

Extract from “A Minor Indiscretion”

Chapter 1

I, Alicia Isabelle Kingston, am miserable. Absolutely miserable. Not just normal Monday morning miserable, but bone-deep, mind-numbing, fistcurling, toe-twitching miserable. The sort of miserable that makes you scowl at your perfectly well-behaved children and snarl at your husband when, for once, he really doesn't deserve snarling at. And the worst thing is, I have no idea why. Really, I don't.

Admittedly, my coffee is stone cold, but that isn't reason enough to be in this state of suppressed aggression blended perfectly with utter desolation. I'm sitting outside the appropriately named Covent Garden Cafe in Covent Garden's main piazza -if you can use the word piazza in London and not appear too poncey. It's supposed to be spring yet I'm frozen. I've tried pulling up the collar of my coat and nestling down on this very trendy, but rock-hard aluminium chair, and now its slats are digging even more deeply into my bottom. The sky is the startling blue of Paul Newman's eyes and the brash yellow sun, brazen as a bottle-blonde, lacks any form of warmth. I glare menacingly at some passers-by so that they are aware of my discomfort, but they ignore me and this feeling just doesn't go away. Do you ever wake up feeling like this? I do. More and more often.

Marie Clare tells me it's my age. My children tell me it's my age. My husband tells me it's my age. My sister tells me it's because I'm a moody cow and always have been, but then she can talk!

I stir my coffee and spoon up some cappuccino froth which, let's face it, tastes OK whether it's cold or not. By now, I'm getting rigor mortis of the buttocks and I cross my legs over and wriggle about a bit in the vain hope of finding a portion of my cheek that isn't yet dead.

'Don't move,' a voice instructs me.

I turn and say 'What?' in my snappiest voice. A boy is sitting there with his easel, his young untroubled forehead creased with the intensity of sketching me.

'I'm drawing you.'

'I don't want to be drawn.' Told you I was grumpy.

'I've nearly finished.' 'I'm not paying you.'

'I don't want to be paid.'

'Then why are you doing it?'

He looks up and smiles, and for a moment, shows the lacklustre sun what it should be doing. 'You have beautiful hair.'

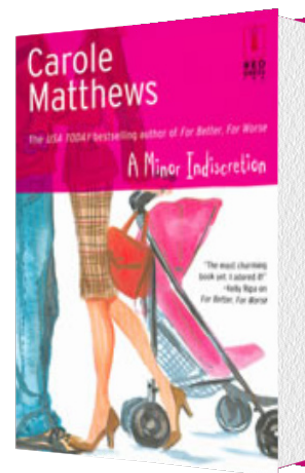
'I do not have beautiful hair.' For the record, I have hair that would be considered flamboyant on a film star. The sort of hair that Nicole Kidman can get away with, no problem. To me it's just plain irritating. Hair that gave me a nightmare time all through school. It's red to the point of a ginger nut biscuit and corkscrews into dreadlocks the minute it hears the word 'damp'. I was the person who wept with relief when John Frieda invented Frizz-Ease.

'Swish it about a bit.' 'I will not.'

He grins, very cheekily, and whizzes his charcoal around like a true professional. I turn away from him and stare out into the piazza in the hope that he will go away and find a less reluctant model.

I'm supposed to be at work. Work being an assistant to a C List interior designer with a 'studio' just around the corner from here next to a Mexican-themed bar in Maiden Lane. She's the sort who pops up on Changing Rooms or Richard and Judy for guest appearances every now and again when they're desperate and can't get Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen or that other posh chap who paints everything beige. But she isn't sufficiently into monochrome or orange or brushed steel tubing to make the grade regularly, harbouring as she does an unhealthy appreciation for chintz, which isn't at all the thing for a hip, up and coming designer. And she looks sort of normal and has a boring name, which she can't help, even though I can testify that she's as mad as a March hare and organisation is not a word in her vocabulary. She's as daffy and arty as they come even though she looks like someone who's running a bit late for her Women's Institute meeting.

It's only eleven thirty, but I was starting to bark and niggle at perfectly nice customers who wanted nothing more sinister than their living rooms making over or their kitchens kitsched, so I thought it was time to take an early lunch, even though I'm not the slightest bit hungry.



I've been sitting here for ten minutes and now I'm not only miserable, but I'm getting bored too. Before the intrusion by Andy Warhol here, my thoughts were wandering on to the barren plains of what we might have for supper tonight and the fact that no matter how many times they eat them, my children never get tired of chicken nuggets and oven chips. I have tried to bring them up not to be philistines, but hey, I'm a funky millennium working mother and time is short. Time is short for everything.

Covent Garden isn't what it used to be. There's hardly anyone here this morning and usually the place is packed with tourists and buskers and pickpockets. This was once the old flower-market -until the developers got hold of it and zazzed it up, but I expect you all know that. You can't imagine it now, can you? There's not a flower in sight. Everything looks grey and dirty, or maybe I'm back to that mood thing again. Too many sweet wrappers drift across the cobbles on the slight breeze, making the whole place look like no one cares for it. Perhaps that's why I'm feeling like this. Perhaps I feel no one cares for me either.

One of the street performers in front of the graffiti-covered facade of St Paul's Church is strutting his stuff. He has a thin, ragged audience that looks to be comprised of truanting children who are heckling him and bemused Swedish tourists. He is juggling, very badly, and his shirt is grubby and looks terminally unwashed and I can understand why his audience are keeping their distance. I used to love the spontaneity and creativity of the street entertainers. Oh, the courage of just standing up before a crowd and laying your soul bare for the meagre reward of gaining their pleasure and a few grudgingly spared pounds! Then I found out that all the performers have to book and pay for their pitches in advance and turn up come hail, rain or shine to entertain the tourists whether the tourists want to be entertained or not. They're not fickle, will o' the wisp artistes, here today, gone tomorrow carefree performers. They have day jobs like the rest of us after all. Disillusionment, thou art a cruel bedfellow.

'I'm done.'

I look up and my artist smiles at me again. And I smile back because it's really hard not to when someone turns the full force of their white twinkly teeth on you, isn't it?

He sidesteps the scraggly bushes and plastic chain-effect fence that ineffectively mark out the territory of the Covent Garden Cafe and comes towards me. His own hair isn't too bad. It's dark blond, mussed up and looks like it too is tempted to take on a life of its own. He has gone down the spiky hair-gel route to tame it, although bits of it still fall forward in an artily foppish way and he pushes it back with his fingers, which seems particularly unwise as they are very dirty.

'Here.' He holds out the drawing. 'I'm not paying for it.' I have reverted to grumpiness and refuse to succumb to any cheeky barrow-boy charm.

'If you like it, you can buy me a cup of coffee,' he says. 'If I don't like it?'

'Then I'll buy one for you.'

I take the drawing and, believe me, it's all I can do not to gasp. It is utterly fantastic. It looks absolutely nothing like me. It is a drawing of some fabulously gorgeous person with a wild flowing mane and searing eyes. Although the nose is a bit like mine. ..Really. And the sulky lip is very me at the moment.

'Do you like it?' 'Who is it?'

He smirks. 'That's how I see you.'

'It looks nothing like me.'

'Then I'm buying.' And before I can protest he's called the waiter- a miracle in itself- and orders two more cappuccinos. He pulls up a chair and plonks himself down and I have to tear my eyes away from this wondrous drawing that could look vaguely like me on a good day. A very good day. 'As well as beautiful hair, you have sensational bone-structure. Classic.'

Any minute now he is going to whip out a bill for fifty quid and I'll have been stung. I just know it. The waiter brings the coffee and he settles back in the chair, looking an awful lot more comfortable than I do. And I don't know why, but I start to examine his bone structure -like I know anything about it! His cheeks are high, sharp, his jaw square and he has soft pale lips that pout like they've been stung by a bee. He has youthful, fresh skin with hardly a trace of stubble and eyes that are the colour of nuts, whole hazelnuts. You see, I've gone silly already. I don't usually carry out this sort of analysis on the faces of strange young men I meet. This is definitely a first for me.

'I'm Christian,' he says, making me blush as I become aware that I am staring at him with my mouth pleasantly agog. 'Christian Winter.' He has a posh, upper-class accent that he probably peppers with swear words and the hip slang of youth to make him seem less educated. Why do the young do that?

'Alicia,' I say. Even though no one calls me Alicia except when they're telling me off. 'Ali. Ali Kingston.'

‘Well, Alicia, Ali Kingston,’ Christian says. ‘It’s been a pleasure to draw you.’

And now I’ve gone all shy and pathetic, which is ridiculous because I’m about a zillion years older than he is and should know better. ‘Do you do this for a living?’ I ask, sounding like he shouldn’t.

‘I wouldn’t call it a living. I’ve just finished college. Fine art degree. I’m doing this for the summer, until I see what else comes along.’

‘You’re very good.’

Christian laughs.

‘No, really. You are. You just caught me on a bad day. I got out of the wrong side of the bed this morning or something.’

‘Perhaps you got out of the wrong person’s bed?’

‘I’m married. I get out of the same bed every day.’ I wonder why I’m embarrassed by how that sounds to this confident, good-looking young stranger.

‘Married?’

‘Very.’

‘Children?’

‘Three.’

‘Wow. You don’t look. ..’

‘Haggard enough?’

‘Old enough.’ And you don’t look old enough to be flirting with me. I smile to myself and then realise I didn’t do the ‘to myself’ bit and he smiles back.

I scabble round for my handbag for something to do. ‘I have to be going. I only popped out of work for a coffee to see if I could shift my mood.’

‘Did I help?’ His eyes appeal to me like a puppy desperate to be loved. I laugh and suddenly my heart wants to bleed or stop and I’m in severe danger of dropping my handbag and spilling its contents onto the cobblestones. ‘Yes, you did.’ And his puppy dog eyes glint with wolfish mischief. I glance at my watch to break his gaze which has gone on for far too long.

‘I really must go.’

‘Where do you work?’

‘In a design studio around the corner.’ I’m not about to tell him that I answer the phone and hold the tape measure when required. I realise I am making a fuss about leaving and stop.

‘Don’t forget this,’ Christian says and holds out the drawing.

I take it and regret that our fingertips don’t touch, even though his need to be scrubbed with a Brillo pad. I walk off across the ever-widening expanse of the piazza, trying to keep straight, yet sexy and not fall over any of the rubbish that is lying around. I don’t look back so I don’t even know if he can see what an effort I’ve made in walking away from him. ‘Don’t forget this’. What a laugh. By the time I’ve bashed out three lots of chicken nuggets and chips tonight and two frozen lasagnes with two tepid glasses of Chianti as a softener, I’ll have even forgotten his name.