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opening extract from

Style Sisters Friends First

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Liz Elwes

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Chapter 1

Friday 9.00 a.m.

Fact. I must have the softest hands in the country.

You need time and dedication to get them in this condition and I have now been in my room for days and days. The hours don't exactly fly by when you are lying on your bed, staring at the ceiling.

Depressed.

It was my keen survival instinct that made my trailing arm start patting tentatively under the bed. This produced a half-eaten packet of biscuits, so I ventured further with some exploratory sweeps of my arm and found an old magazine which had some excellent beauty tips in it – apparently sleeping with moisturised hands in gloves leads to velvety softness.

My Vaselined hands have barely been out of my woolly black school gloves since. Sadly the biscuits are finished. Quite a lot of crumbs have sort of woven themselves into the glove fibres over time but, overall, I would say it's been worth it. I could now, honestly, be a hand model. I can do all the moves. I could do diamond Tiffany bracelets. Or branch out and be a weather girl; I've got the required pointing skills and it would be easy for them to stick false nails on the bitten ones.

The other thing I found under the bed (and I don't want to brag but it was quite a haul) was this diary. This one that I am actually writing in now. My brother, Ned, gave it to me last Christmas. It is a blue and sparkly 'My Little Mermaid' Diary. I

would almost have been touched by this present if I wasn't over six years old and if it hadn't been for the year before. And to think *he* complained about *my* present to him. How could lip balm *ever* be an unwelcome gift?

In spite of the dates not fitting the days of the week and it now being the end of March, I am going to start it anyway. I want to record my slow and painful road to recovery after Danny's sudden and devastating departure. It will all be very useful in our English lessons when we get going on the classics and dealing with Big Novelists. I will see how their made-up stuff shapes up against my own raw emotion. I can call upon what I write now in future essays and Mrs McGuy will say: 'Carrie Henderson, it is astounding how one so young can write about love with such maturity, clarity and simplicity. These other writers were practically dead before they knew enough to express these emotions!'

I will bow my head and bravely bite my lip as she cannot possibly understand what it was like when the first boy I ever kissed and my first *real* boyfriend (as in being allowed to tell people you're going out together and sitting next to each other on the bus) has had to leave my school and my life forever.

I won't write any more because I will start to cry again, though it's hard to tell if it's grief or hunger. After I said goodbye to Danny, Mum brought me up lots of cups of tea and toast and even a bowl of soup and a chicken sandwich on the first night. Heady days. I should have known she couldn't keep it up. It's not in her nature to be consistently kind for long periods. By the end of day two it was: 'Are you coming down, Carrie? It's shepherd's pie,' and wafting the mouth-watering smell up the stairs with a tea towel to torture me. I resisted. A broken heart cannot be

mended by mere food. And now it's breakfast time and she's doing it again with the toast. It's obvious she's trying to starve me out.

I think it's something to do with her being a teacher; they can't sustain nurturing skills over an extended period. It gets trained out of them. (Miss Gooding practically cried when she first came to the school and I told her that a cat had given birth to two adorable fluffy kittens on my homework and I couldn't very well disturb her. Those were the days – now she'd laugh in my face or, I am sad to say, even use strong language.)

Mum's sure to be arrested when my skeleton is found in a corner of my room, though. I'm not sure how Dad, Max and Ned will cope with the prison visits. It's only a matter of time before she'll be rolling ciggies one-handed and yelling 'Got any snout?' across the visiting room to large tattooed women called Deirdre.

Right. To spare them all this fate, I am off to the kitchen now. If I am not greeted with joyous cries from my younger brother and a bit of sobbing into the old apron from Mum I will be offended.

Friday 9.45 a.m.

I am offended.

I do not wish to commit to paper the hurtful scene that has just occurred but I feel my therapist might find an accurate recording of events useful.

I do not actually have a therapist at the moment but I feel it's only a matter of time.

After washing my hair three times (which, by the way, ruined in ten minutes the melting softness of my hands and thus a future thriving career), I pulled on clean jeans and a T-shirt and descended to the bosom of my family. Well, half of it. Dad was at

work and Max is on his gap year in South America.

I leaned against the door in a soulful way and breathed, 'Hi', trying not to make a dash for Ned's toast and cram it in my mouth. He must have sensed something because he drew his plate, and the dirty trainer on the table next to it, towards him. Disgusting.

'Carrie!' Mum was beaming at me. 'You do look lovely, *and* more cheerful.'

I looked at her and wished I could say the same about her. Not the cheerful bit, because she is, but she isn't exactly the last word in style. She was wearing an ancient T-shirt with a crumbly rock band logo on the front and comfy tracky-bums stretched over a not tiny bum. This look was finished off with dazzling white trainers. Truly, truly horrible. I won't say what she wears for school. Too much information. OK, a bit more – sometimes she cuts her own hair. It is very thick and frizzy. Enough said.

I was just sitting down and thinking that I should count myself lucky if my only criticism of my mum was her clothes sense, despite the starvation thing, when the next thing she says, apart from 'Do you want toast and tea, etc, etc.' is: 'I'm so glad to see that you've stopped moping around your room.'

Moping! What kind of word is that to describe my inner tragedy? *Three* days (nearly) I'd been in that room. I drooped over the kitchen table and tried to shovel the toast Mum had just handed me into my mouth in a depressed yet speedy way.

And then Ned said, 'You weren't that keen on Danny before you knew he was going away. You said that you thought he could be a bit boring.'

Don't younger brothers have such irritating squeaky voices?

'I never, *ever* said that!'

'You did.'

'Did not.'

'Did.'

'Did not.'

Etc, etc. Combine the voice thing with their uncanny ability to remember every single thing you have ever said, *even if you didn't mean it*, and it's really a wonder any of them ever make it to adulthood.

He opened his mouth again, but I raised my hand.

'Please don't try and talk to me about relationships, Ned. You are twelve. You love your skateboard and want me to be bridesmaid when you marry it.'

'Ooooh, I'm cracking up, Carrie. You should be in showbiz, you really should.'

I sighed.

It was obvious I was still way too emotionally vulnerable for all this. I had left my room too soon to cope with the outside world. Mum handed me some more toast.

'What's happened to Rani and Chloe?' she asked. 'It seems like ages since they came round. Why don't you give them a ring, Carrie?'

With quiet dignity I took the plate from her hand and left the room.

My therapist will be wringing her hands in sorrow at my insensitive treatment when she gets to that bit. (I've decided it's going to have to be a woman because a man might fall in love with the

fascinating yet fragile personality which I will have developed by then. And I don't need added complications.) She will wonder what kind of extraordinary girl has the strength of personality to overcome that sort of childhood. In fact, she'll be begging to see me and I won't have to pay.

I have finished my toast. I am still hungry.

Now that I've been downstairs, the four walls of my room have lost their charm. Even the pink tree I painted on my wall with the tiny, stencilled gold leaves has lost its allure. On the branches I've nailed tiny tacks that I hang all my jewellery, belts and bits of ribbon, etc. on. I have rearranged this twice. Perhaps I do need to get out.

And Mum's last comment has hit home.

Before Danny's family moved (curse the promotional ladder in Pharmaceutical Sales) we had made the most of his final days by seeing each other whenever we could. I realise now that I hadn't seen anyone else. Not even Rani and Chloe, my best friends in the whole world. Danny had made it clear that he just didn't want them coming along when we went out and when he left I took to my room. Thinking about this is making my cheeks burn. I've just looked in the mirror so I know. Long blondy hair, blue eyes, unremarkable nose, burning cheeks. No wonder they'd stopped phoning. I have to face the painful truth: I have not been a good friend. In fact, I have been a pathetic, self-centred apology for a friend.

This is not a comfortable thought. What if I no longer have any friends? Rani and Chloe are the most loyal people in the world so you would not want to be the person who had failed them in the true and honourable friend department. Take it from

me – we have HIGH STANDARDS as far as being friends go. High standards I suspect I have fallen well below.

I am overcome with shame.

I will make amends.

I will phone now.

Friday 10.25 a.m.

That's over.

I phoned Rani first.

'Hello?'

'Hi, Rani, it's me.'

'Who?'

'Me.'

'I'm trying to recognise your voice. Hold on . . . don't tell me . . . I've got a dim recollection. Did I know you in a past life?'

'It's me, the crappiest friend in crap-friends' town.'

'Ah-ha. Now that clears it up.'

'Rani, I am sooo sorry. I don't know what to say . . .'

'How about this: My once sharp brain has been taken over by mysterious boy power, which has robbed me of my senses. It has caused me to think like this: "Yes, lovely Danny, who I have known for three-and-a-half seconds, you are the most important thing in my life. You do not like Rani and Chloe, my dearest friends, who I have known since Miss Brown's Reception Class, therefore I will spurn them for your love . . ."'

'Ouch, ouch, OK . . . OK . . .'

'I haven't finished yet.'

'Oh God. Go on then.'

'"But now Danny, Boy Wonder, has gone to live in Birmingham

and I want my friends back because I am lonely and sad and I want to have a laugh again . . .'"

'Ooooh.'

'"Which is more than I ever did with Danny."'

'Double oooh.'

'OK, I've finished now. Where shall we meet?'

'Seriously, Rani? Do you mean it? That would be so, so, brilliant. I know I've been an idiot, but I swear, swear, swear, I will never be such a prat again. You know that I now realise that losing my friends would be the worst nightmare that could ever befall me.'

'Really? You always said doing a big poo in someone else's house and not being able to flush it down the loo was the worst thing that could ever befall you.'

'Yes, well, let's face it, that would be hell as well. And thank you for reminding me about that. God, it does seems like forever since I last saw you.'

'Well. Let me see, you went out with Danny for four weeks altogether. The last time I saw you was the last day of term, then the Easter holidays began. That was two weeks ago. Then Danny left and you've been in mourning for him ever . . . since now mmm . . . let me see . . . that would be for two and a bit days.'

'It's enough isn't it?'

'I think so.'

Huzzah! So now I'm meeting her in Barnaby's department store in town later. Rani says they are launching a new eyeshadow range in the beauty department. Her mum's a make-up artist and hears about these things. I also need a new PE kit as my old gym skirt is falling apart and my frontage has increased. Double Huzzah!

I have now done all these things since I phoned Rani:

1) *Phoned Chloe. She was her usual calm and mature self. I honestly think she is incapable of a single mean word. You know in fairy tales when they say about princesses, 'She was as kind as she was beautiful'? Well, that's Chloe.*

   She is looking after her brother, Jim, today. He's seven and has got Down's syndrome. He's very sweet and funny and I'm not just saying that because he's always irresistibly pleased to see me. Rani and I will see her tomorrow.

2) *Tidied my room. I was like Mary Poppins with a little tweety bird on my finger. Personally, I always find scooping all clothes off the floor and chair and plonking them in the laundry basket a very effective start to any clearing up activity.*

3) *Changed into white cotton shirt and added big belt to jeans. Pulled on black suede ankle boots. Being a spinster is no excuse for letting one's standards drop.*

4) *Vowed solemnly in mirror and to this diary that I, Carrie Henderson, have learned a lesson and will, from this day forth:*

   PUT MY FRIENDS FIRST

   (and will try to be a generally better person).

CARRIE'S TIP

Keep your jewellery from getting in a mess. Use a pin board (paint it a great colour first if you want to) and pin up all your bits and pieces. Thread rings through coloured ribbon and pin the ribbons to the board. You can also stick up photos, little pictures, fake flowers, anything you like.

Chapter 2

Friday 8.00 p.m.

If I had known what was going to happen at Barnaby's department store I would have squeezed into my old gym kit for another term. You wouldn't imagine a trip with Mum to the schoolwear department would end in violence and me BEING PRACTICALLY IN FEAR OF MY LIFE, would you? But it did. Dr Jennings (for such is the sort of name my therapist will have) will be the on the edge of her big leather chair now, gnawing her pencil in anguish. She knew I wasn't ready to go out. But that's me all over, she'll be thinking. Plucky, plucky, plucky.

It all started so well. We picked Rani up and I was so pleased to see her grinning face looming up against the car window. She was crossing her eyes and had her tongue sticking out attractively. Her eyes are huge and hazel like her mum's. Her dad is Indian so she has gorgeous tawny skin too. She'd put her shiny black hair up in a ponytail and was eating a sandwich. She is always eating something. I think she lives in terror of starvation. It is very annoying because she is small and graceful and delicate looking. It is also unfair that she got boobs when she was about eleven. She can do cleavage. And here I am, fourteen years old and nearly six foot and thrilled because I've gone from 32A to 32B. Nature can be very cruel.

Rani thought she saw the girl first. She poked me in the arm to alert me, but *naturally* I had seen her. She was standing in front of us in the queue in schoolwear and chewing on a safety pin. It