Beautiful People

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Sam Sherman, head of the Wild Modelling Agency, strode through Covent Garden. She was on her way to a lunch appointment with Jacques Flash, an arrogant but indisputably rising French photographer. She walked quickly. Flash was famously no fan of waiting. No photographer was. Unless it was of people waiting for them, which was of course a different matter.

Sam did not particularly look like a fashion person. As she saw it, that crazy, spiky, shiny, short stuff was best left to those younger and more in fashion's shop window than she was. The models. The designers. The stylists. The muses.

Sam's style was muted: middle of, rather than ahead of, the curve. She was curvy too, as well as small, which was why her own modelling career had literally been cut short. In addition, her face, with its round eyes, full cheeks and firm jaw was not one that the camera had unconditionally loved.

But Sam's genius was the modelling business, not the actual business of modelling. In this she was formidable and frequently ruthless. Her sure eye for a new face and her

confidence and accuracy in predicting trends had made Wild one of the biggest and most successful model agencies in London.

Sam, who had been a teenager in the seventies, generally stuck to a uniform of white shirt teamed with black waistcoat and jeans. The look – classic rock and roll, which no one, even in this most critical of industries, could criticise – was highly practical for someone in her position. She had hundreds of waistcoats, shirts and denims which, when combined with several large amber bead necklaces, chunky silver rings and bracelets, conferred on her a maverick, creative air that perfectly reflected the maverick, creative light in which the fashion industry saw itself. Even if, as Sam knew, it was all about the bottom line. Bottoms certainly loomed large in modelling. Or, rather, small.

Sam's jeans were tucked into high wedge-heeled boots of sand-coloured suede, rendered vaguely Native American with the addition of coloured beads. Her beige woollen wrap, with its fringed edge, billowed about her as she walked, and the bracelets the length of each of her forearms rattled.

Sam walked everywhere. This was not because she was fond of exercise – she wasn't. And there was certainly nothing pleasurable about picking one's way along the uptilted pavements of Endell Street and wincing at the deafening noise of the various drilling gangs engaged in the refurbishments this part of London constantly underwent. Sam walked because it made good business sense. It was more difficult to spot talent from the back of a taxi, and more difficult to get out and run after it if one did.

And spot it she must. Modelling was a competitive business. The Wild Agency might be one of London's

biggest and most successful, but new agencies were always snapping at her heels, competing for the best girls and boys. Wild needed a constant stream of new talent. As Sam walked, her round, hazel eyes, firmly ringed with kohl, swivelled from side to side between centre-parted curtains of russet-and-black-striped shoulder-length hair. As ever, she was on the lookout.

It was trickier than usual today. Her antennae felt blunted, compromised by last night's party in which the definitive book about sunglasses was launched alongside a definitive new handbag collection. On offer had been the latest cutting-edge cocktail, served by a cutting-edge mixologist and featuring champagne, ginger vodka and real gold flakes. There had been no cutting-edge food served with them, however, and Sam had imbibed several on an empty stomach. But that was normal for fashion. Fashion was all about empty stomachs. She wondered about the gold flakes, though. She had a flight to New York this evening and hoped the metal would not set the airport alarms off.

It was a glorious early summer day, with a hint of chill in the air, but with her hangover, Sam walked whenever possible in the shadows cast by the various scaffoldings. The air was too bright to do what she usually did, which was to quickly scan the various roofing gangs for big-biceped talent, even though the magazines preferred skinny and pale men at the moment. But biceps would be back, and when they were, Sam would have all of hers flexed.

As she walked briskly past, Sam fretted for the opportunities she might be missing. She consoled herself with the fact that looking at builders was a dangerous

business because it was usually (loudly and enthusiastically) construed by them as sexual invitation.

She passed café after café, feeling queasy as the scent of toasted cheese and five-spice powder, alternating with whiffs of garlic and cleaning fluid, swirled into her nostrils. The sun, blazing on the aluminium chairs and tables, bored painfully into her pupils. Sam fished in her Birkin tote for a pair of huge and very black sunglasses, which she shoved hastily on her face. That was better.

It was easier now to look about her and scour every face that passed. Sam crossed Long Acre and walked purposefully down Bow Street, past where the vast bulk of the Royal Opera House blazed white against the blue sky. In the narrow shadows of Floral Street, a skinny girl with a graceful carriage caught her attention – one of the ballerinas, Sam assumed. Well, she had a good figure, but oh, dear God, that nose . . . no, no, *no*.

She entered the road where the tube station was. But there was nothing promising among the crowds either outside it or drifting aimlessly across the cobbled market-place between the face-painters, cartoonists, bracelet-weavers, jugglers, buskers, human statues, and all the other theatrically inclined losers who daily congregated here. Sam narrowly avoided stepping into one of the laughably bad renditions of St Paul's or Marilyn Monroe and earned herself a snarled rebuke from one of the pavement artists. She regarded him scornfully from beneath her blunt-cut hair. Who did he think he was – Damien Hirst? To add injury to insult, he was hideous to look at as well.

No, the beautiful people really weren't out this morning. Which was unusual. Covent Garden was one of London's magnets for wannabe models; Topshop on Oxford Street

another. But Sam found herself positively wincing at the unsightliness and dinginess of the crowd she walked among. Everyone looked the same: spots, terrible hair, short, thick legs in stonewashed jeans, white trainers and nasty black anoraks. Tourists, without a doubt, many gathered in an awestruck, giggling and mobile-phone-snapping ring round a street entertainer. Sam paused to watch the Afro-Caribbean man limboing under a stick placed on top of two wine bottles. His physique was good but his features were all over the place.

Which in some cases could work. And some things could be fixed: teeth, hair colour, skin problems – weight, especially; not that one was allowed to say that these days, with all the fuss over size zero. But behind the scenes it still went on as before. The drugs, the self-denial, the work-outs, the worry. Nothing had changed. That could not be fixed. Any more than the young men out today having faces like baskets of fruit could be fixed.

And while there were plenty of pretty girls about this morning, Sam noted with an air of weary professionalism, they were all East European blondes and that look had flooded the market now. The magazine fashion people wanted something new to shoot. Just recently Sam had signed what she had decided would be her last Russian until they became hot again.

The early summer sunshine continued to beat cheerfully down but Sam, behind her sunglasses, hardly noticed the way it polished the cobbles, warmed the butterscotch stone of the eighteenth-century market buildings and made the great white pillars of the Royal Opera House gleam. That was not the sort of beauty she either noticed or cared about. What was the point; one could hardly give it a business

card, ask it to come in for test shots and subsequently launch it as the face of the moment. One could not make money from it.

There were a few home-growns, Sam saw, lanky, blank-looking British girls swishing their hair and dawdling self-consciously along in tight low-waisted jeans and skimpy tops. But none of them looked like the next Lily Cole to her.

God. The lunch. Jacques Flash. Sam glanced at her special-edition Cartier Tank watch and saw that she needed to get a move on if she was going to reach the restaurant on time.

'Ow!' Sam's progress was now halted in the rudest and most uncomfortable of manners. A great physical blow to the front of her lower pelvis stopped her agonisingly in her tracks. Reeling with the suddenness, eyes watering with the pain, she realised she had walked straight into a bollard. She gripped it tightly with her silver-tipped fingers and breathed in hard.

'Are you, um, all right?'

Sam, red-faced and agonised, glanced crossly at the person who had materialised beside her. He was very tall, his face hidden beneath tangled dark blond hair.

'I'm fine, thanks,' she managed tersely. She had no desire to discuss the damage to her intimate regions with some unknown callow youth.

The untidy blond head nodded. He now pushed his hair back to expose his face and instead of the spotty and misshapen bunch of teenage features she had been expecting, Sam found herself looking at one of the handsomest boys she had ever seen.

A huge surge of excitement replaced her pain. Slowly,

Sam removed her sunglasses. Her eyes jabbed incredulously about, collecting the details; full lips, great ridges of cheekbone, hair thick and striped with gold like a child's, a straight and delicate nose, long eyes of the most amazing green – bright, pale lichen green flecked with yellow – she had never seen colour like that before. And set beneath thick brows so straight they could have been done with a ruler. She darted a glance at his other important asset, but could see nothing but baggy jeans hanging off a narrow waist.

She tried to gather her scattered wits enough to remember proportions. There were strict rules in the model business for the classically beautiful face. Did this boy's fit the template of perfection? She stared hard at him. Eyes should have space for an eye in between. Yes. Check. A perfectly proportioned face divided into horizontal thirds, the lines of division passing through the centre of the eyes and mouth. His did. Check. The ends of the lips should line up with the mid-point of the irises. Check. The ends of the mouth should be the same width as the outer points of the nostrils. Check. The upper lip should occupy a third of the entire area between bottom of upper lip and bottom of nostril. Check. Relief and awe swept Sam. This boy really was gorgeous. And it wasn't just her. It was official.

He was clearly perfect, about eighteen, Sam reckoned, and with all that delicious boyhood-ripening-to-manhood quality: smoulderingly sexy with those narrow eyes, those huge lips, that big Adam's apple. And yet still innocent with that boyishly smooth skin, that touch of fresh pink on his cheekbones, that endearingly puzzled expression . . .

'Look, are you sure you're OK?' the boy asked, unnerved by the way she was staring at him.

Sam nodded. She was more than OK. She was revelling in this boy, feasting on his looks. There was a golden glow about him, of classical gods, of medieval angels, of youthful Monaco male royals with big pink lips and blond hair blowing in the Mediterranean breeze. And more than that, of Armani campaigns, Ralph Lauren, Chanel – oh, they'd love him. Who wouldn't? And that voice; it had that just-broken quality of being deep and squeaky at the same time. Better still, it was posh, which the French and Italian designers especially loved. They'd got into that whole English public schoolboy thing in the eighties and they'd never got out of it.

Her eyes scoured his body again: amazingly tall, broad-shouldered but slender. Long legs and arms; nice hands. Pale; a quick blast in the spray-tan would do him no harm at all, but otherwise he was perfect. Completely perfect.

He could, Sam realised, her breath coming in quick, excited pants, her brain whirring with possibilities, be the discovery of the century. Compared to what he could mean to the agency – *earn* for the agency – banging her fanny on a bollard was a small price to pay.

She could not stop looking at his wonderful face, riding, like a surfer, every plane and hollow with her eyes, scanning it mentally into her mind like a computer.

'I'm a scout,' she smiled at him.

The boy, in his turn, stared at Sam. He'd heard somewhere that scouting had got more trendy lately, that it was more snowboarding and surfing than dib-dib-dibbing and doing old ladies' gardens. But all the same, this strange woman, with her make-up, bangles and clumpy heels, looked about as far as he could imagine from the side-parted, shorts-wearing, knot-tying Akela figures he still

associated with the movement. He couldn't easily see her squatted over a camp stove either.

'Not my sort of thing,' he muttered, shambling from foot to foot. 'I've never been any good at putting up tents.'

Sam gasped in annoyance. Her creased lids with their gilded eyeshadow narrowed over her eyes for a moment. Was he joking? His face was completely, perfectly blank, however. 'Not *that* sort of scouting. I own a model agency. Have you,' she asked the boy, 'ever thought of modelling?'

At these words, she knew, almost every other teenager currently drifting through Covent Garden would punch the air with delight, their ambitions realised; their careers, as they saw it, made. But this boy said nothing. He continued to look blank and seemed frozen to the spot, his beautiful, long green eyes dilated with shock.

Beaming, Sam tipped her head to one side. 'Yeah, I know,' she nodded. 'Your dream come true, eh?'

He did not reply, disappointingly. She would have liked to hear that public-school accent again.

Sam pressed her plump, plum-lipsticked lips understandingly together. He was obviously overwhelmed. It was, of course, a great moment in any young person's life. 'Well, look, I'll just give you a card, you think about it, talk to your mother about it. And then give me a ring.'

But of course, Sam was smugly aware, there was no thinking to be done. No one ever thought twice about signing up to Wild, and she didn't encourage her models to think anyway. She rummaged in her bag for a card.

She registered with injured surprise the complete lack of recognition in the boy's face as, silently, he took it. The agency's famous logo, the roaring panther, was something

he had evidently never seen before. Most kids she showed this to lit up with excitement. Some even whooped.

Sam felt suddenly full of doubt. Not about his beauty, but about whether asking him to get in touch was the best idea. There was something clueless about him, which was all to the good in a model, but it might be advisable not to leave the ball in his court.

She really didn't want this boy to get away. He was extraordinary. And Wild was not the only agency who had scouts out all the time, all over London. The risk of him being snapped up by someone else was just too great. No, she'd take him back to the agency herself, but, *bugger, damn it*, she couldn't. She had this lunch with Jacques Flash.

Sam stared furiously into the convoluted depths of her Birkin. Then the answer hit her. She'd phone a colleague. Stacy, a Wild scout, would, at this very minute, be patrolling Oxford Street Topshop. It wouldn't take her long to get here and she could then take this boy back to the agency.

The downside of this plan, of course, was that she'd be late for Flash and he'd be furious. But, Sam decided, now feeling back in control, she'd promise him first dibs on the next face of the moment. The one now looking at her with alarm and confusion written all over it.

'I think you've got an amazing future in modelling,' Sam now told the boy. Unexpectedly, the huge trainered feet opposite herself suddenly moved. With incredible speed the boy ran off into the crowd and within seconds had disappeared from sight. But not before Sam, with the presence of mind that had got her where she was in life, grabbed her mobile from her bag and snapped with its camera what could be seen of his departing face.

*

Orlando Fitzmaurice shot through the middle of Covent Garden market. Through the rows of painted novelty cuckoo clocks and triangular candles, past the hippies sitting cross-legged on the steps eating pulses with plastic forks out of polystyrene cartons, past the woman who may or may not have been an opera singer but who was belting out '*Nessun dorma*' with an ear-splitting vibrato none the less. He ran as if wild animals were after him, or the Wild Modelling Agency, which seemed even more fearsome a prospect.

Orlando's brain rushed with fear, his heart was pumping, and from time to time he looked behind him. The hamster-faced woman had not followed him, however.

Now slowed down to a fast walk, Orlando found himself before the large church in the piazza. The huge neoclassical building, with its gilded clock and pillared portico, was in deep shadow; the shadow of the building itself stretched out across the cobbles in front. There seemed to Orlando to be something protective about it; he darted gratefully into the gloomy refuge between the church's blue door and the thick brown sandstone pillars in front of it. He sat down on one of the broad brown stone steps and waited for his heart rate to return to normal.

He wasn't alone for long. A gaggle of giggling girls appeared, passed from the light into the shadow of the church and walked by him rather too closely.

Orlando ignored them, and watched with relief as the girls passed out into the bright sunlight on the other side of the shadow. Then his heart sank as they stopped, hesitated and giggled before turning and, giggling again, re-entering the shadow and coming past once more. They were leggy,

with lots of eye make-up and long blond hair, which they swished about while looking coyly at him through it. Exactly the type of girls, Orlando reflected, staring hard at the step, who would never have given him a moment's notice before.

Before . . .

Before his appearance had changed. He looked different now from how he had looked a year ago. A year ago, and many of the years before that, he had been average height and above-average chubby and spotty. Girls had not given him a second glance; he had never had a girlfriend, although he had got on well with the shyer, less swishy-haired, self-confident ones. And this had suited him just fine. He had been plump, spotty, unremarkable – and content.

But in the year since then, his appearance had radically changed. He had no idea why. Or how. He had not started working out. He had not changed his diet. He had not begun any special facial routine. Yet for some reason, over the last twelve months, he had grown taller, much taller, and so fast that his bones ached in the night. He had also slimmed down, become quite skinny, in fact.

His spots had disappeared of their own accord, his thinnish lips had suddenly become fuller and pinker, and his eyes seemed to have lengthened and receded under what were now heavy, brooding brows. A prominent Adam's apple appeared in his newly thickened throat and his dull, unremarkably mousy hair, which he had never cut much anyway, developed blond streaks all by itself and now swished in a golden curtain about his neck without him having to put anything on it or even brush it all that much.

And so, without particularly wanting to – without

remotely wanting to, in fact – the eighteen-year-old Orlando, who had never been interested in women in any other way but friendship, now realised with dawning horror that he was of great interest to them. And it was a lot more than friendship that they wanted.

They stared at him all the time, wherever he went. Orlando found that he disliked being stared at because he was handsome. He hated being looked at, full stop. And so he protected himself as best he could. He narrowed his eyes beneath his great level cliffs of brow and hid under his curtain of hair. He pushed out his full lips in go-away defiance. He slouched, he brooded, he muttered, he maintained distance. But this just made matters worse. Women and girls stared at him even more.

And now one of them had asked him if he wanted to be a model. It was hard to think of anything he wanted to be less.