



The
Secret
Shopper's
Revenge



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CHAPTER ONE

Emily

Once upon a time, there was a country bumpkin who dreamed of moving to London.

(That's me, in case you hadn't guessed.)

From the attic bedroom she shared with her very ugly sister in their parents' hay barn (21 Haybarn Close, Rowminster, Somerset) the young bumpkin imagined the city in every detail. A world away from the cowpats and cornfields (and the tacky annual carnival and the swearing, scrumpy-drinking teenagers).

In London, there would be Swarovski crystal Christmas lanterns lighting up the night sky. There would be black chariots to sweep her from one enchanted store to the next. There would be elegant shop assistants inviting her to try on their designer goods or taste their gourmet foods. By association, she would become elegant herself: shopping would transform her.

In time, the dream faded, as dreams do. The bumpkin settled down to real life with a charmer called Duncan Prince, a job in the bank, and a little pink line which appeared on a magic wand she weed on first thing one cider-crisp autumn morning. London was further away than ever.

Then one day, the fairy godmother recruitment consultant called up charming Mr Prince and offered him the job of his life-assurance fantasies.

In London.

And so – as if by magic – here I am.

Garnett's Department Store ('The Greatest Goods on Earth Brought to the Greatest Store on Earth') is the most gorgeous shop in the world. Back in April as we packed our belongings into orange crates for the big move, I imagined shopping here for our first Christmas. I'd order a black chariot . . . well, a cab, to take me to Oxford Street. I'd stock up on last-minute treats for a festive extravaganza chez me and Duncan, in our extensively refurbished Victorian cottage in West London. My shopping list would be as lavish as Nigella's: light-as-air panettone with chocolate chestnut filling, spicy German tree-shaped biscuits with silver balls in place of fairy lights, orchard fruit mince pies with all-butter shortbread pastry, a tub of pine-nut-and-clementine stuffing for our pre-ordered organic turkey, and the essential watermelon-sized truckle of red-waxed Cheddar cheese to remind me of home.

My Burberry-lined willow shopping basket (as modelled by Kate Moss) would be tucked under my arm, crammed with more goodies: a vintage lace angel to grace our twelve-foot spruce, a periwinkle-blue cashmere cardigan and an organic fleecy rabbit for our new baby, a perfect white shirt and miniature Vespa cufflinks for Duncan. Assistants dressed in Garnett's crimson uniform would giftwrap each item so you could barely see the paper for bows.

At home, Duncan would be busy preparing a supper party for our new neighbours: city lawyers on one side, a theatrical agent and an award-winning documentary maker on the other. Canapés courtesy of Tesco (with the packaging hidden in the compost bin, so you might be fooled into thinking they're from Harrods). Wine from our new-found supplier (instead of that evil scrumpy from Duncan's dad's off-licence). Ripe French cheeses, rich as clotted cream, with charcoal

crackers that stain your tongue black. On the CD player, an up-and-coming girl singer would be in mid-lament. Our real fire sizzles with sustainable smoke-free wood, topped with orange peel for festive aromas. Our baby stirs, watching Daddy with gurgling alertness, while in town, Mummy eyes up silk pyjamas that skim her Pilates-toned-virtually-untouched-by-childbirth body. She hesitates, trying to choose between the lavender and the aqua silk, before putting both in her basket, with gloriously guilty pleasure. A treat to herself for putting in place the ingredients for the *perfect* family celebration.

‘Oi. Is the kid yours?’

‘Eh?’ I am in Garnett’s, sure enough. But something’s changed. I look at the purple face of the woman standing next to me, and follow her gaze to the child in the pushchair.

Freddie. Freddie! *Shit*. ‘Yes, yes, sorry, that’s my son. Is everything OK?’ Though even as I speak I know it’s not OK. Not even remotely OK.

I feel a sharp elbow in my back as a frazzled businessman forces his way through, tugging half a dozen glossy Garnett’s bags behind him. The purple-faced woman holds up a distinctly non-organic, not-fleecy-for-a-very-long-time rabbit in a deathly shade of grey. ‘He dropped this.’

I take it from her, and wedge it into the nest of carrier bags in the Fredster’s pushchair. *Pull yourself together, Emily*. You’re turning into that pop-art poster – I LEFT THE BABY ON THE BUS.

As if sensing my appalling amnesia – it can only have lasted a millisecond, surely? – Freddie begins to bawl his adorable head off. The store PA system plays *In the Bleak Midwinter* and it’s all I can do not to bawl along with my son.

Garnett’s is pretty overwhelming for a thirty-year-old, so it must be terrifying for a six-month-old. The singing snowmen are aggressively camp, and the in-store Santa is being played

by last year's X-Factor winner (and I thought it was just policemen who were getting younger).

This *is* the Christmas I'd dreamed about. I *am* stocking up on last-minute items for our first Christmas in our unconverted upper-floor maisonette in the arse end of Shepherd's Bush, a place we bought because the estate agents randomly added 'village' to the name of the main street and we thought Lime Village sounded lovely. Which presumably makes us the Lime Village Idiots.

In my plastic folding plaid holdall (as modelled by sheikhs' wives trying to buy up the entire contents of the Marble Arch branch of M&S), I have a *mini*-panettone, the German tree biscuits, and a Cheddar truckle the size of a Granny Smith. But no stuffing: my Turkey Breast for One comes pre-stuffed.

The newly purchased angel – a little large for our four-foot plastic tree – already looks the worse for wear. Freddie somehow got hold of her and gave her a damned good chew. Her lacy wings are now earthbound with carrot and spittle.

Last Christmas, just after the appearance of the little pink line, everything was blissful. 'Next year,' Duncan kept saying as he patted my still-flat stomach, 'next year we'll give Junior the best Christmas a kid can have. We'll pull out all the stops, Em.'

Duncan is, no doubt, pulling out all the stops at this very minute. Lighting candles, or preparing a supper party for the new neighbours.

Except his new neighbours are Swiss, because his new neighbourhood is Geneva. The gluhwein will be flowing and the Gruyère cheese will be bubbling away in the fondue pan. And new lover Heidi, who also happens to be his boss and 'intellectual equal', has probably let down her flaxen plaits in recognition of the holiday season. I've no proof that she plaits

her hair, or that it's flaxen, but it's little things like that that get me up in the morning.

And I am holding up the size 14 silk pyjamas – which represent a third of this month's mortgage payment – trying to second-guess whether they have a hope of circumnavigating my thighs. And I'm wondering why I let myself be side-tracked from the Food Hall into this stupid Cinderella-themed Gift Grotto for Adults ('. . . *because it's not only the little ones who deserve the greatest gifts from the Greatest Store on Earth*').

Garnett's is, admittedly, the Greatest Store on Earth blah blah blah. It's just that, right now, that world-famous magic seems as hollow as a hand-blown tree bauble.

'Can I help you?'

I doubt it very much. The shop assistant is doll-sized and her skin is dewy and I'd spend the rest of this month's mortgage payment on whatever wonder serum she's been using if I thought it would change things. But her smile is forced, the upper half of her face paralysed by indifference. Or possibly Botox. 'Um . . . I'm browsing.'

She looks around her and raises one fine-tuned eyebrow (so it can't be Botox – her forehead is simply unravaged by life. I remember how that felt). No one in their right mind would browse in the week before Christmas. Then she resurrects her smile: after all, even if I am certifiable, I might still have a credit card.

'Aren't they beautiful?'

It's a killer question. No woman could honestly deny it. *Everything* about these jim-jams smacks of understated elegance. A woman wearing these will sneak down to steal the Sainsbury's *Taste the Difference* Amontillado sherry left for Father Christmas and his reindeers. She'll place stockings on the bedposts of her softly snoring children before donning

stockings of her own for a bout of athletic, silk-pyjama-induced sex with her six-packed husband.

‘And,’ the assistant whispers, ‘Selfridges are charging forty pounds more for exactly the same design.’

‘Well . . .’ I don’t need them. I have pyjamas. Not silk ones, but who is going to know the ruddy difference? There’s no one at home to stroke them, or tease them off.

‘Like it says on the sign,’ she says, pointing, ‘we grown-ups deserve the greatest gifts too. And we can never rely on the men in our lives to get it right, can we?’ She laughs, and her boobs wobble above the top button of her crimson waistcoat. Her badge tells me her name is Marsha: I bet Marsha and her breasts receive an endless array of perfect presents from small armies of Unwise Men.

‘The thing is . . .’ but my voice is quieter now and she sees weakness.

‘You look like you deserve a treat. Not to mention a sit down. Why don’t you try them on? The changing rooms are right here, and we’re laying on complimentary hot white chocolate. There’s room for the little one, too,’ she says, with a final faked smile in the Fredster’s direction. He seems dazzled by her. Maybe it’s her boobs.

Like father, like son.

But the hot chocolate clinches it: a tiny vestige of that fantasy London I’d pictured as we set off up the M4 in the removal van, hope in our hearts, bugger all in our joint account. OK, so I’d imagined sipping the hot chocolate after a bracing skate on the rink at Kew Gardens, me in pink-and-white fake fur like a chic marshmallow, Duncan dashing in soft greys, pulling our baby round in circles in a silver child-sized sleigh from Daisy and Tom.

I follow her into the themed changing rooms, a Garnett’s speciality. This one is like Cinderella’s carriage, with liveried

mice stencilled round the edges, spiced pumpkin candles in storm lamps, and a purple velvet banquette. Freddie peers up from his pushchair, suspicious of all the girliness.

I begin to undress, avoiding my reflection in the curlicued mirror. As I pull my sweater off, I realise how musty it smells. The flat has always been damp anyway and since the dryer gave up tumbling, nothing ever quite dries out.

I leave my bra and pants on rather than risk a glimpse of my boobs or bottom. My English rose complexion has turned porridge grey, and no part of my body is unaffected by carrying Freddie for nine months. If I were a true high-maintenance West End girl, I'd have a weekly salon appointment to be detoxified and airbrushed Fake-Bake brown. But given that I can't even manage to dry my jumpers, I am a lost cause.

The lavender silk feels like the cool touch of soft hands as I pull the pyjama pants up my legs. I draw the tie-waist tight, then put on the top half: the tiny buttons are edged in silver, with opaque blue-grey glass in the centre the exact shade of Freddie's eyes. I begin at the bottom, and with each button, become more convinced that I *must* have this pyjama set, that somehow everything else will fall into place when I take it home: the dryer will tumble again, Freddie will have a perfect first Christmas, and Duncan will ditch horrible Heidi and fly home on the Santa Express to the bosom of his family.

But when I reach my bust, I realise it's hopeless. The button won't do up, the tumble dryer's fatally injured, and there's no reason on earth that Duncan would return to this particular bosom, when he can enjoy perfect Swiss peaks.

Freddie senses the change in my mood and begins to grizzle. Why did I let myself be seduced by a stupid shop and a stupid idea that a pair of pyjamas will make me feel better?

I hear the machine-gun rattle of approaching high heels,

and Marsha pokes her head round the purple flock curtain. 'Oh that colour is so *you*,' she says, averting her eyes from my gaping cleavage.

'The top's too small,' I say. Freddie stares at Marsha and the grizzling turns to a howl.

'Hmmm . . .' She hands over the hot chocolate, in a polar bear mug. 'These are great stocking fillers, by the way. Nineteen ninety-nine for this one and a matching penguin. I can get you size sixteen pyjamas if you like. Though when you're not wearing a bra it'll probably be less of a problem.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well,' she says, giving me a 'you asked for it' frown, 'frankly, most women who've had children will experience a little droop in the cleavage area, sans support. So your boobs will hang down . . . er, be more evenly distributed and *voila*, the top won't gape.'

'Thanks a bunch.' Freddie's cries are now of the outraged variety, daring to express what I can't. 'You know, I'm not sure about them. And they are expensive for what they are. Even if they are cheaper than Selfridges.'

'Oh, if that's what's worrying you,' she says, her face steely, 'and of course, we all find things tight at Christmas, the Garnett's Red Carpet Card gets you a fifteen per cent discount. And nothing to pay till February. I'll get you a form.'

'I really don't think—'

Freddie lets out a howl of sympathetic anguish.

'Do you think you can quieten him down?' Marsha asks. 'It sounds like he's being thrashed.' And she sounds like she'd love to do the thrashing herself.

I sigh and wish her five years of sleepless nights when she produces heirs for some wealthy banker. I reach over and undo the buggy straps to release Freddie. He continues to howl as I hold him tight, trying to stop him shaking with rage.

‘Ordinarily he’s a very even-tempered child,’ I find myself saying, though her sceptical expression makes me wish I hadn’t bothered. And, to be fair, six months ago the same sound would have turned my stomach too.

Finally, the shaking stops and I hold my son’s raging purple face up to mine. ‘There’s a good Freddie, there’s a good boy—’

He opens his mouth for what I hope will be his final howl . . . but there’s something ominous in his eyes as the remainder of his lunch is propelled from inside that tummy with the force of a mashed carrot tornado.

Why was I so keen to experiment with solids?

Within microseconds, Freddie’s face returns to placid loveliness. I hesitate before daring to look down at the pyjama top.

‘Ah.’ The orangey stain stretches from the collar to the hem, and has even splattered the waist-ties and tops of my legs.

Stupid, *stupid* Emily for trying the bloody things on, stupid for believing they could make any difference, stupid, *stupid* for marrying Duncan and getting pregnant and coming to London and thinking a life of silk pyjamas and ice-skating could ever be in my grasp.

I remember I’m not alone, and look up. In the tiny moment before Marsha rearranges her face into *can I help you* blandness, I see disgust, and then satisfaction.

‘So,’ she says finally, ‘how exactly would you like to pay?’

It all goes rather quickly after that. I just know that the price of the pyjamas will be the straw that breaks the back of my Mastercard, so I agree to apply for a Garnett’s card, without realising that the form will add insult to injury: are you

married? Technically. Number of adults in the household: one. Monthly income: as much as Duncan decides to send over from sodding Switzerland. Estimated monthly outgoings: *always* more than my monthly income.

It's no great surprise when Marsha comes back looking sour and announces that the card company has turned me down. When I explain I've no other means of paying, her manager appears, a tall black woman who looks younger than me, but wears the stern expression of a tough-but-fair headmistress. She introduces herself as Sandie Barrow, Section Head, and asks me how much cash I have on me.

I take out my purse and count notes and coins out onto the banquette in little piles, like a child playing shop with chocolate money. My humiliation is now complete: the gap between my fantasy Christmas and the reality couldn't be wider.

'I need that for the bus home,' I explain, setting aside two pounds.

Marsha tuts. 'Only a fool pays cash. Haven't you heard of Oyster cards?'

'Thank you, Marsha,' Sandie says sharply. 'I'm sure you're needed back on the shop floor. I can handle this.'

Marsha flounces off, and Sandie watches as I continue to count. I used to pity women like me, the ones in the supermarket queue who had to hand back tins and packets till the total fell within budget. Except I can hardly ask Garnett's to sell me a sleeve, which is all my cash would buy me.

Sandie sits down on the banquette. Close up, she looks less stern: she'd actually be rather beautiful if she smiled and let her hair grow out of that severe crop. She's used so much spray that her hair looks ever so slightly like a helmet and her deep-brown eyes are bloodshot with tiredness. But she seems a

hundred times more human than Marsha. ‘Not been your day, then?’ she says.

‘Not been my year. I didn’t *want* the bloody pyjamas. I mean, they’re lovely, but I can’t afford them and I knew that so I don’t know why I tried them on when there’s so much else I should be spending what little money—’ I stop. The shame of describing my sorry domestic state is too much to bear: I wonder if there’s an equivalent of restaurant dish-washing for customers who can’t pay the bill? Clearing out the stockroom, maybe, or sweeping the floor.

But even though she doesn’t know the full sob story, Sandie Barrow looks at me as if she understands. Her face is softer, and I get this utterly irrational feeling that things are going to be OK. ‘We can’t sell these now anyway. Don’t worry about it; I’ll mark them down as shop-soiled.’

‘But—’

‘My grandma always swears by bicarbonate of soda. Tub costs under a quid from the supermarket. They’ll be as good as new. If any of Garnett’s thousands of customers today deserves a bit of a treat, I reckon it’s probably you.’ Her slight Brummie accent suddenly sounds like the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.

She leaves the cubicle and waits while I get changed. When I emerge, she gives me another mug of hot chocolate and takes the pyjamas away and returns a few minutes later with them wrapped in tissue paper. ‘I got rid of the worst of the debris,’ she says.

It’s only when I get home to Lime Village and open the crimson Garnett’s carrier bag that I realise she’s added a pair of lavender slippers. On a note, she’s written: ‘These have a slight pull in the silk, so we were going to return them to the

manufacturer, but I thought you might like a matching set. Merry Christmas from all at Garnett's.'

I haven't believed in Father Christmas for years, but as I poke my cold toes into the softest slippers I've ever owned, like Cinders trying on her glass slipper, I let myself believe that angels might exist.