished, not for the first time this week, that she was back in her mother's cottage in the country, where you could leave your door on the latch all night and still not be murdered in your bed.

A state-of-the-art security system and a massive front door was apparently not enough to guarantee that here in Chelsea.

As the door opened and the light snapped on she leapt with a yell from her hiding place and swung the vase with every ounce of her strength. If this were a movie she would have knocked him out with one crash and then waited smugly for the police to arrive and pat her on the back. But this was reality. And she wasn't movie heroine material.

And so it was that before she could connect vase with scalp, before she had the chance so much as to kick the man in the shins, she was soaring backwards through the air to land with a thump on her own bed. Her wrists were immediately held in an iron grip on either side of her head, and as the intruder loomed above her she drew in a lungful of air and screamed as long and as loudly as she could.

She surprised herself with how loudly, in fact. He recoiled a little at the sound, his face catching the light, and she realised with a flash of disbelief just who she was staring at. Last seen yesterday morning on the front of her newspaper, in the flesh he looked even more gorgeous but a lot angrier.

She'd just tried to crack the skull of the most influential figure in British film-making.

‘Calm down, I’m not going to hurt you!’ he shouted over her, exasperation lacing the deep voice.

Famous or not, he had her pinned to the bed, so she ignored him and began to suck in another enormous breath.

He took advantage of the break. ‘Drop the damn vase and I’ll let you go!’

His dark green eyes were just a couple of inches above her own. The sharp woody scent of his expensive aftershave invaded her senses. Hard muscle was contoured against her body as he used his legs to pin her down effortlessly. She struggled, trying everything to move her legs and kick the stuffing out of him, but she couldn’t move an inch. The eyes looking into her own were determined, and his breath was warm against her lips.

Drop the vase? She gave it a split-second’s consideration. If her hands were free and he tried anything she could grab something else and bash him with that. The place was full of heavy minimalist ornaments—she’d be spoilt for choice.

‘Let me go first,’ she countered. Her heart thundered as if she’d just done the hundred-metre dash. She held his gaze obstinately.

He made no move to release her but his voice dropped to a *let’s-be-reasonable* tone.

‘You’ve just tried to brain me with it. Let the vase go and then perhaps you’d like to tell me what the hell you think you’re doing in my house.’

Fear slipped another notch as her mind processed that last

sentence.

She should have known the only person who could get past the Fort-Knox-style security system in this place would be the person who'd put it there. And if it had been daylight instead of the dark small hours she might have listened to her common sense instead of turning the situation into a movie plot. No wonder the house-sitting agency kept their property owners' details confidential. She could imagine women queuing up round the block to get this gig. It would be a stalker's dream.

She'd built up a mental picture over the last two days of the person who owned this beautiful apartment: *rich, clearly*. You couldn't rent so much as a shed in Chelsea unless you were *über-rich* and/or famous. Preferably both. *Male, definitely*. Everything in the place was pared-down and masculine. Exposed brickwork, black leather sofas, expensive spotlights, vast flatscreen TVs. No task was left unadorned. *And single*. In her opinion there was a serious over-use of art featuring the naked female form. Jen couldn't walk past the huge painting in the hallway without being reminded that her breasts were on the small side and she had no curves to speak of. No, the only women who passed through this apartment were overnight guests with no say in the décor. She was sure of it.

She congratulated herself on her powers of deduction. She was in the wrong profession. Perhaps she should swap journalism for the police force.

Alexander Hammond. Film producer. Award-winner.

Millionaire playboy.

She let the vase drop from her fingers. He followed it with his eyes as it rolled away, the look on his face thunderous, and the next moment she was free as he released her hands and stood up.

He straightened the jacket of his impeccably cut dark suit. A pristine white shirt was underneath, open at the collar and devoid of a tie. His thick dark hair was cut short. Faint stubble against a light tan highlighted a strong jaw. He looked as if he'd just stepped off the set of an aftershave commercial. One of those ones filmed in black and white, showing the hero on his way home at sunrise, a glass of champagne in one hand and the perfect woman in the other.

She suddenly realised how she must look, staring at him with her mouth gaping open from her position on the bed. Warmth rose in her cheeks and she snapped her gaze away from him, concentrating on scrambling to her feet with some measure of dignity. Unfortunately on the way up she caught sight of her appearance in the gilt mirror on the wall. One side of her hair was plastered against her face and neck and the other side resembled a bird's nest. Terrific. Add in the greying old shorts and vest she'd been wearing in bed and she wasn't sure she could feel any more insignificant in the face of his gorgeousness.

She made up for it by drawing herself up to her full height and fixing him with a defiant stare. After all, he was the one at fault here. There was a two-day-old signed contract on the massive kitchen table, detailing her right to be here.

‘You’re paying for me to be here,’ she told him.

She suddenly caught herself running her fingers through the tangled side of her hair and folded her arms grimly. What was the point? It would take a damn sight more than a hairbrush to turn small-town Jen Brown into the kind of woman who would impress Alex Hammond.

‘I’m what?’ he snapped.

‘Executivehousesitters.com? I’m here to provide that extra level of security against intruders.’

She searched his face and saw his sudden understanding in the exasperated roll of his eyes.

‘By crowning me with my own vase? That was your best effort at security?’

So an apology was too much to expect, then. Typical arty type. Everything had to be about him. Never mind that he’d scared her half to death.

‘What did you expect, creeping around the place when you’re meant to be out of the country indefinitely?’ She could hear the beginning of temper in her own voice. ‘I’m not meant to be some kind of vigilante security guard, you know. I’m just meant to make the place look occupied, that’s all.’

Apparently he could hear her temper, too, because he held up a placating hand.

‘About grabbing you like that,’ he said. ‘You were just on me before I had a second to think. I could tell as soon as I got through the door there was someone here, I just assumed I’d had a break-

in.’ He leaned over the bed and picked up the vase, turned to replace it on the dresser. ‘Thank God you’re just a house-sitter. My PA booked it up. She must have forgotten to cancel.’

‘Cancel?’ Her heart plummeted.

He glanced at her. ‘There’s obviously been some mix-up,’ he said. ‘Something’s come up and I need to use this place at the last minute.’

No kidding, something had come up. Jen had seen the news coverage. She knew instantly where this was heading for her—right out through the door and back to her day job at the *Littleford Gazette*—and she wasn’t about to take it.

The *Gazette*, from which she was currently on unpaid leave, was great as far as rural local newspapers went, but she didn’t want to be reporting on welly-throwing contests and duck pond vandalism for the rest of her career. She had big plans. Everything was riding on them. And they started right here, in the Chelsea apartment she was passing off as her own.

Having somehow managed to land an internship at *Gossip!*, a huge-selling women’s magazine, she’d spent the last three months there, working herself into the ground, soaking up every piece of information she could lay her hands on, living on a pittance in a Hackney bedsit and loving every second of it. As the three months had come to an end she’d pitched an article idea to the Features Editor and got the go-ahead.

An investigation into the millionaire lifestyle from the angle of an ordinary girl. With a twist. This article was her ticket to a

permanent job—a job that could change her life—if she could just come up with the goods.

For years she'd had a nagging curiosity about the lifestyle of the rich and beautiful. Who wouldn't, with a father who fulfilled both of those things in spades? Unfortunately he was severely lacking in other qualities, namely those needed to be any kind of parent—although perhaps he reserved that ability for his legitimate children. Pitching an article whose main requirement would be to infiltrate that elusive opulent world had been a natural choice. She'd been wondering what her parallel life might be like since she was a kid. Now she had the chance to find out, and take a huge step forward in her career at the same time.

A career with a top-selling UK women's glossy, living in London, living the dream, or back to covering dog shows at the *Littleford Gazette*, circulation five thousand.

No contest.

She intended—*needed*—to do whatever it took to nail this opportunity, and no man was going to stop her. Even if he was Alex Hammond. And even if it meant fighting a little dirty. The only advantage of having a waste-of-space millionaire for a father was that she wasn't the least bit intimidated by rich men. Although rich, *gorgeous* men were slightly more nerve-racking
...

'It's too late to sort it all out now,' he was saying. 'You can stay the rest of the night, then get your things together in the morning and be on your way. I'll get my PA to smooth things over with the

agency. No need to worry. I'm sure they'll find you something else quickly.'

He spoke with the air of someone conferring a great favour. To add to the effect he gave her a lopsided winning smile that creased the corners of his eyes and made her traitorous belly perform a backflip. She wrapped her arms defensively across her body. Just because it worked on the rest of the female population—didn't mean she'd let it work on her.

He made a move towards the door, his back already turned. No need to wait for her response, of course, because what he said always went. How kind of him to let her stay the rest of the night. A whole extra four hours. The bitter taste of contempt flooded her mouth, quickly followed by sheer panic. How could she complete her article if she got kicked out? She *had* to stay in this flat.

'I don't think you understand,' she called after him, working hard to stop desperation creeping into her voice. 'I have a contract. You have to give me a month's notice to move out.'

He paused at the door. She waited. He turned back to face her, a frown touching his eyebrows. There was only one thing for it—she was simply going to have to brazen the situation out.

'This house-sitting thing—it's not completely one-sided, you know,' she said. 'I'm still paying rent. I'm here until New Years. I've even put up the Christmas tree. You can't just barge in and throw me out because the mood takes you. I don't care who you are.'

She saw coldness slip into the green eyes, and a slight inclination of his head acknowledged that she'd recognised him. Good. Then he'd know she wasn't about to be starstruck into doing what he wanted. This was her big break, and not even his dazzling looks and reputation could stand in the way of her dreams.

'I see,' he said. 'Of course I'll compensate you for any inconvenience, if that's what you're worried about.'

He thought she was after his cash? She shook her head at him in disgust. 'I don't want your money.'

Why was she even surprised? She knew the type of man he was. She'd known that type her whole life. And not one cell in her body would submit to his insulting assumption that he could simply swan through life buying whatever and whoever he chose, throwing money at anything that stood in his way. As if a man like him could ever understand her desperate need to prove herself on her own terms.

She sat down obstinately on the bed.

He looked down at her for a moment.

'We'll talk about this in the kitchen,' he said.

Alex Hammond glanced through the house-sitting contract which he'd found in full view on the kitchen table. It seemed she had a point. Two minutes later she walked in, barefooted, tying a dressing gown around her. It was short, and he couldn't help but notice the long, long legs and the dishevelled bed-hair that made her look as if she'd been doing something other than sleeping.

He felt a spark of heat deep in his abdomen. A couple of weeks earlier and the surprise discovery of a scantily dressed woman in his apartment would probably have led to him trying to talk her back into the bedroom and giving her the one-night stand of her life. That wasn't an option now. As of this week, he needed to be a changed man.

That resolution would be a whole lot easier to stick to without those legs under the same roof as him.

She didn't sit down. Instead she lingered in the doorway watching him, leaning against the jamb.

'I don't want your money,' she reiterated. 'Not everyone can be bought, you know.'

He shrugged.

'In my experience they can,' he said. 'It's just a matter of finding the right price. Tell me yours and we can skip all this tedium, sort the whole thing out, and you can get on your way. Everyone can do with a bit of extra cash at this time of year.'

She shook her head stubbornly.

'I'm staying put. You're welcome to serve me notice, if you like. In fact, let's assume that's what you've just done, shall we? So I've got a month before I need to move out and at the end of that time I'll go. No arguments.'

He had to admire her persistence.

'I've had a look at the contract ...' he glanced down at her name on the top sheet of paper '... er ... Jennifer, and I can't see what the problem is. I'll make sure the agency

finds you somewhere else to stay that's just as good as this, and I'm prepared to offer you generous compensation for the misunderstanding. What's not to like?

'Somewhere else isn't good enough,' she said. 'It has to be here.'

A lightbulb flickered on in his mind at the desperation clearly audible in her voice. Was that it? She was some kind of obsessive fan? Oh, great. Just what he needed.

He tried to speak kindly. 'Listen, Jennifer, I know there's a strong fan base for my work, and I'm grateful for that, but you have to understand I like to keep my work life and my private life separate.'

More like *have* to, from now on.

He saw her eyes widen, and her lip curled a little. It occurred to him that for a fan she didn't seem particularly keen on him.

'This isn't about you!' she snapped. 'It's about the address.'

She wasn't making any sense. He felt suddenly very tired. Not surprising after the few days he'd had and the night flight in from the States.

'What's so significant about this address if it isn't the fact that I live here?'

She dropped her eyes from his, fiddled with the belt on her dressing gown.

'It's an important part of my cover story,' she said. 'I can't change it now. There's too much riding on it. And I only have limited time and means.'

Her cryptic explanations were beginning to irritate him.

‘What the hell are you talking about? Cover story?’

‘I’m a journalist.’

The words fell like rocks into his tired mind. He’d just flown thousands of miles to get out of the scrutiny of the press pack only to find that one of them had moved in with him. He fought to keep a neutral expression on his face, to hear her out, when what he really wanted to do was frogmarch her out of the apartment and lock the deadbolt behind her.

‘What kind of journalist?’

‘I’m working on an article that involves me inventing a different identity,’ she said. ‘The house-sitting is a cheap way of getting myself an address in the right ...’ she pursed her lips ‘... social bracket. I’m working to a tight budget.’

He tried again.

‘What paper do you work for?’

The blue eyes cut away from his.

‘I’m freelance,’ she said.

So she worked anywhere and everywhere she could. Terrific. It was time to wrap this up—immediately.

‘Get your stuff right now and leave,’ he said. ‘I don’t give a damn about any contract. My lawyers will take it from here.’

She tilted her chin up and looked down at him, as if another bargaining tool had suddenly occurred to her. ‘Mr Hammond, you must know that with a couple of phone calls to the right people I could have paparazzi outside this flat before the sun

comes up,' she said.

He saw steely determination in the blue eyes and braced himself against the surge of rage. These press people—thinking they could manipulate any situation.

'Are you threatening me, Miss Brown?'

She shook her head quickly.

'No, I'm not,' she said. 'You can believe me when I tell you I have absolutely no interest in what's going on in your life.'

She must be the only journalist in the country who didn't.

'I'm working on a very specific project. I don't want any trouble, and neither do you.'

'But you don't seriously expect me to move out of my own house?' he said. This was the best place for him to lie low, decide his next step. He certainly didn't intend to do it with anyone else under the same roof.

'I don't,' she said.

She crossed the room and stood on tiptoe to take a glass from one of the cupboards. The movement made her robe ride up, and he fought to take his eyes off the length of creamy slender thigh it revealed. There was something undeniably alluring about her in a scruffy kind of a way. She went to the water dispenser on the side of the fridge and filled the glass. Not a hint of awkwardness, acting as though she lived here and he was the guest.

'I'll be no trouble. Just imagine you've got a very easy to live with house guest until New Year. God knows the place is big enough for two of us without getting in each other's way.'

For some reason his mind snapped to the bedroom, to that lithe body pinned underneath his, the blue eyes gazing back at his own.

‘And what if I refuse?’

She shrugged. ‘I’ve got a lot invested in this. A girl has to make a living, and if you pull the plug on this article I’ll have to find something else lucrative to write about.’

The pointed look she gave him said it all. Cross her and her next project would be him.

He’d heard enough.

‘Pack your stuff,’ he said. ‘In fact, no—don’t pack your stuff. Get whatever you need for the night and get yourself out of here. I’ll have someone send your bags on. You can collect them from the house-sitting agency.’

She didn’t move an inch. In fact, she got closer.

‘You people are all the same, thinking you can do whatever you like just because you’ve got a huge bank balance. I have a legal right to be here.’ Alex wasn’t so tired that he didn’t hear the desperate edge to her argument, but right now he *was* too tired to care.

‘I don’t get this,’ he said, levelling his voice with conscious effort. ‘I’m prepared to pay all your costs, cover any lost income. You could restart your project without losing anything. An address change can’t make that much difference.’

She took a sip of her water and Alex noticed her hands shake slightly. *Good*, she must be feeling nervous.

But she still shook her head. ‘No, thanks.’

‘Why the hell not?’

‘Because I’ve already set myself up with this address and I’m not screwing around with that. Plus I don’t dance to anyone’s tune just because they happen to offer me hard cash. I can get where I want to by myself, thanks very much. This way you get to keep a low profile ... that *is* what you’re doing here, isn’t it? ... and I get to finish my article. Everyone’s a winner.’

She folded her arms. She looked as fresh as a daisy, clearly prepared to argue all night if necessary, and suddenly he was done with it.

‘Stay the damn night, then,’ he snapped. ‘You’ll be out in the morning before you’ve had your first cup of coffee.’

The words were barely out of his mouth before she made a move towards the door, immediately taking him up on it. She disappeared, her bare feet padding softly down the passage back to the bedroom.

He stared at the empty doorway. Let her have her victory. It would be short-lived. In a few hours’ time his legal team would have it sorted and he could bolt the door behind her.

Alex switched the phone to his other ear and looked out of the bedroom window onto the square below. It was early and traffic was still light. A couple of hours’ sleep hadn’t soothed his mood and he was more on edge than ever. Mark Dunn had been his lawyer and close friend for a decade, providing confidential advice he trusted on a personal and business level.

'You're actually telling me I can't evict her from my own apartment? What is the law there for? There has to be some kind of loophole.' He gripped the phone between ear and shoulder so he could flick again through the house-sitting contract.

'Without looking at it I can't be certain, but these things are essentially rental contracts.' Mark's voice was matter-of-fact. 'Fax it over and I'll check it out. Of course you could insist she leaves regardless of what the contract says, but in the circumstances that might not be wise. What's she like?'

Young, slim, minxy blue eyes. Legs that shouldn't be allowed.

'Knows her own mind and is refusing to back down,' he said. 'Hinted that she could make trouble.'

'She most certainly could if she wanted to. Alex, think how this could look if she put the right twist on it. All this stuff in the press about you and Viveca Holt. It's just a few weeks until the awards season kicks off and, trust me, the words "casting couch" are not ones you want bandied about in the run-up to that.'

'You think I don't know that?'

The familiar bite of fury at the backlash resurfaced. How dared people dictate what he did? Who he chose to see? Part of him wanted to issue a statement: *Yeah, so I had a fling with Viveca. A great time was had on both sides, if I say so myself, and I doubt it did her career prospects any harm. But really it's none of your damn business.*

'You need to kill that story stone-dead,' Mark carried on. 'Listen to your PR team for once. You're paying them enough. Go

to ground for a few days and then gradually start to be seen again on your own in the right places. Maybe a few carefully chosen public events. Be seen to be having a quiet Christmas away from the limelight. Regain some respectability. Don't give them anything to write about and it will all be forgotten by New Year. What you *don't* need is some loose cannon of a journalist getting a scoop on you assaulting your own tenant and then throwing her out on the street. And that's just one story she could come up with. There could be worse. These people aren't big on truth. Any new story will be used as an excuse to rehash this current scandal. It could run and run if you don't handle it right.'

Alex felt fury begin to mingle with extreme frustration. The last few days had been hell. The constant paparazzi attention had made work impossible, and then there'd been the backlash from the film studios backing the movie. He had no choice but to get things back on track if he wanted to limit the damage to his professional reputation. Since his business empire had been his one priority these last five years, he had no choice but to play the game.

'OK, so if throwing her out isn't an option, what do you suggest?'

'If I were you, while we come up with a solution, I'd let her be and do my best to keep her sweet.' He paused. 'Not *too* sweet, though, Alex. That's the kind of thing that got you into this mess.'

CHAPTER TWO

Rule #2: Get your eye on the prize. Before you can trap the heart of a millionaire you have to be able to identify him. To observe the visible signs that set a wealthy and eligible man apart from the rest of the dross you must observe him in his own environment.

THE kitchen was a vast cold expanse of gleaming cupboards and spotlights and stainless steel. Not so much as a pepper mill cluttered its surfaces. Its clinical sterility reminded her of a hospital, and Jen hated it more than ever this morning. No matter how hard she told herself that she was the exception to the female rule, absolutely *not* attracted to Alex Hammond, her subconscious wasn't getting the message.

The recurring thought of lying on the bed beneath him, his muscular body hard against hers, had invaded her mind and banished sleep for what had been left of the night. The residual adrenaline from facing down a furious Alex hadn't helped, either. As a result she was now edgy and tired, her relief at being able to stay in the flat short-lived. For the first time in weeks she longed for her cosy kitchen back home, with its threadbare sofa in the corner, perfect to curl up on if you shifted the cat to one side before you sat down.

There was no sign of Alex Hammond this morning. He was obviously sleeping in after the late night. She listened hard for a

moment to make sure.

Nothing. The perfect opportunity.

Kneeling down next to the stainless steel dustbin, she pressed the button on the lid to open it and scrabbled around, grimacing as she shoved aside teabags and eggshells and goodness knew what. At last she found what she was looking for: yesterday's newspaper. She tugged it out, scattering coffee grounds across the glossy grey-tiled floor and smoothed it out with her fist. Folding herself up on the floor, she settled down to read the article she'd only skimmed yesterday.

Now she was sharing a flat with him she wanted every gory detail.

Unfortunately Alex's face in the photo was obscured by a blob of cold scrambled egg from last night's supper. And as she began to read the irony of that fact wasn't wasted on her. Since a costly divorce five years ago he'd been living the life of a rich bachelor to the full. And if you insisted on dating a different woman every week, all of them beautiful and most of them famous, it stood to reason that sooner or later one of those affairs would come back and bite you very publicly on the behind. It was a simple matter of probability.

The latest film from Alex Hammond's extremely successful production company, *The Audacity of Death*, was already tipped to clean up at next year's awards season. Its star, the young and stunningly gorgeous Viveca Holt, had been plucked from obscurity to take the female lead role over a number of well-

established actresses. None of this had mattered one bit until pictures had surfaced of Alex Hammond stepping out with Viveca during the film's production and the rumour mill had begun with a vengeance.

The glamour surrounding the film-maker and the film star being together was far too good to pass up. Whether or not sour grapes were to blame wasn't clear, but the implication from the press pack was that Viveca had moved from obscurity into the role of a lifetime via Alex's bed, with him pulling strings along the way. Definitely *not* the kind of publicity a serious piece of arty film-making needed, with award nominations being announced next month.

Jen nearly hit the ceiling when Alex Hammond walked unexpectedly into the room. She frantically screwed the newspaper into a ball. He looked down at her as he rounded the corner, at the bin open next to her spilling its contents across the floor, and raised his eyebrows. She coloured.

'What are you doing?' He moved smoothly across to the counter and switched on the coffeepot.

She squashed the paper back into the bin and slammed the lid down on it.

'Recycling,' she lied, getting to her feet. She soaped her hands under the single curved tap in the enormous double sink. Conscious of his far too observant eyes still on her, she added, 'Everyone can play a part in saving the planet.'

Oh, yes, that sounded just *great*.

He was looking at her as though she were a moron, then he shook his head lightly, as if to clear it.

‘Coffee?’ he asked, coldly polite.

She smoothed her hair back from her face with one hand, drew in a composing breath.

‘Yes, please,’ she said. ‘Black, no sugar.’

He opened one of the many cupboards and took out two mugs. She waited, wondering if he was going to pick up where she’d left off last night on the eviction thing, but he didn’t mention it. He simply filled the mugs with coffee and handed one of them to her. Then he leaned back against the counter, mug in hand, watching her.

Even on a couple of hours’ sleep he looked fantastic, it was so unfair. His hair was still damp from the shower, and he was dressed casually—just jeans and a dark grey polo shirt that on its own probably cost more than her entire wardrobe. She folded her arms defensively across her own cheap white shirt and jeans and took a sip of her coffee.

‘You checked my contract out with your lawyer, then?’ she asked.

He grinned wolfishly. ‘Of course I have.’

Of course. Men like him left nothing to chance. She wasn’t the least bit surprised. She waited, ready to argue her point. He probably had the best lawyers in the world, more than capable of pulling apart a standard rental agreement, but she knew she’d touched a nerve when she mentioned the press even if it had been

just a bluff. She was just a reporter on a small country paper, not a tabloid entertainment correspondent. Her last story before she'd started interning had been about a cat who'd hopped on the bus and travelled from Littleford to the next village all by himself. That was the level of celebrity she was used to dealing with.

He didn't say anything else, just carried on looking at her with that appraising expression in the green eyes which made her self-conscious no matter how hard she tried not to be.

'And?' she prompted, when he didn't say anything.

He sipped his coffee.

'While I *could* break the contract—and I'm sure the house-sitting agency would be prepared to be *reasonable* about it ...' His tone made it obvious who he considered the troublemaker to be in this scenario. 'You've told me how important it is to you that you keep this address. And, as I'm all in favour of enterprise, I'm prepared to be the bigger person here and honour the agreement. I wouldn't want to make things difficult for you.'

She bridled a little at his taking the moral high ground but kept her irritation under wraps. She didn't believe a word of it. He needed to keep his nose clean. That much was clear from the newspaper article and his turnaround since last night. Any sniff of scandal and he'd be back on the front pages. She had no intention of going to the press—she just wanted to concentrate on her article, on not letting her big chance, her *only* chance, slip through her fingers—but she didn't need to tell him that.

Let him think she had the editor of every London tabloid on

speed dial.

‘That’s really good of you. Thank you,’ she said through gritted teeth.

He raised his mug in acknowledgement.

She waited until he began scrolling through his mobile phone.

‘Will Viveca be joining you for Christmas?’ she asked pointedly.

His expression as he looked up from the phone was dark and inscrutable. She saw a flash of the arctic coldness from the previous night.

‘No, she will not!’ he said curtly. ‘It’s a working relationship, nothing more.’

‘That’s not what the papers say,’ she said.

‘And of course they are always right about absolutely everything.’ He slammed his mug down, slopping coffee across the granite counter. ‘It was a few dates and it was months ago. Can’t I go on a couple of nights out without the world reading God knows what into it?’

Clearly not. She would give him her standard live-in-the-public-eye-at-your-peril lecture.

‘That’s the thing, though. You’re happy to court publicity when it suits you. When it’s *good* publicity. When there’s a film to promote. You can’t then say it’s unacceptable when people want to know more about you.’

‘Well, you would say that, wouldn’t you?’ he said. ‘Seeing as you belong to the *vulture* camp. Hoping to get the scoop, are you?’

Well, there's nothing to scoop. I'm single. I only date when I have to, and I don't see that it's anyone else's business. There's a line between public and private. Who I date and why I date them is private.'

She gave her suddenly pricked-up ears a mental slap. The fact that he was single was definitely of no interest to her. She didn't care that he was utterly, heart-stoppingly gorgeous. Firstly, she'd be wasting her time. Even in a ketchup-smearred photo Viveca was nothing short of exquisite. He'd never look twice at someone like Jen. And secondly, the only circumstances in which she would look at a man who paved his way through life with his wealth would be false ones—as demonstrated perfectly by her undercover article. She wasn't about to repeat the mistakes her mother had made. No way.

She shrugged. 'You're just too newsworthy. That's the problem. You need to keep your head down a bit more. Perhaps if you dated someone a bit more run-of-the-mill for a change?'

He raised his eyebrows and gave her a suggestive grin that sent a curl of unwelcome heat through her body. 'Someone like you, you mean?'

The kitchen felt too warm. The look in his eyes took her right back to the previous night again.

'I don't consider myself to be run-of-the-mill, actually,' she said.

She felt his eyes follow her as she crossed the kitchen. She could tell just by the heat in her cheeks that her face was currently

approaching tomato-red. No way was she letting him see that he affected her. She opened a stainless steel door and stuck her head into the cupboard where she'd stashed her food. She took a few calming breaths and when the flustered feeling was gone took out a loaf of bread.

She'd done a big supermarket food shop during a fleeting visit home a couple of days ago, left half the food in the house for her mum and brought the rest back to London with her. She had enough on her plate here trying to track down millionaires without also having to track down budget food.

She put a couple of slices of bread into the gleaming toaster. His attention was back on his phone again as he leaned against the counter.

She hauled her mind back on task. Sparring with Alex Hammond was all very well, but she needed to concentrate on work.

Thankfully, her accommodation remained sorted. She mentally ticked it off. Now for the next step. Somehow she needed to work out how the hell a girl whose most expensive item of clothing was a fifty-pound pair of shoes could identify whether a men's jacket cost a hundred pounds or a few thousand pounds? She needed to build up a sketch of the kind of man to target, and she had to admit there was a certain satisfaction in the idea of fooling a man of her father's ilk. Someone driven by money and reputation and success, who held all the cards in life and had no qualms about playing them.

Her first proper undercover expedition was tomorrow night. OK, maybe she was running before she could walk—she hadn't even got her wardrobe together yet—but a ticket to the first night of an art exhibition had fallen into her lap via the middle-aged arts correspondent of the *Littleford Gazette*. It turned out boring Gordon was a real culture vulture in his spare time, hanging around galleries and getting himself on exclusive mailing lists. When he'd heard about her planned article he'd thrown a spare ticket her way. She suspected he had a bit of a soft spot for her and feared he might expect a bit more than a cream cake as a thank-you if she had to go back to work at the *Gazette*. There was a lot riding on this project in more ways than one.

The opportunity to attend a champagne reception which would undoubtedly be *stuffed* with rich singletons was too good to pass up. If nothing else she'd be able to observe, and if she was really, really lucky she might be able to highlight a couple of suitable men to target. She hadn't had time to source any designer clothes yet. Instead she was intending to wear her trusty little black dress and blend into the background—use the evening to get an idea of the image she needed to build for herself.

But the thought of going straight from comfort zone to such a glossy affair was terrifying. She somehow needed to ease herself into it. A bit of people-watching would be just the thing to get her in the right mind-set. But knowing where to start was the problem. Where *did* the beautiful people hang out in London on an average weekday?

A sudden movement from Alex made her glance around to catch him checking the huge gold watch on his wrist—probably worth more than her car. Somewhere in her mind a penny dropped.

Standing in front of her was a walking, talking information source on every aspect of the lifestyle of a wealthy single man. Unfortunately with a messy and very expensive divorce in his past he was unlikely to see the funny side of an article on landing a rich bachelor, no matter how tongue-in-cheek it was meant to be. She'd have to find an underhand way to tap the information out of him.

He looked back up at her, a questioning frown knitting his brows in response to her sudden beaming smile.

‘Would you like a slice of toast?’ she asked him.

Ten minutes later they were seated on stools next to the granite counter. Alex watched Jen finishing her second slice of toast. A few crumbs clung to her full lower lip and he found himself staring at them until the movement of her hand as she brushed them away snapped him out of it. He gave himself a brisk mental shake. He was meant to be keeping on her good side, not ogling her. Mindful of Mark's warning to keep her sweet, he'd only agreed to the toast to appear friendly after snapping at her about Viveca. He surreptitiously pushed the remains of it to one side of his plate and took a large slug of coffee.

He looked up at her to see that she'd finished eating and was now staring at his wrist. She leaned forward on her stool to get

a better look.

‘That’s a lovely watch,’ she said.

He smiled distantly. What was she up to now?

‘Thanks.’

‘Would you mind if I took a closer look?’

Before he could answer she’d jumped down from the stool and taken a step closer. She took his wrist in her slender hands and turned the watch this way and that, examining it.

‘Cartier ...’ she murmured.

He realised that she was the perfect height for him right now, standing next to him as he sat on the stool. This close he could see the big blue eyes, the frown touching her brows lightly. The curve of her top lip above the full pink lower lip was adorable. There were fine tendrils at the nape of her neck where she’d pulled her light brown hair up from her shoulders into a messy ponytail. He was reminded suddenly of the last time he’d been at eye level with her—last night, with her slender wrists in his hands, lush body pinned beneath him on the bed, close enough to kiss her with one short movement of his head. Heat sparked on his skin at her touch and seemed to pool deep in his abdomen.

This was not a good sign. Less than four days since he’d sworn off women and he was mentally wondering what she might taste like. He debated for a moment if he should have ignored Mark’s advice and evicted her, anyway.

He tugged his wrist away sharply.

She looked up in surprise, her hands left empty in mid-air.

‘I’ve got a conference call in twenty minutes that I really ought to be preparing for,’ he lied.

She took a step back, still eyeing the watch.

‘OK, not a problem. I’m planning on going out, anyway, so you can have the place to yourself.’

Honestly, she had more front than Blackpool. Acting as if she was the one doing *him* the favour when it was his own damned apartment.

She tossed his cold toast in the bin and stacked their plates together in the sink.

‘Can you recommend somewhere good for lunch?’ she asked, her back to him. ‘I need to get a bit of background on the area. The kind of people who hang out here, what they wear—that kind of thing.’

He shrugged. ‘Depends what you’re after. Coffee and a sandwich? Or something a bit more substantial? What do you want to spend? Some places are pretty exclusive and expensive.’

She turned back from the sink in time for him to see the sudden shadows in her blue eyes.

‘Not that I’m implying you’d be out of place there,’ he said, wondering why he was worried about hurting her feelings.

‘Why don’t you just tell me where *you* would go?’ she said. ‘If you were hypothetically going out for lunch in South-West London.’

He thought for a moment, trying to come up with somewhere she might enjoy.

‘La Brasserie,’ he said. ‘French-style place. It’s very popular—decent food.’

‘Great, thanks!’

‘Don’t thank me until you’ve tried it. We might not like the same kind of food.’

She left the room. Just as he was insisting to himself that she was having zero effect on him he realised he was watching the graceful way her legs moved in the slim-cut jeans. He’d have to find a way of getting her out of here.

The globe lights, the ceiling fans twirling above her, the framed French posters on the walls and the marble-topped bar made stepping into La Brasserie feel like stepping into a little corner of Paris in the middle of London. Strings of white fairy lights and Christmas greenery added a warm festive touch. At a corner table, Jen thought it really was the perfect place to while away an hour or two people-watching.

She glanced at the menu and drew in a quick breath at the prices—even after her internship they never failed to amaze her. The coffee shop back home in Littleford did a knockout shepherd’s pie for a fraction of the price of the main lunch menu here. Then again, the residents of Littleford wouldn’t know what to do with a place that served frogs legs in white wine and parsley, Coquilles St Jacques—whatever *that* was—lobster and steak tartare.

When a waiter in a pristine white shirt and black waistcoat arrived to take her order she chose only coffee and a *pain au*

chocolat, with a pang of regret that she couldn't afford to sample the full deliciousness of the menu. She needed to eke out her money big-time if she wanted to frequent places like this and actually look as if she belonged. The group of young women having a girly lunch at the table opposite made her feel totally invisible. She was kidding herself, thinking she could pass herself off as one of them in her High Street wardrobe. She needed designer *everything*. And on the money she'd scraped together that was going to be no mean feat.

The women were glossy without being in your face. Hair loose and natural, with gentle highlights, perfect smiles, less-is-more make-up and not a hint of orange fake tan. Clothes impeccably cut. Fur seemed to be *the* accessory this winter. No outfit appeared to be complete without a bit of dead animal attached to it somewhere.

So this was the world her father inhabited, while she and her mother were an inconvenience he'd written off twenty-four years ago just by opening his wallet. She didn't think she'd ever had a stronger feeling of being on the outside looking in. Jen felt plain, boring, and like an impostor with her mousy brown hair and her cheap handbag. And the worst of it was that none of that should matter—not to her. But still it did.

Wasn't the whole point of her article to look at this world of luxury from the perspective of an ordinary High Street girl? Her fresh eyes would enable her to pick up on all the little things that stood out. Like the way people air-kissed both cheeks as a

greeting. Jen had never done that in her life.

She was furious with herself. She was an investigative journalist—a professional gathering background for an article. She should be finding this interesting, not intimidating. But try as she might she couldn't quite squash the needling little voice in her head reminding her that if things had been different, with a shift in circumstances, this could have been *her* world, too.

Darkness was already filtering in as she left the restaurant, and the cold air burned her cheeks, but she forced herself to do a bit of window-shopping on Brompton Road instead of skulking back to the apartment. In the brightly lit Chanel store, with the interlinked Cs logo huge behind an exquisite suit in the window, she could feel the eyes of the perfectly groomed assistants following her in her cheap jeans as she picked up a black tweed jacket—heavy in her hands, impeccably cut. Beautiful. She checked the label and felt the moisture disappear from her mouth. Maybe if she sold her car. And then some.

She put the jacket back slowly, so as not to look as if she couldn't afford it, more as if she'd decided it really just wasn't *her*. And she checked out a couple of handbags and a scarf on her way to the exit in an attempt to leave with some dignity. None of the staff approached her, clearly knowing perfectly well that she wasn't worth attending to. She wasn't the real deal. And all the while she was thinking that what she really wanted was to be back in sleepy Littleford.

She snapped herself out of it. She was just a bit homesick.

It wouldn't last. These last three months in London had gone by in a whirl and she'd loved every pacy second of it. Christmas in Chelsea exuded class. It was all twinkly white lights and mistletoe, co-ordinated colours and not a tasteless bauble in sight. It couldn't be further from Littleford, which by now would have its threadbare Christmas tree put up on the village green by local volunteers. The same balding tree had been resurrected every year for as long as Jen could remember.

She wanted to stay in London and this was her chance to do that. Her chance to show she could claw her way up in life by herself. She didn't need a rich father smoothing her path for her.

An hour or so later and things were looking up. It was amazing what people sold online. She scrolled through the auction listings on her laptop, propped up comfortably against the pillows on her bed, mug of hot chocolate next to her. It was gobsmacking how much of a discount you could get for pre-owned clothes. No time to wait for the auction to unfold over a week. She concentrated on the 'Buy Now' options.

Within half an hour she'd been possessed by a kind of madness. It was all too easy to click 'Pay Now'. A pair of jeans, a wear-anywhere shirt, a stunning velvet cocktail dress and a heavily knocked-down pair of nude shoes that she hoped would go with everything—all by designers she'd only ever read about in upmarket women's magazines. She snapped her eyes away from the screen and calmed her racing pulse with the fact that she could sell the whole lot on when the project was over with.

Before she could stop herself she'd clicked 'Pay Now' on a gorgeous leather tote bag. In for a penny, in for . . . a lot of pounds. Hmm, it was just too easy to get carried away online when the clothes were this delicious. She'd better do a quick recce of the cost. Her wallet was under serious strain. She'd ploughed her meagre savings into her project—after all, you had to speculate to accumulate—but still she needed to watch her spending.

The cost of renting the apartment, although seriously discounted from what it would *really* be to rent a place like this, was still taking up the lion's share of her budget. Add in the anticipated cost of tickets, entry fees, food and drink—all the essentials she needed to actually get herself in the same room as her prey—and she had hardly anything left for her own makeover. And, judging by the young women she'd seen today, she was in serious need of one of *those* if she was to pass herself off as one of *them*.

She tapped the figures into her pocket calculator and stared in disbelief at the total. Clothes alone would never be enough, she needed to look the part inside and out. That meant hair, make-up, fake tan, nails. How the hell was she going to manage all of that on the ten pounds twenty pence she had left in her budget?

'Sorry, could you just say that again? I thought you said you were sharing a flat with Alex Hammond, but that can't be right, can it?'

'You didn't hear me wrong.'

Jen held the phone away from her ear with a grimace, but still

the piercing squeal of excitement was audible. When it came to overreaction, Elsie was a professional. Then again, to someone who'd spent a lifetime living in Littleford, and for whom the working week consisted of giving perms and blue rinses to the village's pensioner contingent, the news that your friend was living with a celebrity was probably the highlight of the year. When the squeal subsided she tentatively put the receiver back to her ear.

'Are you sure?' Elsie asked breathlessly. '*The* Alex Hammond? The one on the front of today's newspaper with no shirt on? I've never seen abs like it.'

Jen made a mental note to check out today's paper, then mentally crossed it out. She didn't have time to think about Alex Hammond's abs. She felt mildly offended by Elsie's disbelief. Was it really *that* far-fetched that she could move in these social circles?

'Yes, definitely *that* Alex Hammond,' she said.

Elsie sighed.

'So any chance of you coming home before Christmas Day is even more non-existent, then? I'm dying of boredom here without you. What's he like?'

'Nowhere near as hot in the flesh,' she lied.

She hadn't counted on Elsie being quite so starstruck. It was a good few minutes before she could get her off the subject of Alex's physique and onto the subject of the favour she needed to beg. For Pete's sake, her future career was at stake here.

‘I need your help,’ she said when she could get a word in. ‘The success of my article depends on it.’

She’d bored Elsie rigid with her writing career plans since they’d both been at school.

‘What kind of help?’

‘I need to look like a goddess—on a budget and in minimum time,’ she said. It sounded an extremely tall order spoken out loud.

‘How long?’ Elsie asked.

‘One day would be nice. For a start, is there some over-the-counter product I can use to make my hair look sun-kissed?’

Elsie made a dismissive chuffing sound.

‘Pah! You don’t need to bother with any of that over-the-counter rubbish. Not when you’ve got a professional on your team. I’ll see you right. Don’t you worry.’

‘But you’re in Littleford. And I can’t afford to pay for you to come here even if I was able to let you stay.’ She didn’t bother to enlighten Elsie about the fight she’d had to keep herself under this roof.

There was a disappointed sigh at the end of the phone.

‘I suppose it was too much to hope for a meeting with Alex,’ she grumbled. ‘And it’s been ages since I’ve seen you. The place has been dead quiet since you took that magazine job.’

Jen squashed the sudden pang of homesickness. No matter how much she had missed her, Elsie would eat Alex alive if she got within touching distance of him.

‘Sorry,’ she said apologetically. ‘He’s rarely home, anyway. We barely see each other. And even if you *were* here, what I’m after is that modern, subtle, glossy-but-undone look the It-girls have. I need to look like myself, but better. I’m not sure there’s much of a call for that kind of look in Littleford.’

She was trying hard to be tactful but clearly failed, because Elsie gave a derisory sniff.

‘A couple of months in London and you think we’re all hillbillies,’ she complained. ‘Just because I spend my days doing shampoo and sets for grannies doesn’t mean I don’t have all the skills for modern stuff, you know. A tint is a tint, whether it’s blue, pink or just-back-from-Cannes-gold. I’ll pop some colorant in the post tonight, shall I?’

Jen brightened immediately.

‘Is it something I can do myself, then? Can you write me a list of instructions?’

‘I can do better than that, honey. I’ll instruct you *personally* via Skype.’ She spoke in bossy and professional tones, as though she were a stylist to the stars, then ruined it by adding with a touch of stalker, ‘Now, give me Alex Hammond’s address.’

After a day of catch-up phone calls and e-mails, in which the subject of his swift departure from the States was skated over, Alex wandered into the kitchen on a fact-finding mission. Mark’s follow-up phone call had come that afternoon.

‘There is no Jennifer Brown that my press contacts have ever heard of, but it’s hardly an unusual name, and the world is stuffed

with freelancers trying to get a foot in the door. If anything that makes her more dangerous. She's getting exclusive first-hand experience of your day-to-day life, and at some point—if it hasn't already—it will occur to her that she's sitting on a fantastic scoop.'

The morning papers had brought another spate of articles about him and Viveca, and Alex's never hugely impressive patience was close to breaking point. There were three films in varying stages of production that he should be immersed in, and instead he was stuck here, keeping out of sight, all because the studios backing them financially were unsettled by the sudden tabloid interest in his sex life. At this time of year more than ever he wanted to be busy. *Needed* to be busy. Working hard and partying harder. Anything but sitting here twiddling his thumbs in the flat with time to think about what might have been. He just wanted this whole ridiculous thing wrapped up so he could get back to doing what he did best.

'Then get something on *her*!' he snapped at Mark. 'Get some leverage that we can use if she tries anything.'

'I can't do that when I don't know who she is,' Mark protested. 'I need more background. Though it fills me with dread to say it ...' he took a breath '... you're going to have to go and chat her up.'

CHAPTER THREE

FINDING the kitchen deserted, Alex followed the sounds of the TV and found Jen in the small den off the kitchen. It was a small, informal sitting room, cosier than the vast main lounge, with a small sofa, a couple of chairs and a very inferior forty-inch TV set. Where television was concerned, in Alex's opinion, size definitely mattered.

Jen was curled up in the corner of the sofa under a well-worn patchwork quilt that he didn't recognise. In fact, glancing around, he saw quite a few items that couldn't possibly have been put there by the interior designer he'd employed. There were framed snapshots and Christmas cards on the sideboard, tinsel on the mantelpiece and a small potted Christmas tree near the window. A fire crackled in the grate.

From nowhere came an unexpected flash of envy. She'd settled in. Surrounded herself with things that meant something to her, reminded her of her home, her family. When had he last done that anywhere? When had he last bothered with Christmas decorations? These days it didn't seem worth the effort just for him, although Jen clearly didn't see it that way. Home for him was whichever house he happened to be in, and family didn't fit in his life any more. Susan had seen to that.

Jen was wearing glasses and eating cheese on toast from a plate that was balanced precariously on the arm of the sofa. She

looked tiny and somehow fragile.

She glanced up at him.

‘Hi,’ she said.

He nodded towards one of the empty chairs. ‘You mind?’

She shrugged noncommittally, but turned the sound down on the TV and took her glasses off, so he figured she couldn’t be dead against him joining her.

‘I thought the whole appeal of the executive house-sitting thing was that people get to experience luxury they can’t afford themselves,’ he said, settling back in the chair. ‘You know—get a fabulous pad at a fraction of the rent.’

She was watching him, blue eyes wide. He liked the way she didn’t fuss with her appearance. Her hair was piled up in a messy bun and he could see a tiny spray of freckles over her nose. No evidence of hours spent in front of the mirror with a make-up brush. He was used to ultra-groomed women, for whom venturing out was all about the way they looked. She was a breath of fresh air.

‘What’s your point?’

‘So how come you’re eating cheese on toast off your lap in the den? The sitting room doesn’t look lived-in, and you didn’t even bag the master bedroom. This is the only room apart from the kitchen that looks like you’ve set foot in it. You *are* free to use the whole apartment, you know.’

‘Where would you suggest I eat, then?’ she asked. ‘That enormous glass table in your dining room? The one that seats

twelve?’ She shrugged. Smiled faintly. ‘I’m not that kind of girl.’ She glanced around. ‘I feel more at home in here. It’s cosy. You can keep your huge lounge with that monster TV.’

He felt another uncomfortable twist of nostalgia as for no reason his childhood home slipped into his mind. Not a glass table in sight back then, and they’d been lucky to have one temperamental old television. But Jen had sparked his interest with her indifference to the luxury trappings of the apartment. If anything it seemed more of an aversion. Yet hadn’t she said her article was something to do with the opulent side of living in South-West London? Time to charm it out of her.

‘Do you want a coffee?’ he asked.

When he came back with two mugs she’d finished her toast. The empty plate was on the table.

‘How was today, then?’ he asked, sitting down. ‘What did you think of La Brasserie?’

She held her cup in both hands, like a child, and smiled up at him.

‘It was amazing,’ she said.

‘Did you get the background you were talking about?’

She shrugged. ‘I got some,’ she said. ‘You should have seen the food! There were things on that menu I’ve never even heard of, let alone tried. And the people were something else. I wanted to get an idea of image, you know? What the young women in the Chelsea set are wearing, how they act.’

Her face became animated as she talked about her project. He

felt absurdly touched by her excitement over a restaurant he'd visited more times than he could remember. Over things he no longer noticed.

‘And what did you think?’

‘I think I've only seen the tip of the iceberg. I mean, there were quite a few touristy types there, too, but it was still an eye-opener. They're all so glamorous. Fantastic clothes! One girl had a dog living in her handbag!’

He burst out laughing and she tentatively smiled back. As the blue eyes lit up he realised she was quite stunning. Good thing he had Mark to keep him on task. She could be a serious threat to his newly sworn singledom if he let her.

‘Where do you live usually, then?’ he asked. ‘When you're not staking out the Chelsea set? I thought it must be somewhere in London—you know, at the journalistic hub?’

Jen paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. It was one thing to share an apartment with the guy, another to start telling him personal stuff. Then again, she could do with some leverage here. This morning's recce had given her some good ideas about working on her own image—and now she'd got Elsie on board to help with hair and make-up, and hit the online second-hand shops so hard that the thought of it still gave her palpitations.

What she was lacking was information on the type of man she was aiming this image towards. She had no personal experience in that area. Her mother had always avoided talking about her father at all costs, never referring to him without using a variety

of colourful expletives. La Brasserie hadn't really been much help there, either. Wealthy businessmen were apparently too busy making themselves richer to be chilling out in the daytime midweek—no matter how posh the restaurant, and no matter how delicious the food.

Speculate to accumulate. Maybe if she made small talk with Alex she could get some tips out of him and distract herself from the still lingering sense of isolation her afternoon's research had left her with.

'I've been in London for the last few months, but really I'm from Littleford,' she said. 'It's a small village in the West Country. You won't have heard of it.'

No one ever had.

'Not far from Bath?'

'You've been there?' she said, wondering when the hell he'd have had the need to drop in to a village where the star social attraction of the year was the Farm Festival in July, when everyone got together to admire cows and stuff themselves with local produce.

He shook his head. 'No, but I know the general area quite well.'

When she looked at him expectantly he added, 'I grew up in Bristol.'

'You're from *Bristol*?'

'You make it sound like the moon.' The green eyes looked mocking. 'I haven't always lived like this, you know. My parents are working class. My dad was a lorry driver and my mum was

a dinner lady at my school. I could always count on her for extra custard.'

'Really?'

'Your surprise could be construed as insulting, you know,' he said.

'I guess I just assumed you'd had a ... well, a privileged upbringing.'

'Why? Because someone from my background couldn't possibly make something of themselves?' His tone was light, but the eyes had a razor-sharp edge to them.

She backtracked. *Hard.*

'I didn't mean that. It's just ... well, it's such a glamorous career, what you do. Hollywood, London, Cannes.'

He shook his head.

'I didn't have any of that in mind when I started out.'

He took a sip of his coffee. She waited for him to elaborate, but it seemed his own glam world wasn't as interesting to him as it was to her.

'What's Littleford like, then?' he asked.

'Quiet. One pub, couple of village shops, church, duck pond,' she said, trying to fob him off quickly so she could get the subject back on him. 'So, how did you start out?'

Her plan to pump him for background information on what suits he wore was trampled underfoot by her stampeding curiosity about his childhood. She'd assumed he'd been born to wealthy parents and had had an upbringing involving public

school, nannies and a network of contacts that had given him a leg-up until he'd reached the top. Just how wrong had she been?

'I started out small,' he said. He looked down at his coffee mug, a smile touching his lips, creasing the corner of his eyes lightly. 'I guess I just always had big ideas.'

She smiled at that but he shook his head.

'It wasn't particularly a good thing. Where I lived you got through school, then you got out and started earning. Big ideas were seen as a waste of time. I had to fight to get my parents onside about going to college. I worked part-time to fund the course, but there was a real sense that I was wasting that money. I was lucky. I had an inspirational tutor and I was determined to succeed. I made a short film. Just a twenty-minute thing I wrote, produced and directed on a minuscule budget. I knew it was good. I believed in it totally.' He laughed a little. 'Feature films came much later. Ideas above my station never really went away.'

'Nothing wrong with that,' she said. She could definitely relate to it. 'You don't get anywhere by sitting around.'

She realised suddenly that she was feeling hugely impressed by him, and quickly reminded herself that he might have made his own wealth but he didn't seem to be in touch with his roots now. Typical. Get there and never look back. He obviously wasn't above using his money to ride roughshod over other people now he'd got it.

'So you live alone?'

He asked the question casually, without meeting her eyes. The kind of question that might be asked on a date. A spark tingled its way up her spine at the thought and she felt mildly ridiculous. The idea that Alex Hammond might be interested in someone like her when he could call up a model at the drop of a hat was ludicrous.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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