### Prologue

The car door swings open, and bright white lights flash before my eyes, blinding me for a few long seconds. *Flash! Flash! Flash!* Like a firework has been let off at close range. I wait in- side the car while she makes her big entrance. Getting out of a blacked-out limousine in an exquisite, glittering gown complete with vertiginous heels is no easy task, even for a seasoned pro. *Knees together, swivel hips, feet on the ground, smoothly push up, rise gracefully, straighten gown and SMILE!* A thunderous cheer erupts around us as she emerges—*ta da!—*a Hollywood goddess in the flesh. Then come the voices.

“Jennifer! Jennifer!”

She is under siege. Paparazzi shoot off hundreds of high- resolution frames, their faces hidden behind the long, prying lenses of their black state-of-the-art DSLR cameras. When they get too close to this tall, willowy, shimmering beauty, the mind- ers rush in to hold them at bay.

“Hey, Jennifer!” “This way!” “Give us a smile!”

When the flashes subside, I tumble out of the car, dart hastily around it and slip through the entrance, flashing my invitation

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pass. I crouch down at the side of the red carpet, beside the cold metal crowd-control railings, and sink into the shadows, desper- ate to keep out of sight. But I’ve been rumbled. An autograph hunter taps me on the head and shoves a glossy photo in my face.

“Hey! Can you get this signed by Jennifer?”

Another pleads in my ear: “Ma’am, ma’am, do you know her?

Can you get her to come over?”

“Yeah, you got out of her car; get her to come here!” Others join in, like a chorus of extras in a low-budget film. I pretend not to hear, taking my eyes off her for only a few seconds; time enough to readjust the zip and pull down the hood of my gray toweling sleep suit. I’m breaking into a sweat. I look down at myself, in my deeply inappropriate, stale outfit, and then back at Jennifer in her stunning gown, all clean and super-gorgeous. I’m so tired and embarrassed I almost want to laugh. It’s rarely cold in Los Angeles, even on a February evening, and the Oscars—the big- gest night in the entertainment calendar—is no place for a pasty British girl in a baggy onesie, flashing her saggy bottom at un- suspecting fans, never mind the world’s paparazzi, who might snap an unexpected exclusive. Inside, I’m seething. *Bloody Mona!*

## 3

Jennifer makes her way along the carpet, spreading pneumatic glamour wherever she goes, thrilling the crowds of fans with high fives and making a point of waving to those at the back standing on their tiptoes, camera phones lifted skyward, strain- ing to catch a glimpse of their idol. She stops to pose for a few photos with admirers, all of them less aesthetically blessed than she is, and an explosion of air kisses ensues. They have to be air kisses; they can’t make actual contact with her skin—she can’t risk a germ, and she certainly can’t mess up the immaculate, dewy makeup that took two hours for the steady hand of a lead- ing makeup artist to apply. She signs a handful of autographs,

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using the black permanent marker pen I have learned to keep in my kit for such occasions.

Soon we are being ushered along the red gauntlet by her bossy publicist, who is brandishing a clipboard and a firm perma-smile, to reach the main bank of paparazzi. Time to make my move. Pouncing out of the shadows like a leopard stalking its prey, I’m suddenly visible under the bright lights. I dash to the corners of her skirt, pulling down layer upon delicate layer of scarlet pure silk organza, embellished with shimmering beads and tiny se- quins that catch the lights, sending sparkles in every direction. It is breathtakingly elegant.

“Jennifer! This way!” “Over here, Jennifer!”

The cries are more urgent now. This is the main photo op- portunity.

The paps are penned at least five deep, some standing on step- ladders to get the view from above. She takes her time, moving elegantly this way and that, adjusting and tweaking her pose ever so slightly with almost every click. It’s second nature now: right hip lifted, left foot crossed over right, enhancing the natural curve of her body; right shoulder pushed back, chest out, but not too far; left arm on her left hip bone, right arm hanging behind to create a slender profile. Head held high to elongate the neck, face turned slightly to the right to present her best side, chin raised just so for a youthful jawline, belying her fortysomething years (she stopped counting at thirty-nine). She is textbook perfect.

“That’s it, love, nice big smile for the camera!” “This way, once more!”

“Beautiful!”

I look up. Both hands are on her hips now, slender silhouette perfectly shaped by the structured internal corset. Not so tight that she can’t breathe properly, but plenty tight enough. A hint of crystal embellishment on the satin sandals peeping out from

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beneath the gown at the front. Elaborate diamond-drop earrings, worth ten times the gown itself. It’s such a timeless, romantic, pure Hollywood look. *Just perfect.* I glance back to check that the security guard is still with us. He winks back in acknowl- edgment, earpiece and discreet microphone on the lapel of his slick black suit, ready for action should we run into any trouble. The fine jewelry houses don’t take any risks with a loan this expensive. She moves on, floating down the carpet now, enjoy- ing the attention, gliding gracefully, a beautiful swan. With her honey skin, wide smile and dewy eyes, she bewitches everyone in her path. She’s so mesmerizing, it’s actually a little overpow- ering. *How incredible to put a spell on so many people, purely by turning up.* On to the bank of waiting press and TV crews. I shuffle back against the railings into the shadows cast by the hazy early-evening sun.

“Watch out, you’re standing on my cables!” a small, angry American man shouts to my right.

“Sorry, sorry.” I inch out of the way. Then I lose my footing, stumbling backward, and a Japanese woman elbows me in the ribs.

“Hey! Watch it, miss. You almost lost my sound!”

*Aargh, jet lag. I should be asleep by now.* More bright lights. This time microphones are being thrust in her face, a barrage of questions thrown from all sides. The faces of the entertainment reporters are so familiar to me now.

“Jennifer, you look stunning tonight! Who are you wearing?” “Is it couture?”

“Did Mona Armstrong style you?”

“Can you twirl so we can see the back?” “How much are the earrings worth?” “Can we get a close-up of your shoes?”

“Were you influenced by the style of your character in the film?”

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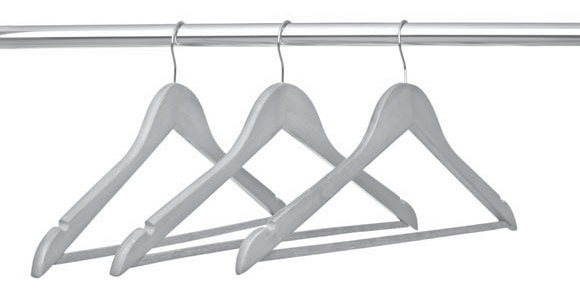
“Do you feel confident about tonight?”

And repeat. Over and over again, for entertainment shows from Boston to Beijing and everywhere in between. Finally we reach the entrance to the Dolby Theatre—and my phone vibrates in my pocket. But it’s not the person I’m aching for it to be, and I’m disappointed. One text from him and this would all be ex- citing again—another crazy night in La-La Land to chew over and laugh about later on. The onesie would give him plenty of ammunition. And though I’d protest, really, I’d love every min- ute. Instead, it’s from Mona: Are you with Jennifer? *Seriously? Bit late now.* But I’ve learned it’s best not to reply when I feel as I do right now.

## 3

As Jennifer is swept into the auditorium to deafening applause, thousands more flashbulbs and some ear-splitting whoops, I dis- creetly make my exit, wondering how I ended up in this circus, in a slightly smelly onesie. Oh, if only this was just a bad dream . . .

# Part One:



# London,

Pre-Awards Season

### Chapter One

We gathered on white stools around the cash desk as Jas, our boss, delivered the news.

“It’s about Mona Armstrong.”

Kiki’s eyes lit up. This sounded infinitely more interesting than a discussion about who was responsible for the smelly lettuce in the fridge. And her short attention span, after years of social me- dia abuse, meant she *really* needed to concentrate.

“I’ve had a call from an assistant director at 20Twenty, the production company,” Jas explained.

Her motley crew—the staff of Smith’s boutique, consisting of Alan the security guard and the store assistants, Kiki and I— listened intently.

“They’re making a pilot episode for a reality show about Mona,” she continued. Kiki flashed me a “told you so” look, but I pretended not to notice, willing her to topple off the stool. “The working title is *Mona Armstrong: Stylist to the Stars*,

but for now they’re calling it *The Stylist*.”

Big Al was the only one of us who blatantly wasn’t interested in this news. But it didn’t come as a complete surprise to Kiki or me—style bloggers had been buzzing about the pilot for several weeks, and Kiki had been monitoring the situation closely. Her

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latest bulletin, gleaned from various fashion blogs and breath- lessly delivered over her daily liter of Super Greens, had informed me the show was “rumored to be airing on an American network in the coming months.”

Mona was one of the few things Kiki and I bonded over. You see, Mona Armstrong was not just any old stylist, like the ones you saw on daytime TV turning Sharon from Wolverhampton into a sort of Sharon Stone. She was Britain’s most famous— make that *infamous*—celebrity stylist; a personality in her own right, thanks to her minuscule frame, achingly hip, self-coined “boho riche” dress sense and close friendships with most of the names in *Tatler*’s Little Black Book.

Now, just a few hours later, it had suddenly become a real- ity. *My reality.* Little did I know that day’s news was about to change my life, forever.

### 3

“The TV guy—Rob, I think—asked if we can keep it to ourselves for now,” Jas went on, the American twang to her English accent a reminder of her two decades working as a top New York model. “That means no Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, *nothing*—they need to keep it under wraps until the network has confirmed.”

But that wasn’t the half of it. “Oh, and the 20Twenty crew want to come to the store tomorrow to do some filming, *with Mona*, as she prepares for awards season,” Jas said, “so it’s highly likely we’ll appear in the pilot, too.”

Kiki and I looked at each other. I stifled a giggle—laughing was my default when I didn’t know how to react. Kiki’s jaw had dropped so low it looked like it needed a stool of its own. Jas car- ried on, ignoring the mounting hysteria emanating from her staff. “We’ll each have to sign a release form, in case we’re in a shot the TV people want to use, and a nondisclosure agreement—an

NDA.”

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Kiki surreptitiously pulled her iPhone from the back pocket of her tight gray Acne jeans and held it in her lap, her finger hover- ing over the white-and-pink camera icon.

“Release forms and NDAs are legally binding,” Jas added pointedly.

Sucking in her cheeks, Kiki turned the iPhone over. Updat- ing her followers would just have to wait. But this was big news for both of us. In fashion circles, Mona Armstrong was a leg- end. Aka a #Ledge.

“*The Stylist* crew will be here to set up at eleven tomorrow, and Mona will arrive soon after,” Jas continued, already off her stool and itching to get to work. “So we need to get this place looking camera-ready. Amber, can you refresh the windows— let’s go monochrome. And, Kiki, work with me in store.”

We nodded as the enormity of the situation began to sink in. This visit to the boutique, on a Wednesday morning in late Janu- ary, was to be Mona’s first this season, just before awards season kicked off in Los Angeles with the Golden Globes. Mona’s vis- its were always an “event,” even without TV cameras rolling, so this was set to be epic. Kiki, visibly about to burst at the seams of her skinny jeans, couldn’t hold it together any longer.

“Oh. My. God. A camera crew! What the hell are we going to *wear*?”

We both cracked up. Kiki and I were both obsessed with Mona, though for different reasons—Kiki from a bona fide fashion perspective (she would regularly study the minutiae of Mona’s outfits, to an extent bordering on OCD). For me, it was more of a morbid fascination. I wondered how she could function on a seemingly liquid diet of Starbucks, water and champagne. (There were no paparazzi photos in existence that showed her eating. Fact.) But what could not be denied was that Mona’s ce- lebrity power was off the scale. Practically a celeb in her own right, the careers of the stars she counted as friends were built

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on column inches secured through the clothes *she*’*d* put on their skinny backs. For up-and-coming fashion designers, she was a “dress trafficker,” able to kick-start a label simply by placing their creations on the model of the moment. Yes, in our world, Mona was massive news, so it wasn’t surprising that today we were bordering on hysterical. *What* will *we be like tomorrow?*

3

On the morning of Mona’s visit, Smith’s was a flurry of activity as we vacuumed, steamed, straightened, dusted and generally tarted up the place. In the center of the shop was a loosely set tic-tac- toe board of square leather pouffes and two small glass-topped tables holding Diptyque candles and mineral water—though a glass of champagne was offered to those who looked as though they had money to burn. This was one world where you mostly *could* judge a book by its cover. You could spot our customer a mile off: latest It bag hanging off her arm, rarely wearing a warm coat (who needed one when you cab-hopped around town?), sunglasses whatever the weather, breezing around in a delicious cloud of expensive perfume. Some of our best clients, many of whom were old friends of Jas’s from her catwalk days, frequently stayed in the shop for hours at a time, chatting, gossiping and, of course, buying clothes, especially once the champagne flowed. One regular recently bought the entire Chloé collection on a whim following four glasses of Perrier-Jouët rosé.

“Her head will be aching tomorrow,” Jas commented, as the woman left the store with eight immaculate, shiny white Smith’s bags tied with bows. “But she won’t bring anything back. She’d rather die.”

Smith’s did that to women who were usually highly self- controlled. The thought of spending nearly two thousand pounds on a few items of clothing, in one shopping trip? It made my eyes water. I still couldn’t comprehend what it must be like to inhabit

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a world where a cheap bag cost three hundred pounds. That was almost half my rent for a month! But working at Smith’s, it had begun to feel as though we were ringing Monopoly money through the tills.

Of course, most of the store’s reputation was down to its owner, Jasmine Smith—an elegant, fiftysomething ex-model with cheek- bones that make Kate Moss’s look fleshy. Jas’s talent for spotting a bestseller on the crowded runways of New York, London, Mi- lan and Paris was second to none. But it was her skill in mixing up cutting-edge items from the designer collections with care- fully chosen pieces from the debut lines of the fashion stars of tomorrow—often fresh from their Central Saint Martins gradu- ation show—that had made Smith’s the most successful, longest- running independent luxury fashion outlet in central London and a destination for stylists and shoppers alike. “God is in the detail,” is Jas’s mantra, and neither Kiki nor I would dare argue. I was often mesmerised by my chic manager and her stylish customers. It was only now, after working here for the past twelve months, that I felt just about cool enough for this store. The truth was, I got the position by default. It was originally offered to my fashionista best friend and flatmate, Vicky, who then got her dream job as assistant to the fashion editor at *Glamour* maga- zine. I was temping at the time, which everyone knew was a fast track to nowhere, so she passed this job to me, and Jas said yes.

## 3

Until this position, I was more your average Debenhams devo- tee and Gok Wan fan. Topshop was my fashion frontline and Armani simply the fragrance my parents gave each other for Christmas. Yep, beneath this shiny new surface, I am a 100 per- cent fashion fraud. I often see the real me, in the form of typi- cal Westfield shoppers, peering into the window of Smith’s and looking confused.

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“Recession’s hit hard; this place is halfway to closing down,” they remark, passing on by. At first glance, the shop’s white walls and oh-so-sparse rails might look as though we’re missing half our stock or have fallen victim to a Bond Street raid. But, as I have swiftly come to learn, true fashionistas know differently. The hard-core style set have Smith’s in their Smythson address books because this boutique is a fashion landmark.

Once you step through the glass doors and enter the inner sanc- tum, you are in an Aladdin’s cave, featuring a small, fully alarmed section of haute couture, rails of hot-off-the-catwalk pieces and Jas’s “Ones to Watch.” On either side of the cash desk stand two tall, highly polished glass jewelry cabinets, filled with rings set with rare gems, shoulder-grazing earrings, waspish friendship bracelets and sparkling necklaces in pretty, contemporary designs, boasting price tags to make even the most fearsome fashion direc- tor pause. Then there are It bags, killer heels, painted pumps and chain-mail belts dotted around on white plinths and shelves, each presented as a unique work of art. Everything is to be admired, stroked, Instagrammed, Pinned, oohed and aahed over by every passing customer in turn. Smith’s has it all. But only in small doses. “Nothing makes an item more covetable than if you have to sit on a waiting list for six months before you get it,” Jas informed me early on. The minimalist interior is down to our strict instruc- tion to put only one of every design onto the rails. Of course, mostly, it’s just an illusion—we have all the sizes, colors and crops in the stockroom, downstairs in the basement, which is the size of the shop floor again but packed with polythene-wrapped clothing. It’s a clever ploy; thinking your size isn’t available only makes you desire something more. And then when we pop out of the stockroom, excitedly exclaiming, “You won’t believe it,

Mrs. Jones! We do have a 14 after all!”—well, they’re already punching in their PIN.

Of course, the hefty price tags at Smith’s *are* very real. That’s

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why, like most of the high-end store managers, Jas employs a full-time security guard to watch over the stock—in our case, a burly silver fox affectionately known as Big Al. He works here full-time, patrolling the boutique and keeping a trained ex- army eye on the very expensive items, which have actual alarms fitted. Though his six-foot-four frame doesn’t suggest it at first, he’s a teddy bear at heart and, like me, is now able to offer an informed second opinion on an outfit if a customer requires it. In fact, despite the fact that he’s happily married with two grown- up children, Big Al *loves* the opportunity for a gentle flirt with a “lady who lunches,” especially when she’s in a quandary over whether to plump for the DVF wrap or the Hervé Léger body-con dress. He must be nearing retirement age, but when he removes his stiff guard’s cap to reveal a full head of salt-and-pepper hair and you notice his bright blue eyes, it’s easy to imagine Big Al was a heartbreaker in his day. You’d be surprised how many phone numbers he’s had surreptitiously thrust into his big, ca- pable palms. *Uniforms really do work.*

As for me, I know that, in Jas’s mind, what I initially lacked in fashion credentials, I gained with my “artistic eye.” My art foundation course wasn’t going to turn me into the next Tracey Emin, but it had given me the confidence to believe I knew what looked good when it came to dressing the shop, and the windows had become my specialty area. Our visual merchandising isn’t on the scale of the world-class windows at London department stores—Selfridges, Liberty or Harrods. But, for a bijoux bou- tique just off Bond Street, right in the heart of London’s designer shopping enclave, our little shop and its two bay windows get a *lot* of attention.

## 3

On the morning of Mona’s visit, we had all come in early to en- sure the store looked more dazzling than ever. I’d even brushed

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the shag-pile rug—a first, even in our bonkers little world. The candles sent an intoxicating aroma of gardenia into the air, and the room-temperature Evian and best cut-crystal tumblers were set out. Mona didn’t do Buxton or ice cubes, I discovered to my cost the first time I was dispatched for water without having re- ceived this important memo. And Kiki had spent the past ten minutes painstakingly assembling a pyramid of dark choco- late truffles on a white porcelain saucer next to the till (not that anyone was likely to eat one). Big Al was watching her with a mixture of awe and amusement.

“Dare you to take one from the bottom, Amber,” he whis- pered as I passed.

## 3

When I started at Smith’s, Kiki had given me a crash course in preparation for a visit like this. Kiki was two years older than me, and boy did she let me know it. She’d been working at the boutique for nearly three years, and she was Jas’s senior assis- tant. For me, the job was a full-time stopgap while I searched for a “proper” career, ideally in visual merchandising, but Kiki adored everything about it. Waif-like, effortlessly hip and perma- nently looking as though she’d stepped off the pages of *i-D* mag- azine after a huge night at the Box, she had bags of attitude, and I was intimidated by her from day one—a situation she seemed to relish. At first sight of me, Kiki had taken it upon herself to educate me in the intricacies of the fashion scene, because I so evidently needed it.

“There’s a major hierarchy in the industry,” she explained, as I sat on a box of Diane von Furstenbergs once during stocktak- ing. Though she claimed to hail from the East End, Kiki still had a clipped, public-school voice.

“At the top are the designers—the holy grail of Valentino, Giorgio Armani, Donatella Versace, Stella McCartney, Dolce

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and Gabbana and so on. Beneath these are the A-list stars who wear the designers’ creations on red carpets everywhere from Hollywood to Cannes, at the Golden Globes, BAFTAs, Oscars, collecting gongs at all the glitziest bashes. And beneath these are the stylists, who do all the *real* work, getting them red- carpet ready and securing their appearances on ‘best dressed’ lists around the world. Sod the little gold trophy—it’s making *those* lists that really counts. A stylist like Mona Armstrong can make or break a celebrity with a sheer gown or a statement ac- cessory. Remember when Angelina’s leg pose at the Oscars went viral?” I nodded sagely. “But can you remember who won any of the awards that year?” I shrugged. My lecturer smiled appre- ciatively. “Of course you can’t. It was a moment that went down in red-carpet history.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “But what works for one could be a horrendous fail on the poor cow who can’t pull it off. It’s a cutthroat world out there, and styling un- derpins it all. Make no mistake, Amber, a celebrity without a stylist is like Kylie Jenner without her pout. We shut the entire shop when Mona comes in to choose pieces for her clients—it’s *beyond* fabulous. But don’t get carried away; it gets really, re- ally stressful in the run-up to awards season. I ate a cheese ba- guette once.”

It must have been stressful, because it wasn’t hard to guess why Vicky and I had nicknamed Kiki the Stick Insect, or lately just the Stick. I often saw her downing pints of pond-water-looking liquid from recycled water bottles—her famous Super Greens— and the work fridge was always stocked with bags of lettuce and bean sprouts that she snacked on during the day, though, more often than not, they went off, causing a hideous stench that I would regularly have to clean up. Only once did I see her pick at something vaguely calorific—a lavender macaron—and that was only because it had been sent in by the fashion editor at *Ba- zaar* and she wanted to #Instafood it.

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Kiki was hardly coming up for air during this particular lesson. “Seriously, Amber, it’s ah-mazing when Mona comes in— she’s been dressing the big names like Jennifer Astley and Beau Belle for years. And if they wear an outfit Mona’s borrowed from Smith’s, when the fash mags come out and we’re credited, Jas is on cloud nine. It’s *sooo* good for business. But it’s not only the red-carpet stuff. I mean, it was Mona who introduced the whole gypsy trend we’re seeing now.” She fluffed up her bil- lowing sleeves to illustrate the point. “The second Beau went shopping on Rodeo Drive wearing a peasant skirt and crochet top—literally *all* the high-street stores were knocking out rip-

offs within weeks. Mona is *that* powerful.”

I quickly learned that the Stick had a major fashion crush on Mona, and by this particular January day I was well versed in the life of the super-stylist.

## 3

As usual, I had spent most of the morning being bossed around by Kiki, before being directed by Jas to finish off the windows. I loved the narrow wooden “stage” between the bay windows and the store—a small space that might have felt claustrophobic but was a beautiful blank canvas to me; somewhere I could create an image of the woman all our customers wanted to be. Dress- ing the mannequins, I’d follow Jas’s chosen “Look” from the stack of look books the fashion houses provided with each new collection—usually a ring-bound folder containing photos of a series of models posing in a white studio wearing the label’s lat- est designs. Really it was window dressing by numbers, but be- cause we held only edited versions of the collections at Smith’s, to my delight, Jas would often let me add personal touches—an edgy accessory or eye-catching shoe—to bring the ensemble to life. We changed the windows on a Monday, once a fortnight, to

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stop them feeling stale. This week we had refreshed them spe- cifically with Mona in mind—they had to be “wow.” Jas had in- structed me to put a strictly black-and-white outfit on each of the two mannequins, a look we then made “pop” with one statement accessory: a bright green leather cuff on one and a standout red clutch under the arm of the other.

“Our girls look stunning today!” she declared, before suggest- ing the footwear I should add to each model’s perfectly smooth size seven plastic feet—one was to wear black and the other ivory heels, completing the monochrome vision. As I admired my handiwork from the street outside, I mulled over which pair of shoes should go on which mannequin. *Not bad for a morn- ing*’*s work.*

“Am-ber!” Kiki trilled from the doorway, breaking the spell. “You forgot to steam the Stella!” *Jesus Christ, does she ever let up?* Three perfectly pressed Stella McCartney jumpsuits later, Jas conducted a final walk-through to ensure everything was just so. And then, decked out ourselves in on-trend outfits (bor- rowed from the store for the duration of Mona’s visit; our slim wages could never afford the real thing), we were ready to wel- come fashion royalty.

## 3

Bang on time the assistant director, Rob, arrived. He skidded on the shag-pile and almost slipped on it, making me want to giggle. “Great entrance there, well done, Rob,” he said, quickly com- posing himself and catching my eye as he laughed it off. My internal laughter then gave way to a fear that the highly polished floor/fluffy rug combo might actually be a potential death trap. *What if Mona breaks her leg?* Rob pushed a strand of floppy brown hair behind his ear. When he came around to shake my

hand, I became aware that my palms were sweaty.

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“Are you responsible for these gleaming floors?” he quipped. My cheeks flushed. *Despite wearing new-season Jonathan Saunders, I still resemble the resident skivvy. How?* “Sorry about

that.”

“You’d better hope Mona’s put the cheese-grater over her soles,” he replied. “Unlike me.”

I laughed nervously. There was a familiarity about him.

Kiki gave me a withering look. “That’s what people on TV do,” she informed me, loud enough for Rob to hear, “to stop them slipping on the studio floor.”

“I know,” I lied.

If she was trying to show me up, I didn’t really care. I was more interested in Rob taking off his jacket. He pushed up the sleeves of his gray jumper, revealing what looked like the begin- ning of a tattoo on his upper arm.

Rob was the first to arrive of the team of three. The next, sport- ing a directional dyed red bob and wearing thick, black-rimmed glasses, was introduced as Fran, the director. There was also a long-haired, lanky bloke carrying the camera, who went by the name of Dave. I inwardly christened him Shaggy. I wondered if, like us, Fran and Rob had put on their most fashion-conscious clothes for Mona’s benefit, or whether they always looked so me- dia cool. As word went around that “She” was about to arrive, Rob hurriedly took down our contact details and had us each sign a release form and NDA. I barely read the words; I was too busy concentrating on trying not to do anything embarrassing.

## 3

Today, as ever, you could spot Mona’s sunglasses before you saw the rest of her. Huge, round Prada shades, covering at least half of her small, elfin face, came bobbing down the street, swooping toward the store like a large fly. Light chestnut boho waves with streaks of caramel blond cascaded around her shoulders; now a

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flash of matte coral lipstick came into view. She was only aver- age height, even in towering heels—in fact she was more shades and curls than actual person—but in the fashion world, she was God. She paused to take in the windows; I felt a prickle of ex- citement, hoping she liked what she saw. She looked the man- nequins up and down, but her sunglasses hid any kind of facial expression. At last, Mona entered our pristine temple of style. As she made her entrance for the camera, Jas, Kiki and I simultane- ously clocked a turquoise cocktail ring the size of a golf ball on her petite index finger. Behind me, Kiki let out a gasp.

“YSL, new season,” she whispered, as if we were observing a rare exotic bird.

And then the front door was locked, the shop sign switched to closed, the French blinds rolled down and we pulled up ringside seats at the Mona Armstrong show. Of course there was no real need to pull down the blinds; to the average person, Mona was just an eccentrically dressed, extremely thin, seemingly ageless woman in OTT sunglasses. But in the world between these four white walls, she was the high priestess.

According to Kiki, my main tasks during this particular visit would be to silently hold clothes for Mona, refrain from tak- ing part in fashion small talk (I wasn’t qualified), try to keep off-camera (not photogenic enough, presumably) and, above all, concentrate on not tripping up in the stupidly high Nicho- las Kirkwoods I’d made the mistake of thinking I could walk in (hello, bunions)*.*

I’d been fully briefed that Mona’s longtime assistant, Tamara, would do most of the running around, trying things on, holding items to the light and offering opinions on the season’s hottest threads. Blond and long-limbed, able to pass for a model her- self, Tamara was a well-known face on the fashion circuit, too, having been Mona’s assistant for several years. She was the only person—other than Jas and Mona—whom I had ever seen the

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Stick try to make an effort for. When Tamara had once retweeted Kiki (“Smith’s is now stocking Roksanda! #Ledge”)*,* Kiki had been bouncing off the walls for days. Today she was more exhil- arated than ever about Tamara’s visit because apparently there’d been some rumors among the fashion Twitterati that Tamara might be on the verge of setting up on her own—that it was ac- tually *she* who had been dressing some of Mona’s regular clients. She had even been snapped spending New Year’s on board a yacht in the Caribbean with none other than the BAFTA rising star— not to mention former regular client of Mona’s—Poppy Drew. Plus, there were hints that Tamara, instead of Mona, would be dressing the actress Jennifer Astley for awards season this year, where she was hotly tipped to win a slew of Best Supporting Ac- tress awards. *But that*’*s just gossip*.

Until today, when Tamara was nowhere to be seen.