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Lessons in Heartbreak

Written by Cathy Kelly

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CATHY KELLY

Lessons in Heartbreak

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To Murray, Dylan and John, with love

PROLOGUE

In her head, she knew what she was doing was wrong. She lay, open-eyed in the dawn, feeling the length of his naked body next to hers, warm despite the chill of the room. She'd never slept naked before, and now wondered how there was any other way.

Of course, you needed another body beside yours; a body like his, hard with physical exercise, taut and lean, not an ounce of flab on him, and fiercely strong.

Yet he was so gentle with her. His hands with their tender pianist's fingers had drawn whorls on her pale skin the night before, his eyes shining in the soft light of the dim bulb.

With his hands on her skin, her body became like nothing she'd ever known before: a treasured thing made for being wrapped up with his and adored.

'You're so beautiful. I wish this moment could go on for ever,' he'd said in the low voice she loved. There wasn't anything about him she didn't love, really.

He was perfect.

And not hers.

Their time was stolen: a few hours here and there, holding hands under the table at dinner, clinging together in the vast hotel bed like shipwreck survivors on a raft. For those hours, he was hers, but she was only borrowing him.

The awfulness of separating rose up again inside her. It was a physical ache in the pit of her stomach.

He'd wake soon. He had to be gone by seven to get his train.

If she had been the one who had to leave the hotel room first, she knew she simply couldn't have done it. But he would. Duty drove him.

It was dark in the room and only the gleam of the alarm clock hands showed that it was morning. She nudged her way out of the bed and opened a sliver of heavy curtain to let some grey dawn light in. It was raining outside; the sort of sleety cold rain that sank cruelly into the bones.

There were early-morning noises coming from the street below. Doors banging, horns sounding, traffic rumbling. Ordinary life going on all around them, like worker ants slaving away in the colony, nobody aware of anybody else's life. Nobody aware of hers.

He moved in the bed and she hurried back into it, desperate to glean the last precious hour of their time together. If she closed her eyes, she could almost pretend it was night again and they still had some time.

But he was waking up, rubbing sleep from his eyes, rubbing his hands over his jaw with its darkening stubble.

Soon, he'd be leaving.

She was crying when he moved hard against her, his body heavy and warm.

'Don't be sad,' he said, lowering his head and kissing the saltiness of her tears.

'I'm not,' she said, crying more. 'I mean, I don't mean to. I'll miss you, I can't bear it.'

'You have to, we both have to.'

She'd never known that love could be so joyous and so agonising at the same time. Every caress took them closer to his leaving. Each time he touched her, she couldn't block out the thought: Is this the last time he'll ever do that? Will I ever see him again?

She could barely stop the tears. But she did, because she had to.

In the end, she lay silently in the bed watching him get ready. Just before he left, he sat beside her, pulled her close and kissed her as if she was oxygen he was breathing in.

Her hands clung to him, one curved tightly around his neck, the other cradling his skull. They kissed with their eyes closed so they'd never forget.

'I have to go. I love you.'

She couldn't speak in case she cried again.

'Goodbye.'

He didn't look back as he left and she wondered if that was the difference between men and women. Men looked forward, warriors focusing on the future. Women's eyes darted everywhere. Searching, wondering, praying to some god to keep the people they loved safe.

She lay back in the bed still warm with the imprint of his body, and wondered if she would ever see him again.

ONE

The New Mexico sun was riding high in the sky when the Zest catalogue shoot finally broke up for lunch. Izzie Silver stood up and stretched to her full five feet nine inches, glorying in the drowsy heat that had already burnished the freckles on her arms despite her careful application of Factor 50.

Truly Celtic people – with milk-bottle skin, dots of caramel freckles and bluish veins on their wrists – only ever went one colour in the sun: lobster red. And lobster red was never going to be a fashionable colour, except for early-stage melanomas.

It was her second day on the shoot and Izzie could feel her New-Yorker-by-adoption blood slowing down to match the sinuous pace of desert life. Manhattan and Perfect-NY Model Agency, who'd sent her here to make sure nothing went wrong on a million-dollar catalogue shoot involving three of their models, seemed a long way away.

If she was in New York, she'd be sitting at her desk with the rest of the bookers: phone headset on, skinny latte untouched on her desk, and a stack of messages piled up waiting for her. The office was in a sleek block off Houston, heavy on glass bricks and Perspex chandeliers and light on privacy.

At lunch, she'd be rushing down to the little beauty salon on Seventh where she got her eyebrows waxed or taking a quick detour uptown into Anthropologie on West Broadway to see if they had any more of those adorable little soap dishes shaped like seashells. Not that she needed more junk in her bathroom, mind you; it was like a beauty spa in there as it was.

In between scheduling other people's lives, she'd be mentally scrolling through her own, thinking of her Pilates class that night and whether she had the energy for it. And thinking of him. Joe.

Weird, wasn't it, how a person could be a stranger to you and then, in an instant, *become* your whole life? How did that happen, anyway?

And why him? When he was the most inconvenient, wrong person for her to love. Just when she thought she'd cracked this whole life thing, along came Joe and showed her that nothing ever worked out the way you wanted it to. You have no control – random rules.

Izzie hated random, loathed it, despised it. She liked being in charge.

At least being here gave her the space to think, even if she was missing her eyebrow appointment, her Pilates and – most importantly – dinner with Joe. Because Joe took up so much space in her head and in her heart that she couldn't think clearly when he was around.

Here at Chaco Ranch, with the vast hazy spread of dusty land around her and the big sky that seemed to fill more than the horizon, clear thinking felt almost mandatory.

Izzie felt as much at home as if she was sitting on the back porch of her grandmother's house in Tamarin where sea orchids dotted the grass and the scent of the ocean filled the air.

Chaco Ranch, just thirty minutes away from the buzz of Santa Fe, was a sprawling, white-painted ranch house, sitting like an exquisite piece of turquoise in the middle of sweeping red ochre.

And though it was geographically a long way from Tamarin, the small Irish coastal town where Izzie had grown up, the two places shared that same rare quality that *mañana* was far too urgent a word and that perhaps the day after tomorrow was time enough for what had to be done.

While the ranch was landlocked with huge cacti and mesquite trees guarding the house and mountains rising up behind them, Tamarin sat perilously on rocks, the houses clinging to steep hills as if the roar of the Atlantic would send them tumbling down.

In both places, Izzie decided, the landscape made people aware of just how puny they were in the grand scheme of things.

The consequent tranquillity of the ranch had calmed everyone down at least as much as two hours of Bikram yoga would.

Bookers rarely went on shoots: their work was confined to the office, living on the phone, relying on email as they juggled their models' lives effortlessly. But Zest were important clients and Izzie's bosses had decided it was worth flying her in, just in case anything went wrong on this first shoot for a whole new Zest line.

'I love this place,' Izzie had said to the blonde ranch owner the morning before when the crew had arrived with enough clothes, make-up, hair spray and photographic equipment to make a small movie, and enough adrenaline to power a large town.

Mexican-inspired arches in the walls, tiled courtyards hung with Moroccan lights, and dreamy wall-hangings made locally gave the place depth. Local artists' handiwork hung cheek by jowl with pieces by international artists, and there were two walls dedicated to haunting photographs of Anasazi ruins.

The ranch owner had waved slender brown arms that rattled with silver and turquoise bangles and explained that Chaco Canyon, where her treasured photos had been taken, was home to a flea that still carried bubonic plague.

‘Could we get some?’ deadpanned Izzie. ‘Not for me, you understand, but I’ve got some people I’d like the flea to bite.’

‘I thought you fashion people had no sense of humour,’ the blonde woman grinned back.

‘Only me, sorry,’ Izzie said. ‘It’s a hindrance in fashion, to be honest. Some of these people cry at night over hemline lengths and if you are not a True Fashion Believer, then they try to kill you with their Manolo spike heels or else batter you to death with their copy of *Vogue*: New Collections edition. Personally, I think a sense of humour helps.’

‘And you’re not a True Fashion Believer?’ asked the woman, staring at the tall redhead curiously.

‘Hey, look at me,’ laughed Izzie, smoothing her palms over her firm, curvy body. ‘True Fashion Believers think food is for wimps, so I certainly don’t qualify. I’ve never done the South Beach or the Atkins, and I just cannot give up carbohydrates. These are crucial in True Fashion.’

In an alternate universe, Izzie Silver could have been a model. Everyone told her so when she was a kid growing up in Tamarin. She had *the look*. Huge eyes, coloured a sort of dusty heliotrope blue with glossy thick lashes like starfishes around them, and a big generous mouth that made her cheekbones rise into gleaming apples when she smiled. Her caramel mane of thick hair made her look like a Valkyrie standing on her own long-boat, curls flying and fierce majesty in her face. And she was tall, with long, graceful legs perfect for ballet, until she grew so much that she towered over all the other little ballerinas.

There was only one issue: her size. When she was twelve, she stood five feet six in her socks and weighed one hundred and ten pounds.

Now, aged thirty-nine, she wore a US size ten. In an industry where skinniness was a prize beyond rubies, Izzie Silver stood out for many reasons.

With her perfect hourglass figure, like a sized-up Venus, she was proof that big was beautiful. She loved food, turned heads everywhere she went and made the hollow-eyed fashion junkies look like fragile twigs in danger of cracking inside and out.

She liked her size and never dieted.

In fashion, this was the equivalent of saying that polyester was your favourite fabric.

Joe Hansen had been mildly surprised when she told him she worked in the fashion industry the first day they met. They'd been seated across the table from each other at a charity lunch – an event Izzie had only gone to by the strangest, totally random circumstances, which proved her point that random ruled.

She hadn't thought he'd noticed her, until suddenly, she'd seen that flicker in his eyes: a glint to add to the mirror-mosaic glints already there.

Hello, you, she'd thought wistfully.

It had been so long since she'd found a man attractive that she almost wasn't sure what that strange quiver in her belly was. But if it was attraction, she tried to suppress it. She had no time for men any more. They messed things up, messed people's heads up and caused nothing but trouble. Work – nice solid work where you toiled away and achieved something real that nobody could take away from you – and having good friends, that was what life was about.

But if she'd discounted him, he clearly hadn't discounted her. From his position across the table Izzie could feel Joe taking her in admiringly, astonished to see that she was so earthy and real. She'd eaten her bread roll with relish, even briefly licked a swirl of butter off her finger. Carbs *and* fats: criminal. The city was full of fashion people and common wisdom held that they were skinny, high-maintenance beings,

always following some complicated diet. Izzie didn't try to be different. She'd just never tried to be the same.

'God made you tall so men could look up to you,' Gran used to say. Her grandmother had stepped into her mother's place when Mum died of cancer when Izzie was just thirteen. Izzie wasn't sure how her grandmother had managed to steer her around the tricky path of being a big girl in a world of women who wanted to be thin, but she'd done it.

Izzie liked how she looked. And so, it seemed, had the man across from her.

He was surrounded by skinny charity queens, spindly legs set elegantly on equally spindly-legged gilt chairs, and he was staring at her. No, staring wasn't the right word: gazing at her hungrily, that summed it up.

Lots of men looked at Izzie like that. She was used to it; not in a cavalier, couldn't-care-less way, but certainly she barely glanced at the men who stared at her. She honestly didn't need their stares to make her feel whole. But when Joe Hansen looked at her like that, he flipped her world upside down.

The most shocking thing was that when his eyes were on her, she could feel the old Izzie – uncompromising, strong, happy in her own skin – slip away to be replaced by a woman who wanted this compelling stranger to think her beautiful.

'You know, honey, from what I hear, that whole fashion world sounds kinda like hard work,' sighed the ranch owner to Izzie now, hauling her mind away from the Plaza and the first time she'd met Joe.

'I tried that South Beach once and it takes a lot of time making those egg-white and spinach muffins 'n' all.'

'Too much hard work,' agreed Izzie, who worked in an office where the refrigerator was constantly full of similar snacks. Quinoa was the big kick at the moment. Izzie had tried it and it tasted like wet kitchen towels soaked overnight in cat

pee – well, she imagined that was what cat pee tasted like. Give her a plate of Da Silvano's pasta with an extra helping of melting parmesan shavings any day.

'Pasta's my big thing,' she said.

'Spaghetti with clams,' said the other woman.

'Risotto. With wild mushrooms and cheese,' Izzie moaned. She could almost taste it.

'Pancakes with maple syrup and butter.'

'Stop,' laughed Izzie, 'I'm going to start drooling.'

'Bet those little girls never let themselves eat pancakes,' the woman said, gesturing to where two models sat chain-smoking. Even smoking, they looked beautiful, Izzie thought. She was constantly humbled by the beauty of the women she worked with, even if she knew that sometimes the beauty was only a surface thing. But what a surface thing.

'No,' she said now. 'They don't eat much, to be honest.'

'Sad, that,' said the woman.

Izzie nodded.

The ranch owner departed, leaving the crew to it and Izzie wandered away from the terrace where the last shots had been taken and walked down the tiled steps to the verandah at the back where Tonya, at eighteen the youngest of the Perfect-NY models, had gone once she'd whipped off the cheerful Zest pinafore dress she'd been wearing and had changed into her normal clothes.

A brunette with knife-edge cheekbones, Tonya sat on a cabana chair, giraffe legs sprawled in Gap skinny jeans, and took a first drag on a newly lit cigarette as if her life depended on it. From any angle, she was pure photographic magic.

And yet despite the almond-shaped eyes and bee-stung lips destined to make millions of women yearn to look like her, Izzie decided that there was something tragic about Tonya.

The girl was beautiful, slender as a lily stem and one hundred per cent messed up. But Izzie knew that most people

wouldn't be able to see it. All they'd see was the effortless beauty, blissfully unaware that the person behind it was a scared teenager from a tiny Nebraska town who'd won the looks lottery but whose inner self hadn't caught up.

As part of the Perfect-NY team, Izzie Silver's job was seeing the scared kid behind the carefully applied make-up. Her stock-in-trade was a line of nineteen-year-olds with Ralph Lauren futures, trailer-trash backgrounds and lots of disastrous choices in between.

Officially, Izzie's job was to manage her models' careers and find them jobs. Unofficially, she looked after them like a big sister. She'd worked in the modelling world for ten years and not a week went by when she didn't meet someone who made her feel that modelling ought to include free therapy.

'Why do people believe that beauty is everything?' she and Carla, her best friend and fellow booker, wondered at least once a week. It was a rhetorical question in a world where a very specific type of physical beauty was prized.

''Cos they don't see what we do,' Carla inevitably replied. 'Models doing drugs to keep skinny, doing drugs to keep their skin clear and doing drugs to cope.'

Like a lot of bookers, Carla had been a model herself. Half Hispanic, half African-American, she was tall, coffee-skinned and preferred life on the other side of the camera where the rejection wasn't as brutal.

'When the tenth person of the week talks about you as though you're not there and says your legs are too fat, your ass is too big, or your whole look is totally last season, then you start to believe them,' Carla had told Izzie once.

She rarely talked about her own modelling days now. Instead, she and Izzie – who'd bonded after starting at the agency at the same time and finding they were the same age – talked about setting up their own company, where they'd do things differently.

Nobody was going to tell the models of the Silverwebb Agency – the name had leaped out at them: Izzie Silver, Carla Webb – they were too fat. Because the sort of models they were going to represent were plus-sized: beautiful and big. Women with curves, with bodies that screamed 'goddess' and with skin that was genuinely velvety instead of being air-brushed velvety because the model was underweight and acned from a bad lifestyle.

For two women who shared the no-bullshit gene and who both struggled with the part of their jobs that dictated that models had to be slender as reeds, it had seemed such an obvious choice.

Five months ago – pre-Joe – they'd been sharing lunch on the fire escape of Perfect-NY's West Side brownstone, talking about a model from another agency who'd ended up in rehab because of her heroin addiction.

She weighed ninety pounds, was six feet tall and was still in demand for work at the time.

'It's a freaking tragedy, isn't it?' Carla sighed as she munched on her lunch. 'How destructive is that? Telling these kids they're just not right even when they're stop-traffic beautiful. Where is it going to end? Who gets to decide what's beautiful any more, if the really beautiful girls aren't beautiful enough?'

Izzie shook her head. She didn't know the answer. In the ten years she'd been working in the industry, she'd seen the perfect model shape change from all-American athletic and strong, although slim, to tall, stick-like and disturbingly skinny. It scared everyone in Perfect-NY and the other reputable agencies.

'It's going to reach a point where kids will need surgery before they get on any agency's books because the *look of the season* is too weird for actual human beings,' she said. 'What does that say about the fashion industry, Carla?'

'Don't ask me.'

'And we're the fashion industry,' Izzie added glumly. If they weren't part of the solution, then they were part of the problem. Surely they could change things from the *inside*?

'You know,' she added thoughtfully, 'if I had my own agency, I really don't think I'd work with ordinary models. If they're not screwed up when they start, they'll be screwed up by the time they're finished.' She took a bite of her chicken wrap. 'The designers want them younger and younger. Our client list will be nothing but twelve-year-olds soon.'

'Which means that we, as women of nearly forty –' Carla made the sign of the cross with her fingers to ward off this apocalyptic birthday '– are geriatric.'

'Geriatric and requiring clothes in double-digit sizes in my case,' Izzie reminded her.

'Hey, you're a Wo-man, not a boy child,' said Carla.

'Point taken and thank you, but still, I am an anomaly. And the thing is, women like you and me, *we're* the ones with the money to buy the damn clothes in the first place.'

'You said it.'

'Teenagers can't shell out eight hundred dollars for a fashion-forward dress that's probably dry-clean-only and will be out of date in six months.'

'Six? Make that four,' said Carla. 'Between cruise lines and the mid-season looks, there are four collections every year. By the time you get it out of the tissue paper, it's out of fashion.'

'True,' agreed Izzie. 'Great for making money for design houses, though. But that's not what really annoys me. It is the bloody chasm between the target market and the models.'

'Grown-up clothes on little girls?' Carla said knowingly.

'Exactly,' agreed Izzie.

As a single career woman living in her own apartment in New York, she had to look after herself, doing everything

from unblocking her own sink to sorting out her taxes and then being able to play hardball with the huge conglomerates for whom her models were just pawns.

Yet when the conglomerates showed off clothes aimed at career women like Izzie, they chose to do it with fragile child-women.

The message from the sleek, exquisite clothes was: *I'm your equal, Mister, and don't you forget it.*

The message coming from a model with a glistening pink pout and knees fatter than her thighs, was: *Take care of me, Daddy.*

'It's a screwed-up world,' she said. 'I love our girls, but they're so young. They need mothers, not bookers.'

She paused. Lots of people said bookers were part-mother/part-manager. For some reason, this bothered her lately. She'd never minded what she was called before, but now she felt uncomfortable being described as an eighteen-year-old's mother. She wasn't a mother, and it came as a shock that she was old enough to be considered mother to another grown-up. Why did it bother her now? Was it the age thing? Or something else?

'Yeah.' Carla abandoned her lunch and started on her coffee. 'Wouldn't it be great to work with women who've had a chance to grow up before they're shoved down the catwalk?'

'God, yes,' Izzie said fervently. 'And who aren't made to starve themselves so the garment hangs off their shoulder blades.'

'You're talking about plus-sized models ...' said Carla slowly, looking at her friend.

Izzie stopped mid-bite. It was *exactly* what she was always thinking. How much nicer it would be to work with women who were allowed to look like women and weren't whipped

into a certain-shaped box. The skinny-no-boobs-no-belly-and-no-bum box.

Carla wrapped both hands around her coffee cup thoughtfully. The familiar noises of their fire-escape perch – the hum of the traffic and the building's giant aircon machine on the roof that groaned and wheezed like a rocket about to take off – faded into nothingness.

'We could –'

'– start our own agency –'

'– for plus-sized models –'

They caught each other's hands and screamed like children.

'Do you think we could do it?' asked Izzie earnestly.

'There's definitely a market for plus-sized models now,' Carla said. 'You remember years ago, nobody ever wanted bigger girls, but now, how often are we asked do we have any plus-sized girls? All the time. The days of plus girls being used just for catalogues and knitting patterns are over. And with lots of the big-money design houses making larger lines, they want more realistic models. No, there's a market, all right. It's niche, but it's growing.'

'Niche: yes, that sums it up,' Izzie agreed. 'I like niche. It's special, elite, different.'

She was fed up working for Perfect-NY and having daily corporate battles with the three partners who'd long ago gone over to the dark, money-making side. The agency's Dark Side Corporates didn't care about people, be it employees or models. Any day now, time spent in the women's room would involve a clocking-in timecard and a machine that doled out a requisite number of toilet-paper sheets.

Besides, she'd given ten years to the company and she felt at a crossroads in her life. Forty loomed. Life had run on and – it hit Izzie suddenly what was wrong with her, why she'd been feeling odd lately – she felt left behind.

She had all the things she'd wanted: independence, her own apartment, wonderful friends, marvellous holidays, a jam-packed social life. And yet there was a sense of something missing, a flaw like a crack in the wall that didn't ruin the effect, but was still there, if you thought about it. She refused to believe the missing bit could be love. Love was nothing but trouble. Having a crack in her life because she didn't have someone to love was just such a goddamn cliché, and Izzie refused to be a cliché.

Work was the answer – her own business. That would be the love affair of her life and remove any lingering, late-night doubts about her life's path.

'I'm sure we could raise the money,' Carla said. 'We haven't got any dependants to look out for. There has to be some bonus in being single women, right?'

They both grinned. Izzie often said that New York must surely have the world's highest proportion of single career women on the planet.

'And it's not as if we don't know enough Wall Street venture capitalists to ask for help,' Carla added.

This time, Izzie laughed out loud. Their industry attracted many rich men who had all the boy toys – private jets, holiday islands – and felt that a model on their arm would be the perfect accessory.

'As if they'd meet us,' she laughed. 'You know there's a Wall Street girlfriend age limit, and we're ten years beyond it, sister. No,' she corrected herself, 'not ten, more like fifteen. Those masters of the universe men with their Maseratis and helicopter lessons prefer girlfriends under the age of twenty-five. They are blind when women of our vintage are around.'

'Stop dissing us, Miz Silver,' Carla retorted. 'When we have our own agency, we can do what I'm always telling them here and have an older model department. And you could be our star signing,' she added sharply. 'The masters of the universe

only keep away from you because they're scared of you. You're too good at that "tough Irish chick" thing. Men are like guard dogs, Izzie. They growl when they're scared. Don't scare them and they'll roll over and beg.'

'Stop already,' Izzie said, lowering her head back to her wrap. 'It doesn't matter whether I scare them or not: they prefer nineteen-year-old Ukrainian models every time. If a man wants a kid and not a woman, then he's not my sort of man.'

She didn't bother to reply to the remark about her working as a model. It was sweet of Carla, but she was too old for a start, and she'd spent too long with models to want to enter their world. Izzie wanted to be in control of her own destiny and not leave it in the hands of a bunch of people in a room who wanted a specific person to model a specific outfit and could crush a woman's spirit by saying, 'We definitely don't want *you*.'

'Could we make our own agency work?' she'd asked Carla on the fire escape. 'I mean, what's the percentage of new businesses that crash and burn in the first year? Fifty per cent?'

'More like seventy-five.'

'Oh, that's a much more reassuring statistic.'

'Well, might as well be real,' Carla said.

'At least we'd be doing something we really believed in,' Izzie added.

For the first month after the conversation, they'd done nothing but talk about the idea. Then they'd begun to lay the groundwork: talking to banks, talking to a small-business consultancy, and drawing up a business plan. So far, nobody was prepared to loan them the money, but as Carla said, all it took was one person to believe in them.

Then, two months ago, Izzie Silver had found love.

Love in the form of Joe Hansen. Love had obliterated everything else from her mind. And while Carla still talked

about their own agency, Izzie's heart was no longer in it, purely because there was no room in her heart for anything but Joe.

Love had grabbed her unexpectedly and nobody had been more shocked than Izzie.

'If it all works out, we won't be the backbone of Perfect-NY any more,' Carla had said happily just before Izzie had set off for New Mexico. 'Imagine, we'll be the bosses ... and the bookers, assistants, accountants and probably the women who'll be mopping out the women's room at night too, but, hey, we won't care.'

'No,' agreed Izzie, thinking that she didn't give a damn about anything because she was so miserable at having to fly to New Mexico and be away from Joe. Once, she'd have loved this chance to leave the office for a shoot in a far-flung location. Now, thanks to Joe, she hated the very idea.

'Catalogue shoots are tough,' Carla added. 'Pity you weren't sent to babysit an editorial shoot instead. 'Cos it's going to be hard work, honey.'

She was right, Izzie thought, standing in the New Mexico heat, watching the Perfect-NY model work.

Catalogue shoots *were* hard work. Hours of shooting clothes with no time to labour over things the way they could on magazine shoots. On magazine shoots, Izzie knew it could easily take a day to shoot six outfits – here, they might manage that in one morning. The models had to be ultra professional. The girl with the cheekbones, still-eyed and silent, was just that.

During the morning, Izzie had watched Tonya in an astonishing seven different outfits, transforming her silent watchful face into an all-American-girl-next-door smile each time. It was only when the cameras were finished, and Tonya's face lapsed back into adolescent normality, that Izzie thought again and again how incredibly young she was.

Now it was lunchtime. The photographer and his two senior assistants were drinking coffee and gulping down the food brought in from outside; the other two assistants were hauling light reflectors and shifting huge lights.

No lunch for them.

The make-up and hair people were sitting outside, letting the sun dust their pedicured toes and gossiping happily about people they knew.

'She insists she hasn't had any cosmetic procedures done. Like, hello!! That's *so* a lie. If the skin round her eyes get pulled up any further at the corners, she'll be able to see sideways. And talk about botox schmotox. She never smiled much before, but now she's like a wax dummy.'

'Dummy? She wishes. Dummies were warm once – isn't that how they melt the wax?'

'You're a scream!'

The woman from Zest's enormous marketing department was loudly phoning her office.

'It's fabulous: we're on target. We've the rest of the day here because the light's so good that Ivan says we can shoot until at least six. Then tomorrow we're going up to the pueblo . . . '

Izzie's cell phone buzzed discreetly and she fumbled in her giant tote until she found it. She loved big bags that could hold her organiser, make-up, spare flat shoes, gum, emergency Hershey bars, water bottle, and flacon of her favourite perfume, Acqua di Parma. The minus was triumphantly holding up a panty liner by mistake when you were actually looking for a bit of note paper. How did they always manage to escape their packaging and stick themselves to inappropriate things? They never stuck to knickers as comprehensively as they did to things in her handbag.

'How's it goin'?' asked Carla on a line so clear that she might be in the next room instead of thousands of miles away in their Manhattan office.

'It's all going fine,' Izzie reassured her. 'Nobody's screamed at anybody yet, nobody's threatened to walk off in a temper, and the shots are good.'

'You practising magic to keep it all running smooth, girl?' asked Carla.

'Got my cauldron in my bag,' replied Izzie, 'and I'm ready with the eye of newt and the blood of a virgin.'

Carla laughed at the other end of the phone. 'Not much virgin blood around if Ivan Meisner is the photographer.'

Ivan's reputation preceded him. As a photographer he might be a genius who had *W* and *Vogue* squabbling over him, but the genius fairy hadn't extended her wand as far as his personality.

Nobody watching him idly caressing his extra-long lens as he watched young models could be in any doubt that he considered himself a bit of a maestro in the sack as well as behind the Hasselblad.

'He's definitely got his eye on Tonya,' Izzie said, 'but don't worry. I'm going to put a stop to his gallop.'

'Can somebody tape that?' Carla asked. 'I'd like to see him when you've finished with him. *Hard Copy* would love film of Ivan having his lights punched out.'

Izzie laughed. Carla was one of the few people who knew that, at fourteen, Izzie Silver had had a reputation for being a tomboy with a punishing right hook. It wasn't the sort of thing she'd want widely known – violence was only in fashion when it came to faking hard-edged shoots in graffiti-painted alleyways – but it still gave her an edge.

'Don't mess with the big Irish chick,' was how some people put it. Izzie was more than able to stand up to anyone. Ruefully, she could see how that might put some men off. Before Joe, it had been six months since her last date. Not that she cared any more: you had to move on, right?

'Carla, you're just dying to see me hit someone, aren't you?' laughed Izzie now.

'I know you can because of all those kickboxing classes,' Carla retorted. 'Sure, you're the queen of glaring people into silence with the evil eye and telling them you don't take any crap, but I'd still prefer to see you flatten someone one day. For fun. Pleeese . . . ? I hate the way Ivan hits on young models.'

'He won't this time,' Izzie said firmly. 'He might try, but he won't get anywhere. Since the company have actually spent hard cash to fly me here to make sure it all runs smoothly, I'm going to do my best. Any news at your end?'

'No, it's pretty quiet. Rosanna's off sick so we're a woman down. Lola spotted a gorgeous Mexican girl on the subway last night. She got a photo of her and gave the girl her card, but she thinks the kid's scared she's from immigration or something, so she may not call. Stunning, Lola says. Tall, with the most incredible skin and fabulous legs.'

'Oh, I hope she phones,' Izzie said. As bookers, they were always on the lookout for the next big thing in modelling. Despite the proliferation of television shows where gorgeous girls turned up hoping to be models, there were still scores of undiscovered beauties, and there was nothing worse than finding one and having her not believe the 'I work for a model agency' schtick.

'Me too. Lola keeps glaring at her phone. It's going to catch fire soon.'

'No more news?'

'Nah. Quiet. What's the Zest marketing guy like? I heard he's a looker.'

Izzie grinned. Carla had said she was never dating ever again just the previous week.

'He couldn't come. They sent a woman instead.'

'You can catch up on your beauty sleep, then,' laughed Carla, before hanging up.

When shooting was over for the day, the entire crew repaired to their hotel's restaurant-cum-bar for some rest and

relaxation. There was a sense of a good day's work having been done, but it wasn't quite party time. That would be tomorrow night when the catalogue shots were all finished, when nobody had to be up at the crack of dawn and hangovers didn't matter.

Besides, the Zest marketing woman was there watching everything alongside Izzie, and there was too much money in catalogue shoots to screw it all up mid-shoot.

Izzie knew what happened on shoots when party night had happened too early. Someone phoned *her* up at the office and screamed that her models had gone on the razz, and that the following day had been a blur with the make-up people working extra hard to hide the ravages of sleep deprivation, while general hungover irritation meant it was a miracle any shots were taken at all.

'Menus,' said the Zest woman cheerily, handing them out like a prefect at school trying to quash any naughtiness in advance. 'There's a salad bar too, if anyone wants anything lighter.'

A line of skinny people who did their best to never eat heavy if possible, stared grimly back at her. No mojitos tonight, then.

Food was finally ordered, along with a modest amount of wine and, thanks to the hair guy, who hated bossy women, cocktails.

'Just one each,' chirped the Zest woman, who had the company credit card to pay for all this, after all.

As Izzie had predicted, Ivan wasn't long slithering up the cushioned wooden seat to where Tonya sat nursing something alcoholic from the cocktail menu.

Izzie sat down on a stool opposite Ivan and Tonya, simultaneously patting Tonya comfortingly on the knee, and giving Ivan the sort of hard stare she'd perfected after years of dealing with men just like him.

'How's Sandrine?' she said chattily. Sandrine was his wife and a model who'd miraculously staved off her sell-by date by being labelled a super. Normal models were considered elderly once they hit twenty-five; supers could get another ten years out of the industry if they were clever.

Ivan didn't appear to get the hint. He took another long pull of his margarita, gazing at Tonya over the top of his salt-encrusted glass.

'She's in Paris doing editorial for *Marie Claire*,' he said finally.

Tonya, bless her, looked impressed. Izzie wished she could explain to the younger girl that she wouldn't absorb Sandrine's brilliance by osmosis. Sleeping with a supermodel's photographer husband didn't make you a supermodel. It just made you look stupid, feel used and get a bad reputation.

Izzie had another try at the subtle approach. She *was* working for Tonya's agency, after all. No point in irritating the photographer so much that he took awful shots of the girl, thus screwing up both her career and her part of the catalogue shoot. Izzie knew that wasn't what her boss had in mind when she said 'make sure nothing goes wrong'.

'Ivan's married to Sandrine,' Izzie informed Tonya gently, as if Tonya didn't already know this. 'She's so beautiful and so successful, but she travels a lot. It must be so hard to be apart when you're married,' Izzie added thoughtfully. 'You must miss Sandrine so much. I bet you're dying for the moment you can phone her. How far ahead is Paris? Ten hours, eleven?'

Izzie was not a natural liar. Catholic school had done its work a long time ago, but for her job, she'd perfected the art of subtle manipulation. A tweak here, an insinuation there, was all it took.

She could see the rush to Ivan's brain: would the smooth fire of the local tequila make it there first or would her suggestion about phoning his wife overtake it?

A moment passed and Ivan reached into his jacket for his cell phone.

Izzie allowed herself a small, internal smile.

Too much cocaine and general stupidity had eroded Ivan's logistic skills but still he had a certain bovine intelligence. He was aware that Izzie knew the bookers in his wife's agency and that, if he misbehaved, the news would reach Sandrine. He began to dial.

His wife was the sort of model Tonya might be one day, given plenty of kindness and therapy and people to stop predatory males hitting on her.

Quite why Sandrine had married Ivan in the first place was beyond Izzie. Models knew that photographers were drawn to models like flies to jam. And that DCOL (doesn't count on location) was such a given in their industry that it should have been part of the model-wedding-vow thing. *I promise to love, honour, obey and look the other way if he/she has a fling doing a shoot in Morocco.* However, it didn't work quite that way with the supers; when you could have any man on the planet, you didn't stand for being cheated on.

When Tonya got up to go to the women's room, Izzie quickly slipped into the young model's seat, to make sure that Ivan couldn't get close to her when she came back.

Eventually, the rest of the group joined them, the food arrived and the danger of Ivan getting Tonya on her own for a quiet tête-à-tête passed.

The group shared a low-key meal and Ivan wandered off with his assistant early on. Probably to score coke, Izzie guessed – and not the liquid type that refreshed, either. After all, he didn't need to look good in the morning.

Once he was gone, she left Tonya in the gentle hands of the other models and the make-up and hair people, and went to bed.

Her room was large, decorated in the soft ochre that seemed to be part and parcel of New Mexico, and looked out over a pretty pool that was surrounded by ceramic candle-holders, all lit, twinkling like so many stars. Opening the double doors on to the small terrace, she stepped outside for a moment and breathed in the balmy night air.

There were two wooden loungers on her terrace, along with a little blue and yellow tile-topped table with a lit citronella candle to ward off the giant flying things that seemed to hum in the air. A heady scent of vanilla rose from below, as well as a more distant smell of garlic cooking. It was all very romantic and begging for a special someone to share it with. Even the bath in the huge ensuite was big enough for two. Sad for one, though.

Izzie sighed and went back into the room. She stripped off her simple belted shirtdress and sank on to the bed, trying not to worry how many other people had sunk on to the heavy Dupion coverlet – hotels were *freaky*. So many other people using exactly the same space, over and over again, leaving their auras and their sweat there – and laid down. Her head felt heavy from the heat and she was tired. Tired and emotional.

She looked at her phone again. No messages. What was it Oscar Wilde said: that it was better to be talked about than not to be talked about?

Cell phones were the same. No matter how often people moaned about them, it was nicer to be phoned than not to be phoned.

She ran one unvarnished fingernail over the rounded plastic of the screen, willing some message to appear there. But there was nothing: the blankness mocked her.

He hasn't called. What's he doing?

What was the point of being wise, clever, savvy – all the things she'd worked hard at being – when she was risking it all for a married man?

Izzie closed her eyes and let the now-familiar anxiety flood over her. She loved Joe. Loved him. But it was all so complicated. She longed for the time when it would be simpler.

Of course, it was complicated simply because of the sort of person Joe was. He might be a tough member of the Wall Street elite, a hedge-fund man who'd gone out on his own with a friend to set up a closed fund and was slowly, relentlessly pushing towards the billionaire Big Boys' Club. But he was a family man underneath it all, and that was where the complications appeared.

Raised in the Bronx, married at twenty-one, a dad at twenty-two, his professional life may have been fabulous but his home life had gone sour long ago. What he did have, however, were three sons whom he adored, and while he was living a separate life from his wife, they were trying to shield their two younger sons from the break-up.

When Izzie thought about it, about the tangled mess she'd walked into when she'd fallen for Joe, she felt nauseated. She knew that people of her age or Joe's carried baggage with them but his baggage made their relationship so difficult.

No wonder she felt nauseated.

Funnily enough, someone being sick had set it all off. That someone was Emily De Santos, one of the Perfect-NY partners.

She'd bought a ticket for a twenty-thousand-dollar-a-plate lunch at the Plaza in aid of a child-protection charity which focused on kids from disadvantaged areas.

'Do you think those rich people would have heart attacks if they actually saw a child from a disadvantaged area?' wondered Carla when word came down from on high that Emily – a social climber so keen she carried her own oxygen – was too ill to take her place at the lunch and wanted a warm body to stand in for her.

‘Carla, don’t be mean,’ said Izzie, who was the only one without any actual appointments that lunchtime and was therefore about to race home to swap her jeans and chocolate Juicy Couture zippered sweat top for an outfit fit for the Plaza’s ballroom. ‘They’re raising money. Isn’t that what matters? Besides, they don’t have to do a thing for other people. They could just sit at home and buy something else with their twenty thousand bucks.’

‘Sucker,’ said Carla.

‘Cynic,’ said Izzie, sticking her tongue out.

She was between blow-dries, so her hair needed a quick revamp and Marcello, one of her favourite hairstylists, said he could fit her in if she rushed down to the salon.

‘I’m channelling Audrey Hepburn,’ he announced, as Izzie arrived, having changed at home and tried to put on her make-up in the cab downtown to the hair salon.

‘You better be channelling her bloody quickly,’ Izzie snapped, throwing herself into the seat and staring gloomily at her hair.

‘You’re right,’ Marcello agreed, holding up a bit of Izzie’s hair with his tail comb, as if he dared not touch it with his actual hand. Marcello was from Brooklyn, had been miserable in high school when he wasn’t allowed to be prom queen, and made up for it by being a drama queen for the rest of his life. ‘Forget Audrey. I’m seeing … a woman leaning into a dumpster searching for something to eat and she hasn’t washed her hair in a month …’

‘Yes, yes, you are so funny, you should have your own show, Marcello. I have to leave here in twenty minutes to go to the Plaza – can you not channel Izzie Silver looking a bit nice? Why do I have to look like someone else?’

‘The rules of style, sugar,’ Marcello sighed, like someone explaining for the tenth time that the earth wasn’t flat. ‘Nobody wants to look like themselves. Too, too boring. Why be yourself when you can be somebody more interesting?’