Look the World in the Eye

Alice Peterson

CHAPTER ONE

'Morning, Eddie.' I hand him a white paper bag with a croissant inside.

'The usual, Katie?' He turns to start operating the cappuccino machine. 'You've been away, haven't you?'

'Well, I was in Paris two weeks ago on business. Catwalk shows . . .'

'Paris and models? Sounds like a holiday to me.'

'And racking through three thousand designers' clothes. After a while it's not much fun, I promise! It was like a cattle market.'

'One cappuccino, with organic chocolate on the top.'

'Wonderful.'

'Busy day ahead?'

'Yes, very. Rush, rush, rush. It never stops, does it?'

'You've changed your hair colour again,' he notes.

I smile excitedly. 'I've got my fashion show tonight.' I rummage in my purse, trying to find the right change. 'Got to run, see you tomorrow.'

'Five minutes to go!' I call out to the models. The dressing room has an overpowering smell of hair spray and styling solutions. I pace the corridor. Where is Sam? I punch in his number on my mobile.

'Katie, I'm on my way, promise,' he says. 'In a cab right now.' He starts to make car noises. 'Yes, left here, mate.'

'Sam! I can hear the phone in the background. You're still in the office, aren't you?'

'Half an hour, tops,' he tells me firmly.

'Sam, I really need you here.'

'Don't pull my hair so tightly,' I overhear Henrietta, one of the models, screeching. 'Are you sure you're a professional?'

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'Please get here soon.' I hang up, take a deep breath and walk back into the dressing room. Hen sits in the corner, stroking a strand of her blond hair protectively. 'Hen, five minutes,' I say, counting them off on my fingers. 'One, two, three, four, five. No more tantrums, OK? Just let her do your hair.'

I look at the chaos of high-heeled shoes and the racks of black clothes waiting to be modelled. I own a shop in Turnham Green called FIB, which stands for Female In Black, selling day and evening wear and accessories, and tonight is the summer fashion show. The clothes, of course, are mainly black, except for the odd accessory and the occasional burst of colour for contrast. I have started to organize fashion shows twice a year, it's hard work but it pays off. This one is being held at a house in Chiswick, owned by a client of Sam's. The house is so big you could run a marathon in it. It is a perfect location for a show because my local customers will not have to travel far. The owners have also gone for the minimal look: stripped floorboards, white walls, spotlights, large modern paintings covering the walls, gilded mirrors. In fact, it is almost a clone of Sam's house, except his is half the size.

I can hear the audience taking their seats, there is that familiar sound of shuffling and scraping chairs. This is the point when my nerves start to kick in. I pick up a half-full glass of champagne, pink lipstick smudged around the rim. 'Is your glass half-full or half-empty?' was the first thing Sam ever said to me when we met in a bar, followed by, 'Allow me to get you a refill,' and finished off with a wink.

If he had been bald with bad breath I probably would have politely refused. Instead, I was looking at a tall attractive dark-haired man. His skin was so smooth, not a staple of stubble. I had to look around to make sure he was talking to me; that he had picked up my glass of vodka and tonic.

Eve, who works at FIB with me, tells me the photographer wants a quick word before we start, and someone from the press has just arrived. 'Good luck, girls,' I say. 'Look the part, feel the part and you ARE the part.' Was one of the models rolling her eyes at me? I ask myself as I walk out of the room.

Quick look in the mirror. I am wearing one of the outfits we are showing tonight: a black halter-neck dress which floats just below the knee. There is a panel of silver beading around the neckline and bust, and it is cut low at the back and fastened with small sparkling silver buttons. My outfit is finished off with slip-on silver heels. My dark brown hair has been dyed black especially for tonight and is half scooped back with camouflaged clips and pinned together with a white rose.

The show begins with . . . 'It Started With a Kiss', by Hot Chocolate as the first model strides out in a black satin top and slim-fitting black hipster skirt, offset by a handcrafted black and silver beaded belt which shimmers under the lights. In one hand she clutches a black satin bag with a small silver clasp. In the other she holds a cocktail glass. I wanted to kick start the evening with a heady injection of glamour. She glides up to the fireplace, mushroom-coloured smoke weaving its way across the wooden floorboards

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at her feet. I think the smoke looks like the clouds you see from an aeroplane. The audience marvels at it and claps as the model leaves the room. I see Emma, my old school friend, taking a seat at the back. You can never miss her entry into a room. She's nearly six foot tall and always played Keeper in school netball classes. She mouths 'hello' to me and looks at her programme. Sam, where are you?

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