

# Cara's Makeover

A cut scene from

## *Believe in Me*



Cara slumped in the hairdresser's chair as the middle-aged Afro-Caribbean stylist Delia expertly wielded her curling tongs on the hair she'd just washed and trimmed. Pettett and Mayfield's hairdressing salon, tucked away on the Second Floor, was beautifully decorated in soothing pastel colours and rows of potted orchids. Such a shame so few customers came here to see what a lovely job Delia had done.

It would take more than pink and lilac paintwork to soothe Cara. A sense of responsibility weighed her down like a cement overcoat. Just like her hair, Cara felt her life spiralling out of her control.

Letting everyone else take over seemed strange. Even wrong. She'd made all her own decisions and managed on her own for so long.

She'd rushed through her work to get done early. Normally she wouldn't think of leaving her desk until after six, but they wanted her in the salon by five to get ready. Now other people were deciding what she should wear and how her face should be made up and how her hair should look, so she could go on a date with a man she'd prefer not to see again, if the choice was left to her.

Mrs Pettett's threat to fire her hadn't left her with any option but to agree. Fake dates with a Hollywood star as a publicity stunt, or lose her job.

"So what's Nick *really* like?" Delia asked. "He's lovely on the telly. Come on, spill the beans."

Cara barely suppressed a grimace. If it wasn't to help the store survive, she would never have agreed to any of this. Everyone seemed to think she was the luckiest girl alive. She thought a root canal would be more fun.

"He's... nice." Her muttered response felt inadequate.

The truth was, Nick was more than nice. He was way too much more than nice to be good for her to be around.

Okay, so he was one of those blessed people who never had a day's suffering in his life. He was still a big-mouthed big-headed over-confident Hollywood golden boy, who thought he only had to smile and the world would give him whatever he wanted.

But she'd seen him with that child in the Pet Shop, how kind he'd been. She could imagine him sitting with the exhausted mother, listening to her with that intentness that made you felt you were the most interesting person in the world to him. He'd noticed the homeless man, just like she had. He'd wanted to buy her breakfast. And he seemed as wholehearted as she was about saving the store.

"Nice" was the understatement of the year.

She owed Delia more of an explanation. "I'm usually still on my way home from work when *California Dreaming* airs, so I've never seen him on TV. But he's

lovely in real life, too.” She forced a smile. “I’ll tell you more tomorrow after tonight’s date.”

“Make sure you do.” Delia stepped back and examined Cara critically. “So where is he taking you?” She applied a more than generous amount of hairspray to Cara’s hair.

Once the cloud dispersed enough to breathe again, Cara answered. “I don’t know. Something Christmas themed, that’s all he said.” The time of year she hated most and a man who made her feel far too much. A killer combination.

“Awww. That’s so romantic. A surprise date. If I were ten years younger and single, I’d be jealous.”

Cara almost laughed at the idea of anyone being jealous of her, the girl least likely.

The hairdresser frowned thoughtfully, rearranged a few curls, then beamed. “Done. You know, now our children are grown up and it’s just Nelson and me at home, I’m going to make sure we go on some proper dates, too. I couldn’t tell you when we last went out, just the two of us.”

*Please don’t let Delia notice how strained my smile is. She’s so kind and well-meaning.*

“That’s right. No need to be jealous of me, when you have your own lovely man waiting at home. I’ve always been a little jealous of you two and the wonderful relationship you have.”

“Really?” Delia’s tired face glowed as if a light had been ignited inside her.

“Really. Twenty-five years happily married is something for you to be proud of and celebrate.”

Trying to imagine herself married all that time failed dismally. No-one in her life stayed around that long. She’d told Delia the truth, she *was* jealous. Safer and

better not to even think about any possibility of a happy-ever-after for her.

She glanced down at herself. Her hair lay in tumbled curls on her shoulders. What had Delia done to her?

“Is there a mirror?”

“No. Mrs Pettett’s orders. She said you weren’t to see yourself till it was all done. She said she didn’t want to spoil the surprise.”

Cara suspected it was more because Mrs Pettett was afraid she’d bolt if she had the chance to see what they were doing to her, but she kept that to herself.

Delia whipped the protective cape off Cara’s shoulders as the store’s very slim and very stylish personal shopper bustled into the salon and stood at the reception desk, tapping her fingers impatiently on the counter. “Okay, all done. I’ll hand you over to Monique’s tender loving care.”

Possibly the teensiest bit sarcastic of the hairdresser. The look on Monique’s almost certainly Botoxed face was anything but tender and loving. She wasn’t exactly frowning, but probably only because she couldn’t.

Cara jumped to her feet and straightened her skirt. Better not keep Monique waiting any longer. The woman’s temper was legendary, and she doubted her position as deputy assistant manager would make much difference.

“Thank you.” Cara smiled as brightly as she could to Delia.

“Your Nick will get such a wonderful surprise when he sees you, if he’s only seen you in business mode.”

“He’s not my Nick.” Wasting her breath to protest.

Delia gave her a knowing smile. “Sure, sure. You deserve something good, Cara. You work so hard. Make sure you tell me tomorrow how he reacts, okay?”

She nodded weakly.

“You are ready at last? Good, follow me,” Monique said in a tres chic French

accent Cara knew she faked, though no-one had ever heard her speak differently. Her fancifully titled job included managing the HR records. Monique was really Monica, born and raised in Clapham.

Feeling a clumsy elephant next to Monique's elegant size zero, Cara followed her into the personal shopper's private dressing room.

She couldn't remember when she last tried to look pretty, but long enough she'd forgotten how it felt. Probably not since seventeen, when she was dating Roger. And what a disaster that turned out to be. She was hardly the type men fell for, and Roger made sure to rub her nose in it once the sweetener of Dad's money disappeared.

Maybe Mrs Pettett had been right to order the makeover.

Not that she wanted to look good for Nick. Not at all. Definitely not. She'd simply be representing the store. If his plan worked and their pictures ended up splashed across all the capital's newspapers, she'd better make sure she looked at least half-way decent.

According to Monique, she didn't look even one per cent decent now. In the privacy of her room, the personal shopper ooh la la-ed and rolled her eyes over Cara's shapeless grey wool suit and her plain black low heeled office shoes, before ordering her behind the French boudoir style folding screens. "It all must come off. Leave only your underwear."

Cara cringed. If Monique disapproved of her outer clothes, she hated to imagine what she'd make of what she wore underneath. She should have listened to Grandma Hague's "But what if you were in an accident" warning to always wear decent undergarments.

Not that hers were indecent. Just the opposite. Probably her utilitarian cotton whites were far too decent to suit Monique's idea of style. She carefully hung her suit

up and peeled off her tights.

“I’m ready,” she called.

As expected, the moment Monique pulled back the screens, she sniffed.

Cara got in first before the other woman could voice her disapproval. She’d had enough of that already today. “I’m sure whatever budget Mrs Pettett has allowed won’t stretch to new lingerie.” Nick was the only one who’d told her she looked fine the way she was. She held up a hand to stop Monique arguing. “And even if it does, I don’t want to spend too much of the store’s money on this scheme. No one will see my underwear. These will have to do.”

“A fashionable French woman takes pride in having only the best undergarments.” Monique couldn’t look more horrified if Cara told her she wanted to wear a sack. “Even under the simplest dress, she wears lace to give her confidence.”

Cara forced a chuckle. “I could do with extra confidence, but unfortunately I’m *not* a fashionable Frenchwoman. When it comes to dressing me, forget what’s fashionable. I’m not letting the store pay for my underwear. And I’m telling you now, you won’t get me into anything low cut or revealing. I need to look stylish enough to be believable as Nick’s date, but it’s got to be simple, and it’s got to be modest.” She might be doing it to salvage her job and everyone else’s jobs, but it was long past time to take back some control over the situation.

The shopper sniffed. “Of course it will be modest! Monsieur Nicholas, he tells me it is outdoors, and casual, but you will not be needing a coat or jacket. So I choose for you this.”

She held up a rich berry-red loose cut sweater, with a crazily deep V neck. Demure it was not.

Cara’s eyebrows reached her hairline. Probably she looked like a cartoon character with her eyes bugging out. “Modest? I hope you intend for me to wear a T-

shirt under that?”

Monique pursed her lips and tutted. “An adventurous woman would wear it just so. No brassiere, only a little skin tape to hold it in place.”

“Sorry, I’m not the adventurous type. Far from it.” Cara shook her head. “I’ll need a T-shirt or a vest under that. Worrying about a wardrobe malfunction showing things I’d rather not show won’t help me feel more confident. I’m not budging on this one. I will not face Nick Gallagher and the paparazzi wearing a top that leaves far too little to the imagination.”

“How did I know you’d say that?” Monique said, dropping the French accent and smiling, almost a real smile. The Botox made sure it fell short of that, but genuine warmth and support flashed out. “Oops, my little secret slipped out. I can trust you won’t tell anyone.”

Cara’s heaviness lifted, just a little. “I already knew. And I don’t gossip about other staff.” She reached out to touch the fluffy knit and smiled back. “It’s a lovely jumper. Thank you for choosing it for me. But I don’t want anything slipping out, either. I really must have something underneath it.”

“I came prepared.” Monique pulled a plain white long sleeved T shirt out of a stack of clothes she’d piled up on a chaise lounge. “Be careful when you put it on, hold the neck wide open so you don’t get make-up on it. Here are jeans, I have a few for you to try for size and fit. Let me see each pair as you try them.” She handed over all the clothes, and pulled the screens closed again.

The sweater embraced Cara like a hug from an old friend, even over the T-shirt. She stroked the soft fabric draping gently around her. Monique chose well. And the first pair of jeans she pulled on fitted perfectly and felt as comfortable as a worn-in favourite pair. No mirrors, so she couldn’t see herself, but these were the pair she wanted. No need to try on more.

Discomfort started to itch at her.

Not from the clothes. From how wrong it felt to take pleasure in them. Wanting new clothes was wrong. She didn't need them, and how could she take them? They cost money, money that could be used elsewhere in the store. Money that could save jobs, go into the pension fund.

Guilt tightened a noose around her throat, choking her, stopping her breathing. She scrabbled for price tags, but couldn't find them. Like the savvy personal shopper she was, Monique must have removed them. Sell the product to the customer first, make sure they decided they wanted the item, and then tell them how much it is.

Dad had told her about that salesperson's technique.

And her father was the reason the last time she'd bought new clothes for herself was nine years ago. Before Dad disappeared with all his company's money, leaving a mountain of debt behind. Before Mum died. Before her life collapsed around her.

"You must have those clothes on by now, I want to see how they look." Monique's authentic south London accent interrupted Cara's unwelcome thoughts.

"You can see."

Monique drew back the screens, and Cara stood stiffly while the older woman's gaze assessed her, first narrow-eyed and unsmiling, then softening into approval. "Turn around."

Cara turned.

"How does it feel to you?"

"I love it. But the clothes are gorgeous, and they must have cost a fortune. I can't accept them."

Monique stared at her as if she was mad.

“Of course you can. You deserve nice things. You work hard. Everyone knows you do hours of unpaid overtime trying to keep this place going. Just think of it as payback time.”

Cara wrapped her arms around herself, loving the feel of the cuddly sweater against her hands, despite her certainty she *didn't* deserve them. She shook her head. “I don't feel comfortable taking them.”

The other woman smiled. “No choice. You *have* to. Mrs Pettett's orders. She Who Must Be Obeyed. I've got you boots too. I had the girls in your office check your size.”

Cara put on the socks Monique passed her, then slipped her feet into the soft low-heeled wedge boots. Like the jeans, they fit as if they were made for her. She stood, and almost moaned in bliss. After years of her feet always hurting in worn out shoes, she'd forgotten what comfortable shoes felt like.

But it felt wrong to accept this when other people were suffering.

Monique nodded approvingly. “Perfect. Try to smile. What you're wearing didn't cost that much, promise. I rummaged round and found some old sale stock.” She walked across the room and pulled back a curtain, revealing a wall of mirrors. “Ta dah! And ooh la la!”

Cara looked. Then she stared, pressing her hand to her chest as her breath froze in her chest and her heart paused then pound. The woman in the mirror couldn't possibly be her. Her reflection looked ten years younger than usual.

Maybe her office staff had been right with that twenty-eight going on fifty-eight crack.

She raised a wondering hand and touched her hair, so did the woman in the mirror. Okay, no denying it, somehow, amazingly, it was her. The woman in the mirror smiled, a soft pretty smile. The way she used to smile, a long time ago.

For a moment, she could almost forget everything that happened since those naive, happy times.

Only for a moment. Too much had happened since then. The woman in the mirror narrowed her lips. Her brows pulled together. The softness disappeared. A makeover changed nothing.

Who she was and what she'd done hadn't changed. This whole Christmas thing with Nick would only make an already painful time of year even worse.

“What's wrong?” Monique asked. She didn't frown, the Botox kept her forehead serenely uncreased, but her voice held genuine concern. “You look perfect for a wonderful Christmas date with a hunk like Nick Gallagher.”

Cara blew out a long hard breath. “Yes. That's what I'm worried about.”

They called her Ms Scrooge. Well, Ms Scrooge needed to be more Scroogelike than ever if she was to come out of this with her heart in one piece. Knowing that didn't stifle her unwelcome glimmer of hope — maybe Nick would think she looked wonderful, too.

But changing how she looked was far easier than changing how she felt. A pretty sweater, new jeans, and a nice pair of boots couldn't undo her past. Couldn't make her deserve a man like Nick.

Nothing could.

*Cara has a lot to let go of and a lot of learning to trust God again to do before she can accept Nick's love and let herself be the beautiful woman God created her to be.*

*Just as beautiful as He created each of us to be, too!*

*I made this printable as a reminder. You can download it [on my website](#).*



*And if you don't have a copy of [Believe in Me](#) yet, the ebook will be free on Amazon worldwide from December 22<sup>nd</sup> through 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017!*

*I pray your Christmas is richly blessed and filled with love and joy,*

*Autumn*♥