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Opening Extract from...

The Stylist

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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 inside 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, and 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 minders 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 round it and slip through the entrance, flashing my invitation pass. I crouch down at the side of the red carpet, beside the cold metal crowd-control railings, and sink into the shadows, desperate 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 grey towelling 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 biggest night in the entertainment calendar—is no place for a pasty British girl in a baggy onesie, flashing her saggy bottom at unsuspecting fans, never mind the world's paparazzi, who might snap an unexpected exclusive. Inside, I'm seething. *Bloody Mona!*

* * *

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 skywards, straining 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 make-up that took two hours for the steady hand of a leading make-up artist to apply. She signs a handful of autographs, 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, brandishing a clipboard and a firm permasmile, 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 pure silk scarlet organza, embellished with shimmering beads and tiny sequins 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 opportunity.

The paps are penned at least five deep, some standing on stepladders 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 youth-

ful jawline, belying her forty-something 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 satin sandals peeping out from 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 the security guard is still with us. He winks back in acknowledgement, earpiece and discreet microphone on the lapel of his slick black suit, ready for action should we run into any trouble. The fine jewellery houses don't take any risks with a loan this expensive. She moves on, floating down the carpet now, enjoying 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 mesmerising, it's actually a little overpowering. *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.

'Mind 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 backwards, 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?'

'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 exciting 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 minute. 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 like I do right now.

* * *

As Jennifer is swept into the auditorium to deafening applause, thousands more flashbulbs and some ear-splitting whoops, I discreetly 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…