Confessions of a Shopaholic
(also titled The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic
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by

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Excerpts: chapters one and two

Chapter One

OK. Don't panic. Don't panic. It's only a VISA bill. It's a piece of paper; a few numbers. I mean, just how scary can a few numbers be?

I stare out of the office window at a bus driving down Oxford Street, willing myself to open the white envelope sitting on my cluttered desk. It's only a piece of paper, I tell myself for the thousandth time. And I'm not stupid, am I? I know exactly how much this VISA bill will be.

Sort of. Roughly.

It'll be about... £200. Three hundred, maybe. Yes, maybe three hundred. Three-fifty max.

I casually close my eyes and start to tot up. There was that suit in Jigsaw. And there was dinner with Suze at Quaglino's. And there was that gorgeous red and yellow rug. The rug was £200, come to think of it.

But it was definitely worth every penny - everyone's admired it. Or, at least, Suze has.

And the Jigsaw suit was on sale - 30 per cent off. So that was actually saving money.

I open my eyes and reach for the bill. As my fingers hit the paper I remember new contact lenses. Ninety five pounds. Quite a lot. But, I mean, I had to get those, didn't I? What am I supposed to do, walk around in a blur?

And I had to buy some new solutions and a cute case and some hypo-allergenic eyeliner. So that takes it up to...

four hundred?

At the desk next door to mine, Clare Edwards looks up from her post. She's sorting all her letters into neat piles, just like she does every morning. She puts rubber bands round them and puts labels on them saying things like, 'Answer immediately' and 'Not urgent but respond'. I loathe Clare Edwards.

'OK, Becky?' she says.

'Fine,' I say lightly, 'Just reading a letter.' I reach gaily into the envelope, but my fingers don't quite pull out the bill. They remain clutched around it while my mind is seized - as it is every month - by my secret dream.

Do you want to know about my secret dream? It's based on a story I once read in the newspaper about a mix-up at a bank. I loved this story so much, I cut it out and stuck it onto my wardrobe door. Two credit card bills were sent to the wrong people, and - get this - each person paid the wrong bill without realizing. They paid off each other's bills without even checking them.

And ever since I read that story, my secret dream has been that the same thing will happen to me. Some dotty old woman in Cornwall will be sent my humungous bill and will pay it without even looking at it. And I'll be sent her bill for three tins of cat food at 59p each. Which, naturally, I'll pay without question.

Fair's fair, after all.

A smile is plastered over my face as I gaze out of the window. I'm convinced that this month it'll happen - my secret dream is about to come true. But when I eventually pull the bill out of the envelope - goaded by Clare's curious gaze - my smile falters, then disappears.

Something hot is blocking my throat. I think it could be panic.

The page is black with type. A series of familiar names rushes past my eyes like a mini shopping mall.

I try to take them in, but they're moving too fast.

Thomtons, I manage to glimpse. Thomtons Chocolates?

What the hell was I doing in Thomtons Chocolates? I'm supposed to be on a diet. This bill can't be right. This can't be me. I can't possibly have spent all this money.

Don't panic! I yell internally. The key is not to panic.

Just read each entry slowly, one by one. I take a deep breath and force myself to focus calmly, starting at the top.
WH Smith (well, that's OK. Everyone needs stationery) Boots (ditto) Specsavers (essential) Oddbins (bottle of wine - essential) Our Price (Our Price? Oh yes. The new Charlatans album. Well, I had to have that, didn't I?) Bella Pasta (supper with Caitlin) Oddbins (bottle of wine - essential) Esso (petrol doesn't count) Quaglino's (expensive - but it was a one-off) Pret Manger (that time I ran out of cash) Oddbins (bottle of wine - essential) Rugs to Riches (what? Oh yes, the rug. Stupid rug) La Senza (sexy underwear for date with James) Agent Provocateur (even sexier underwear for date with James. Huh. Like I needed it) Body Shop (that skin brusher thing which I must use) Next (fairly boring white shirt - but it was in the sale) Millets...

I stop in my tracks. Millets? I never go into Millets. What the hell would I be doing in Millets? I stare at the statement in puzzlement, wrinkling my brow and trying to think - and then suddenly, the truth dawns on me. It's obvious. Someone else has been using my card.

Oh my God. I, Rebecca Bloomwood, have been the victim of a crime.

Now it all makes sense. Some criminal's pinched my credit card and forged my signature. Who knows where else they've used it? No wonder my statement's so black with figures! Someone's gone on a spending spree round London with my card - and they thought they would just get away with it.

But how have they managed it? I scrabble in my bag for my purse, open it - and there's my VISA card, staring up at me. I take it out and gaze at it. Someone must have pinched it from my purse, used it - and then put it back. It must be someone I know. Oh my God. Who?

I look suspiciously round the office. Whoever it is, isn't very bright. Using my card at Millets! It's almost laughable. As if I'd ever shop there.

'I've never even been into Millets!' I say aloud.

'Yes you have,' says Clare.

'What?' I turn to her, not particularly pleased to be interrupted. 'No I haven't.' 'You bought Michael's leaving present from Millets, didn't you?' I stare at her and feel my smile disappear. Oh bugger.

Of course. The blue anorak for Michael. The blue sodding anorak from Millets.

When Michael, our deputy editor left three weeks ago, I volunteered to buy his present. I took the brown envelope full of coins and notes into the shop and picked out an anorak (take it from me, he's that kind of guy). And at the last minute, now I remember, I decided to pay on credit and keep all the handy cash for myself.

I can vividly remember fishing out the four £5 notes and carefully putting them in my wallet, sorting out the pound coins and putting them in my coin compartment, and pouring the rest of the drossy change into the bottom of my bag.

Oh good, I remember thinking.

I won't have to go to the cashpoint. I'd thought that sixty quid would last me for weeks.

So what happened to it? I can't have just spent sixty quid without realizing it, can I?

'Why are you asking, anyway?' says Clare, and she leans forward. I can see her beady little X-ray eyes gleaming behind her specs. She knows I'm looking at my VISA bill. 'No reason,' I say, briskly turning to the second page of my statement. But I've been put off my stride. Instead of doing what I normally do - look at the Minimum Payment Required and ignore the total completely - I find myself staring straight at the bottom figure.

Nine hundred and forty-nine pounds, sixty-three pence. In clear black and white.

I stare at it silently for thirty seconds, then stuff the bill back into the envelope. I honestly feel, at that moment, as though this piece of paper has nothing to do with me. Perhaps, if I carelessly let it drop down on the floor behind my computer, it will disappear. The cleaners will sweep it up and I can claim I never got it.

They can't charge me for a bill I never received, can they?

I'm already composing a letter in my head. 'Dear Managing Director of VISA. Your letter has confused me. What bill are you talking about, precisely? I never received any bill from your company. I did not care for your tone and should warn you, I am writing to Anne Robinson of Watchdog.' Or I could always move abroad.

'Becky?' My head jerks up and I see Clare staring at me. 'Have you finished the piece on Lloyds?' 'Nearly,' I lie. As she's watching me, I feel forced to summon it up on my computer screen, just to show willing. But she's still bloody watching me.

'Savers can benefit from instant access,' I type onto the screen, copying directly from a press release in front of me. 'The account is also offering tiered rates of interest for those investing more than £5,000.' I type a full stop, take a sip of coffee and turn to the second page of the press release.
This is what I do, by the way. I'm a journalist on a financial magazine. I'm paid to tell other people how to organize their money.

Of course, it's not the career I always wanted. No-one who writes about personal finance ever meant to do it. People tell you they 'fell into' personal finance. Of course, I still know nothing about finance. People at the bus stop know more about finance than me. Schoolchildren know more than me. I've been doing this job for three years now, and I'm still expecting someone to catch me out.

That afternoon, Philip the editor calls my name, and I jump in fright.

'Rebecca?' he says. 'A word.' And he beckons me over to his desk. His voice seems lower all of a sudden, almost conspiratorial, and he's smiling at me, as though he's about to give me a piece of good news.

Oh my God, I think. Promotion. It must be. He knows it's unfair I earn less than Clare, so he's going to promote me to her level. Or even above. And he's telling me discreetly so Clare won't get jealous.

A wide smile plasters itself over my face and I get up and walk the three yards or so to his desk, trying to stay calm but already planning what I'll buy with my pay rise. I'll get that swirly coat in Whistles. And some black high-heeled boots from Pied Terre. Maybe I'll go on holiday. And I'll pay off that blasted VISA bill once and for all. I feel buoyant with relief. I knew everything would be OK...

'Rebecca?' He's thrusting a card at me. 'I can't make this press conference,' he says. 'But it could be quite interesting. Will you go? It's at Brandon Communications.' I can feel my elated expression falling off my face like jelly. He's not promoting me. I'm not getting a pay rise. I feel betrayed. Why did he smile at me like that?

He must have known he was lifting my hopes. Callous bastard.

'Something wrong?' enquires Philip.

'No,' I mutter. But I can't bring myself to smile. In front of me, my new swirly coat and high-heeled boots are disappearing into a puddle, like the Wicked Witch of the West. No promotion. Just a press conference about... I glance at the card. About a new unit trust. How could anyone possibly describe that as interesting?

'You can write it up for the news,' says Philip.

'OK,' I say, shrugging, and walk away.

Chapter Two

There's just one essential purchase I have to make on the way to the press conference - and that's the Financial Times. The FT is by far the best accessory a girl can have. Its major advantages are:

1. It's a nice colour.
2. It only costs 85p.
3. If you walk into a room with it tucked under your arm, people take you seriously. With an FT under your arm, you can talk about the most frivolous things in the world, and instead of thinking you're an airhead, people think you're a heavyweight intellectual who has broader interests, too.

At my interview for Successful Saving, I went in holding copies of the Financial Times and the Investor's Chronicle - and I didn't get asked about finance once. As I remember it, we spent the whole time talking about holiday villas and bitching about other editors.

So I stop at a newsstand and buy a copy of the FT and tuck it neatly under my arm, admiring my reflection in the window of Denny and George.

I don't look bad, I think. I'm wearing my black skirt from French Connection, and a plain white T-shirt from Knickerbox, and a little angora cardigan which I got from M&S but looks like it might be Agnbs B. And my new square-toed shoes from Hobbs. And even better, although no-one can see them, I know that trader neath I'm wearing my gorgeous new matching knickers and bra with embroidered yellow rosebuds. They're the best bit of my entire outfit. In fact, I almost wish I could be run over so that the world would see them.

So anyway. There I am, gazing at myself, thinking I look pretty good, and half wishing someone from Just Seventeen would pop up with a camera - when suddenly my eyes focus and snap to attention, and my heart stops. In the window of Denny and George is a discreet sign. It's dark green with cream lettering, and it says: SAIE.

I stare at it, my heart thumping hard. It can't be true.

Denny and George can't be having a sale. They never have a sale. Their scarves and pashminas are so coveted, they could probably sell them at twice the price. Everyone I know in the entire world aspires to owning a Denny and
George scarf. (Except my mum and dad, obviously. My mum thinks if you can't buy it at Bentalls of Kingston, you don't need it.) I swallow, and take a couple of steps forward, then push open the door of the tiny "shop. The door pings, and the nice blond girl who works there looks up. I don't know her name—but I've always liked her. Unlike some snotty cows in clothes shops, she doesn't mind if you stand for ages staring at clothes you really can't afford to buy. Usually what happens is, I spend half an hour lusting after scarves in Denny and George, then go off to Accessorize and buy something to cheer myself up. I've got a whole draweful of Denny and George substitutes.

'Hi,' I say, trying to stay calm. 'You're . . . you're having a sale.' 'Yes.' The blond girl smiles. 'Bit unusual for us.' My gaze sweeps the room. I can see rows of scarves, neatly folded, with dark green '50 per cent off' signs above them. Printed velvet, beaded silk, embroidered cashmere, all with the discreet 'Denny and George' signature.

'They're everywhere. I don't know where to start. I think I'm having a panic attack.'

'You always liked this one, I think,' says the nice blond girl, taking out a shimmering grey-blue scarf from the pile in front of her.

Oh God, yes. I remember this one. It's made of silky velvet, overprinted in a paler blue and dotted with iridescent beads. As I stare at it, I can feel little invisible strings, silently tugging me towards it. I have to touch it. I have to wear it. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. The girl looks at the label. 'Reduced from £340 to £120.' She comes and drapes the scarf around my neck and I stare at my reflection.

There is no question. I have to have this scarf. I have to have it. It makes my eyes look bigger, it makes my haircut look more expensive, it makes me look like a different person. I'll be able to wear it with everything.

People will refer to me as the Girl in the Denny and George scarf.

'I'd snap it up, if I were you.' The girl smiles at me.

'There's only one of these left.' Involuntarily, I clutch at it.

'I'll have it,' I gasp. 'I'll have it.' As she's laying it out on tissue paper, I take out my purse, open it up and reach for my VISA card in one seamless, automatic action—but my fingers hit bare leather. I stop in surprise and start to rummage through all the pockets of my purse, wondering if I stuffed my card back in somewhere with a receipt or if it's hidden underneath a business card... And then, with a sickening thud, I remember. It's on my desk.

How could I have been so stupid? How could I have left my VISA card on my desk? What was I thinking of?.

The nice blond girl is putting the wrapped scarf into a dark green Denny and George box. My heart is thumping. What am I going to do?

'How would you like to pay?' she says pleasantly.

My face flames red.

'I've just realized I've left my credit card at the office,' I stutter.

'Oh,' says the girl, and her hands pause.

'Can you hold it for me?' The girl looks dubious.

'For how long?' 'Until tomorrow?' I say desperately. Oh God. She's pulling a face. Doesn't she understand?

'I'm afraid not,' she says. 'We're not supposed to reserve sale stock.' 'Just until later this afternoon, then,' I say quickly.

'What time do you close?' 'Six.' Six! I feel a combination of relief and adrenalin sweeping through me. Challenge Rebecca. I'll go to the press conference, leave as soon as I can, then take a taxi back to the office. I'll grab my VISA card, tell Philip I left my notebook behind, come here and buy the scarf.

'Can you hold it until then?' I say beseechingly.

'Please? Please?' The girl relents.

'OK. I'll put it behind the counter.' 'Thanks,' I gasp. I hurry out of the shop and down the road towards Brandon Communications. Please let the press conference be short, I pray. Please don't let the questions go on too long. Please God, please let me have that scarf. As I arrive at Brandon Communications, I can feel myself begin to relax. I do have three whole hours, after all. And my scarf is safely behind the counter. No one's going to steal it from me.

There's a sign up in the foyer of Brandon Communications saying that the Foreland Exotic Opportunities press conference is happening in the Artemis Suite, and a man in uniform is directing everybody down the corridor. This means it must be quite big. Not television-cameras-CNN-world's press on tenterhooks big, obviously. But fairly-good-turnout big. A relatively important event in our dull little world.

As I enter the room, there's already a buzz of people milling around, and waitresses circulating with canapes. The journalists are knocking back the champagne as if they've never seen it before; the PR girls are looking supercilious.
and sipping water. A waiter offers me a glass of champagne and I take two. One for now, one to put under my chair for the boring bits.

In the far corner of the room I can see Elly Granger from Investor's Weekly News. She's been pinned into a corner by two earnest men in suits and is nodding at them, with a glassy look in her eye. Elly's great. She's only been on Investor's Weekly News for six months, and already she's applied for forty-three other jobs.

What she really wants to be is a beauty editor on a magazine. What I really want to be is Fiona Phillips on GMTV. Sometimes, when we're very drunk, we make pacts that if we're not somewhere more exciting in three months, we'll both leave our jobs. But then the thought of no money - even for a month - is almost more terrifying than the thought of writing about pension plans for the rest of my life.

'Rebecca. Glad you could make it.' I look up, and almost choke on my champagne. It's Luke Brandon, head honcho of Brandon Communications, staring straight at me as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

I've only met him a few times, and I always feel slightly uneasy around him. For a start, he's got such a scary reputation. Everyone talks all the time about what a genius he is, even Philip, my boss. He started Brandon Communications from nothing, and now it's the biggest financial PR company in London. A few months ago he was listed in some newspaper as one of the cleverest entrepreneurs of his generation. It said his IQ was phenomenally high and he had a photographic memory. (I've always hated people with photographic memories.) But it's not just that. It's that he always seems to have a frown on his face when he's talking to me. As if he knows what a complete fraud I am. In fact, it occurs to me, he probably does. It'll probably turn out that the famous Luke Brandon is not only a complete genius but he can read minds, too. In fact, I'm really thinking about a gorgeous black top I saw in Joseph and whether I can afford the trousers as well.

'You know Alicia, don't you?' Luke is saying, and he gestures to the immaculate blond girl beside him. I don't know Alicia, as it happens. But I don't need to. They're all the same, the girls at Brandon C, as they call it. They're well dressed, well spoken, are married to bankers and have zero sense of humour.

'Rebecca,' says Alicia coolly, grasping my hand. 'You're on Successful Saving, aren't you?' 'That's right,' I say, equally coolly. 'It's very good of you to come today,' says Alicia. 'I know you journalists are terribly busy.' 'No problem,' I say. 'We like to attend as many press conferences as we can. Keep up with industry events.' I feel pleased with my response. I'm almost fooling myself.

Alicia nods seriously, as though everything I say is incredibly important to her.

'So, tell me, Rebecca. What do you think about today's news?' She gestures to the FT under my arm. 'Quite a surprise, didn't you think?' Oh God. What's she talking about? 'It's certainly interesting,' I say, still smiling, playing for time. I glance around the room for a clue, but there's nothing. What's happened? Have interest rates gone up or something?

'I have to say, I think it's bad news for the industry,' says Alicia earnestly. 'But of course, you must have your own views.

'And now this rumour about Scottish Prime and Flagstaff Life going the same way!' She looks at me intently. 'Do you think that's really on the cards?' 'It's... it's difficult to say,' I reply, and take a gulp of champagne. What rumour? Oh God, why can't she leave me alone?

Then I make the mistake of glancing up at Luke Brandon. He's staring at me, with a strange expression on his face. Oh shit. He knows I don't have a clue, doesn't he? - 'Alicia,' he says abruptly. 'That's Maggie Stevens coming in. Could you catch her for me?' 'Absolutely,' she says, trained like a racehorse, and starts to move smoothly towards the door.

'And Alicia - ' adds Luke, and she quickly turns back. 'I want to know exactly who fucked up on those figures.' 'Yes,' gulps Alicia, and hurries off.

God he's scary. And now we're on our own. I think I might quickly run away.

'Well,' I say brightly. 'I must just go and--' But Luke Brandon is leaning towards me.

'SBG announced that they've taken over Rutland Bank this morning,' he says quietly. And of course, now he says it, I remember hearing something about it on the news this morning.

'I know they did,' I reply haughtily. 'I read it in the FT.' And before he can say anything else, I walk off to talk to Elly.

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As the press conference is about to start, Elly and I sidle towards the back and grab two seats together. I open my notebook, write 'Brandon Communications' at the top of the page, and start doodling swirly flowers down the side. Beside me, Elly's dialling her telephone horoscope on her mobile phone.

I take a sip of champagne, lean back and prepare to relax. There's no point listening at press conferences. The information's always in the press pack, and you can work out what they were talking about later. In fact, I'm wondering whether anyone would notice if I took out a pot of Hard Candy and did my nails, when suddenly the awful Aticia ducks her head down to mine.

'Rebecca?' 'Yes?' I say lazily.

'Phone call for you. It's your editor.' 'Philip?' I say stupidly. As though I've a whole array of editors to choose from.

'Yes.' She looks at me as though I'm a moron and gestures to a phone on a table at the back. Elly gives me a questioning look and I shrug back. Philip's never phoned me at a press conference before.

I feel rather excited and important as I walk to the back of the room. Perhaps there's an emergency at the office. Perhaps he's scooped an incredible story and wants me to fly to New York to follow up a lead.

'Hello, Philip?' I say into the receiver - then immediately I wish I'd said something thrusting and impressive, like a simple 'Yep'. 'Rebecca, listen, sorry to be a bore,' says Philip, 'but I've got a migraine coming on. I'm going to head off home.' 'Oh,' I say puzzled.

'And I wondered if you could run a small errand for me.' An errand? Who does he think I am? If he somebody to buy him paracetamol, he should get secretary.

'I'm not sure,' I say discouragingly. 'I'm a bit tied here.' 'When you've finished there. The Social Securi Select Committee are releasing their report at five o'clock. Can you go and pick it up? You cab to Westminster from your press conference.' What? I stare at the phone in horror. No I can't pick up a bloody report. I need to pick up my VISA card! I need to secure my scarf.

'Can't Clare go?' I say. 'I was going to come back to the office and finish my research on . . .' What am I supposed to be writing about this month? 'On mortgages.' 'Clare's got a briefing in the City. And Westminster's on your way home to trendy Fulham, isn't it?' Philip always has to make a joke about me living in Fulham. Just because he lives in Harpenden.

'You can just hop off the tube,' he's saying, 'pick it up and hop back on again.' Oh God. I can't think of any way to get out of this. I close my eyes and think quickly. An hour here. Rush back to the office, pick up my VISA card, back to Denny and George, get my scarf, rush to Westminster, pick up the report. I should just about make it.

'Fine,' I say. 'Leave it to me.' I sit back down, just as the lights dim and the words FAR EASTERN OPPORTUNITIES appear on the screen in front of us. There is a colourful series of pictures from Hong Kong, Thailand and other exotic places, which would usually have me thinking wistfully about going on holiday. But today I can't relax, or even laugh at the new girl from Portfolio Week, who's frantically trying to write everything down and will probably ask five questions because she thinks she should. I'm too concerned about my scarf. What if I don't make it back in time? What if someone puts in a higher offer? The very thought makes me panic. Is it possible to gazump a Denny and George scarf?

Then, just as the pictures of Thailand disappear and the boring graphs begin, I have a flash of inspiration.

Of course! I'll pay cash for the scarf. No-one can argue with cash. I can get £100 out on my cashpoint card, so all I need is another twenty, and the scarf is mine.

I tear a piece of paper out of my notebook, write on it 'Can you lend me twenty quid?' and pass it to Elly, who's still surreptitiously listening to her mobile phone. I wonder what she's listening to. It can't still be her horoscope, surely? She looks down, shakes her head, and writes, 'No can do. Bloody machine swallowed my card. Living off Luncheon Vouchers at moment.' Damn. I hesitate, then write, 'What about credit card? I'll pay you back, honest. And what are you listening to?' I pass the page to her and suddenly the lights go up.

The presentation has ended and I didn't hear a word of it. People shift around on their seats and a PR girl starts handing out glossy brochures. Elly finishes her call and grins at me.

'Love life prediction,' she says, tapping in another number. 'It's really accurate stuff.' 'Load of old bullshit, more like.' I shake my head disapprovingly. 'I can't believe you go for all that rubbish.

'Call yourself a financial journalist?' 'No,' says Elly. 'Do you?' And we both start to giggle, until some old bag from one of the nationals turns round and gives us an angry glare.

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'Ladies and gentlemen.' A piercing voice interrupts us and I look up. It's Alicia, standing up at the front of the room. She's got very good legs, I note resentfully. 'As you can see, the Foreland Exotic Opportunities Savings Plan represents an entirely new approach to investment.' She looks around the room, meets my eye and smiles coldly. (I always turn to the charges first. Just like I look at the price tag first.) Elly rolls her eyes sympathetically, still listening the phone.

'Foreland Investments are all about adding value,' Alicia is saying in her snooty voice. 'Foreland Investments offer you more.' 'They charge more, you lose more,' I say aloud without thinking, and there's a laugh around the room.' God, how embarrassing. And now Luke Brandon's staring at me, too. Quickly I look down and pretend to be writing notes.

Although to be honest, I don't know why I even pretend to write notes. It's not as if we ever put anything in the magazine except the puff that comes on the press release. Foreland Investments takes out a whopping double-page spread advertisement every month, and they took Philip on some fantastic research (ha ha) trip to Thailand last year - so we're never allowed to say anything except how wonderful they are. As Alicia carries on speaking, I lean towards Elly.

'So, listen,' I whisper 'Can I borrow your credit card?' 'All used up,' hisses Elly apologetically. 'I'm up to my limit. Why do you think I'm living off LVs?' 'But I need money!' I whisper. 'I'm desperate! I need twenty quid!' I've spoken more loudly than I intended and Alicia stops speaking. 'Perhaps you should have invested with Foreland Investments, Rebecca,' says Alicia, and another titter goes round the room. A few faces turn round to gawp at me, and I stare back at them lividly. They're fellow journalists, for God's sake. They should be on my side. NUJ solidarity and all that. Not that I've ever actually got round to joining the NUJ. But still.

'What do you need twenty quid for?' says Luke Brandon, from the front of the room.

'I... my aunt,' I say defiantly. 'She's n hospital and I wanted to get her a present.' The room is silent. Then, to my disbelief, Luke Brandon reaches into his pocket, takes out a £20 note, and gives it to a guy in the front row of journalists. He hesitates, then passes it back to the row behind. And so it goes on, a twenty-quid note being passed from hand to hand, making its way to me like a fan at a gig being passed over the crowd. As I take hold of it, a round of applause goes round the room and I blush.

'Thanks,' I mutter as he passes my chair, but I'm not sure he even hears me. Still, who cares? I've got the twenty quid and that's all that matters.

On the way back from Westminster, the tube stops in a tunnel for no apparent reason. Five minutes go by, then ten minutes. I can't believe my bad luck. Normally, course, I long for the tube to break down, so I've got an excuse to stay out of the office for longer. But today I behave like a stressed businessman with an ulcer. I tap my fingers and sigh, and peer out of the window into the blackness.

Part of my brain knows that I've got plenty of time to get to Denny and George before it closes. Another part knows that even if I don't make it, it's unlikely the blond girl will sell my scarf to someone else. But the possibility is there. So until I've got that scarf in my hands I won't be able to relax.

As the train finally gets going again I sink into my seat with a dramatic sigh and look at the pale, silent man on my left.

'Thank God!' I say. 'I was getting desperate there.' 'It's frustrating,' he agrees quietly.

'They just don't think, do they?' I say. 'I mean, some of us have got crucial things we need to be doing. I'm in a terrible hurry!' 'I'm in a bit of a hurry myself,' says the man intensely 'They don't realize that some of us...' He gestures towards me. 'We aren't just idly travelling It matters whether we arrive or not.' 'Absolutely!' I say. 'Where are you off

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to?' 'My wife's in labour,' he says. 'Our fourth.' 'Oh,' I say, taken aback 'Well Gosh. Congratulations. I hope you--' 'She took an hour and a half last time,' says the man, rubbing his damp forehead. 'And I've been on this tube for forty minutes already. Still. At least we're moving now.' He gives a little shrug, then smiles at me.

'How about you? What's your urgent business?' Oh God. 'I... ohm... I'm going to...’ I stop feebly and clear my throat, feeling myself blushing red. I can't tell this man that my urgent business consists of picking up a scarf from Denny and George. I mean, a scarf. It's not even a suit or a coat, or something worthy like that.

'It's not that important,' I hear myself mumbling.
'I don't believe that,' he says nicely.

Oh, now I feel awful. I glance up - and thank goodness, it's my stop.

'Good luck,' I say, hastily getting up. 'I really hope you get there in time.' As I walk along the pavement I'm feeling a bit shamefaced.

Maybe I should have got out my hundred and twenty quid and given it to that man for his baby, instead of buying a pointless scarf. I mean, when you think about it, what's more important? Clothes - or the miracle of new life?

As I ponder this issue, I feel quite deep and philosophical. In fact I'm so engrossed, I almost walk past my turning. But I look up just in time and turn the corner - and feel a jolt. There's a girl coming towards me and she's carrying a Denny and George carrier bag. And suddenly everything is swept from my mind.

Oh my God.
What if she's got my scarf?
What if she asked for it specially and that assistant sold it to her, thinking I wasn't going to come back?

My heart starts to beat in panic and I begin to stride along the street towards the shop. As I arrive at the door and push it open, I can barely breathe for fear.

What if it's gone? What will I do?

But the blond girl smiles as I enter. 'Hi!' she says. 'It's waiting for you.' 'Oh thanks,' I say in relief and subside weakly against the counter.

I honestly feel as though I've run an assault course to get here. In fact I think they should list shopping under cardiovascular activity. My heart never beats as fast as it does when I see a 'reduced by 50 per cent' sign.

I count out the money in tens and twenties and wait, almost shivering as she ducks behind the counter and produces the green box. She slides it into a thick glossy bag with dark green cord handles and hands it to me. I almost want to close my eyes, the feeling is so wonderful. That moment. That instant when your fingers curl round the handles of a shiny, uncreased bag - and all the gorgeous new things inside it become yours.

What's it like? It's like going hungry for days, then cramming your mouth full of warm buttered toast. It's like waking up and realizing it's the weekend. It's like the better moments of sex. Everything else is blocked out of your mind. It's pure, selfish pleasure.

I walk slowly out of the shop, still in a haze of delight. I've got a Denny and George scarf. I've got a Denny and George scarf! I've got 'Rebecca.' A man's voice interrupts my thoughts. I look up and my stomach gives a lurch of horror. It's Luke Brandon.

Luke Brandon is standing on the street, right in front of me, and he's staring down at my carrier bag. I feel myself growing flustered. What's he doing here on the pavement anyway? Don't people like that have chauffeurs? Shouldn't he be whisking off to some vital reception or something?

'Did you get it all right?' he says, frowning slightly.

'What?' 'Your aunt's present.' 'Oh yes,' I say, and swallow. 'Yes I... I got it.' 'Is that it?' He gestures to the bag and I feel my cheeks flame red.

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'What?' 'Your aunt's present.' 'Oh yes,' I say, and swallow. 'Yes I... I got it.' 'Is that it?' He gestures to the bag and I feel my cheeks flame red.

'Yes,' I say eventually. 'I thought a... a scarf would be nice.' 'Very generous of you. Denny and George.' He raises his eyebrows. 'Your aunt must be a stylish lady.'

'She is,' I say, and clear my throat. 'She's terribly creative and original.' 'I'm sure she is,' said Luke, and pauses. 'What's her name?' Oh God. I should have run as soon as I saw him, while I had a chance. Now I'm paralysed. I can't think of a single female name.

'Erm...Ermintrude,' I hear myself saying.

'Aunt Ermintrude,' said Luke thoughtfully. 'Well, give her my best wishes.' He nods at me, and walks off, and I stare after him, trying to work out if he guessed or not.

End of Chapter One and Two