

CHAPTER ONE



Matilda Cameron peered through her car windscreen as the wipers sluiced away the water that was bucketing from the heavens. In the gloomy pre-dawn light she could just about make out a long Regency terrace to her right. With its ornate white stucco facade, rectangular windows and black wrought-iron balconies, it reminded her of a soggy wedding cake. To her left lay a pebbled seafront and a grey expanse of what passed for ocean in this part of the world.

She was there, at such a godforsaken hour, an hour when she would normally be in a nice warm bed, because today was the day that they were photographing the stills for a new campaign for DeVere & Soames, one of Britain's most celebrated jewellers. A jeweller with four Royal Warrants, no less, as Jamie Soames, great-great-great-grandson of one of the original founders, had impressed upon her when she'd met with him in his Albemarle Street offices a few weeks earlier.

'I'm sure you realise how important it is that we get this absolutely right,' Soames had said, a tight smile on his patrician features.

'Yes, absolutely right,' she had assured him, trying not to subconsciously mimic his accent. 'You're in the best hands in the country; I know you'll be delighted with our work.' His business was dependent on it. Her job was riding on it.

The weather, however, wasn't cooperating.

She could see Cara, the stylist, parked a few metres away, the back of her station wagon piled high with suit bags, shoe boxes and hats, and there was Paul, Mattie's favourite hair and makeup wizard – 'Honestly, the guy could make a rusty brillo pad look good,' Bianca, her boss at Three Bees, had said when she'd first recommended him – parked next to Cara. There was no sign of the two young models, Cassandra and Jemima, who Mattie had cast last week, nor was the honeywagon anywhere to be seen.

She glanced at Orazio, who was in the passenger's seat beside her, drumming his fingers on the dashboard and looking every bit the temperamental hot young Italian photographer. He was being hailed as the new Demarchelier and was in such high demand in London and New York that she'd been wildly lucky to book him for the dates they needed. She'd only succeeded due to a combination of dogged persistence and major sucking up to his agent. He didn't drive, so she'd picked him up from his Peckham terrace at the excruciatingly early time of 5.30am, loading his camera gear into the back of her car, and they had been sitting, watching the rain on the Brighton seafront, for the past

half-hour. She fumbled in her bag for an antacid – her stomach was in knots. She hadn't had time for more than coffee before they'd left and there was nowhere open. Not that she was getting out of the car in this downpour in any case. She ground the chalky tablet between her teeth and then, for something to do besides worry about the weather, consulted the call sheet yet again. She reviewed the plans for the day's shoot, the brief for the photographer, the head shots of the models, the permits that allowed them to shoot, and the contacts for everyone involved, including the absent honeywagon company. They were also still waiting on DeVere & Soames' security guard with a gazillion quids' worth of diamonds, rubies and emeralds. The reason they were all there in the first place. The success of today's shoot, the whole campaign actually, was in her hands. The buck – as Bianca hadn't failed to remind her – stopped with her. It had been her creative concept, her strategy, and she couldn't afford to bugger it up, not if she wanted to hold onto her job, not to mention get away to her long-awaited holiday on time.

Ten days. Switzerland. With Johnny. Snow-capped mountains, postcard-perfect chalets and romantic log fires. She could almost taste the whipped cream on top of the hot chocolate. Sighing, she got out her phone and punched in a number from the sheet. It was going to be a long day.

As Mattie was dialling, an enormous trailer bearing the fifties-style curling logo 'Sweet As' rumbled around the corner. 'Well, that's one less thing to worry about: the honeywagon's here – at least the girls will have somewhere to change. Now how are we going to get around this

weather?’ she asked Orazio, keeping her voice upbeat. The shoot had been organised with no time for a proper recce, nor was there an alternative date on which to do it, given Orazio’s heavily booked schedule. Not waiting for his answer, she texted Cara. *Any idea what’s happened to Cassandra and Jemima?*

Cara’s reply pinged back instantly. *Mimi’s mum’s car died. They’re on the 8.30 train.*

Mattie frowned. There wasn’t much daylight to work with in winter and this would mean that they were behind before they’d even begun. Hair and makeup alone would take at least an hour. For each girl.

Too impatient to text again, she dialled. Cara answered before the phone even had a chance to ring. ‘I’ll go and pick them up later,’ Mattie said. ‘Do you want to get everything out of the car and into the wagon? I’ll get Paul to set up and then Orazio and I’ll scout a few locations, see if there’s anywhere in this godforsaken place that’s under cover and out of the rain.’

‘No worries, Mats. I’m on it.’ Cara was, like Mattie, one of the Aussie advertising mafia, blow-ins from downunder who held the London media world to ransom with their never-say-die attitude and ability to work hard and play even harder. Needless to say, their more laidback, self-deprecating British colleagues couldn’t make them out at all.

Mattie had been dazzled and intimidated in equal measure by Cara from the moment she met her. The fashion stylist’s petite rear, as round as a peach and clad in shiny copper-coloured jeans, had been sticking out of a cupboard

in the Three Bees offices. 'Where the fuck are the new Manolo samples?' she cursed. 'I'll be ropable if anyone's taken them without checking with me first.'

As Cara stood up, Mattie saw that she had long poker-straight platinum-blond hair and the features of a porcelain doll. With her slim figure and the delicate bones of a prima ballerina, Cara looked like she'd be knocked over in the first gust of wind, but in reality she was a tough operator with a vocabulary saltier than a pirate's. That, combined with the fact that most of the time she dressed as if she were on her way to the Stella McCartney front row, meant that the rest of the office – and their clients – were in equal awe and terror of her. She looked exactly like the kind of precious, high-fashion princess that Mattie had little in common with and even less time for, but she had heard the familiar accent and softened her judgement. 'I think I saw Jasmine with them this morning,' she offered.

'Oh, right,' Cara replied, backing out of the cupboard. 'Thanks, mate. Was about to go off on one there for a minute. Proper dummy spit.'

On the surface the two girls couldn't have appeared more different – Mattie was a spiky-haired tomboy whose preferred mode of dress was jeans and a t-shirt – but after a night out when they discovered an unlikely but shared passion for *Les Mis* and a mutual infatuation with Eddie Redmayne – 'Oh, his cheekbones ...' 'No, those sleepy, sexy eyes ... God he could totally do me ...' – and a fondness for Slippery Nipple cocktails, the friendship was cemented. Never mind that Cara was a city girl who claimed to get

dizzy if she saw too much open space and only ever slept under the five stars, and that Mattie was secretly happiest outside under a million of them, the two became firm friends at work and almost inseparable outside of it.

Cara had a cool, left-of-centre aesthetic that was going to be perfect for what Mattie had in mind for the DeVere shoot, and she knew she could rely on her completely, especially if things got tricky. Which it looked like they were going to be. They'd already run through the clothes that Cara had selected to complement the jewels – 'pieces', Jamie Soames had reverently called them when he briefed her – and now all Mattie had to do was scout half a dozen locations in and around Brighton. Not too much of a tall order on any normal day in any normal country, but this was England and today's downpour was making her job almost impossible. She refused to be beaten by anything – let alone the weather – and began to brainstorm alternative locations that would offer some protection from the rain.

'Fierce. But fresh. That's what we're looking for.' Orazio was coaching the two gawky, impossibly skinny, deathly pale teenagers as they sat, hair wound around enormous rollers, having their makeup done. They'd arrived, thank Christ, and Mattie had bundled them down to the seafront and straight into the honeywagon, where Paul was on standby, brushes and tongs at the ready. She'd been alarmed to see that Cassandra had cut a full six inches off her hair since the previous week's casting.

‘How many hair extensions did you bring, mate?’ she quizzed Paul as her stomach churned with anxiety. ‘Cause we’re gonna need them all, I reckon.’

Somewhat miraculously, the rain had begun to peter out and Mattie saw a faint hint of brightness on the horizon as a watery sun struggled to break through. The security guard from DeVere had also arrived. Mattie saw Cara’s eyes flick over him, taking in his broad chest and solid, rugby-player thighs. She also noticed Cara clocking the handcuffs that bound the bulky briefcase to his wrist and suppressed a smile. She knew exactly what her friend would be thinking and flashed a warning at her with her eyes.

‘As if!’ Cara protested, getting her meaning. As Mattie laughed, she noticed that the rain had now completely stopped. Thank heavens for small mercies.

Cara gasped when the first of the necklaces was revealed. ‘Fucking hell, they are incredible!’ she said as she bent over it to get a closer look. Mattie had seen them in the DeVere showroom when she was planning the shoot. They were gorgeous but she could never imagine wearing anything as precious herself. Her budget had never run to jewellery. Even her watch was selected less for its looks than for its ability to withstand careless treatment. In fact, her most prized possessions, should anyone ever ask, would probably be her two pairs of RM Williams boots.

‘Great, super, fantastic, *si*, do that ... that thing with your eyes, Jemima.’ Orazio snapped away furiously as the girls

wobbled on spindly heels on the pebbly beach. ‘Don’t think about the cold; imagine it’s a spring morning, and you’ve got the sun on your face, you’re a spring flower, yes, tip your head up like that ... *bellissimo*.’

Mattie studied the two girls, their silk dresses fluttering in the breeze, thin arms blue with cold, jewels flashing like ice in the fading light. An idea came to her.

‘How about we pop you up there?’ She looked at Orazio, who shrugged.

‘Up there’ was two metres off the ground on a stone parapet. Both girls looked horrified. ‘Really, it’ll make a great shot,’ she reassured them. ‘Look, let me show you what I’m thinking. Orazio, give us a leg-up, will you?’ With the photographer’s assistance, Mattie sprang up the wall, scrambling with the toes of her boots to get a foothold, and hauled herself onto the ledge. It was narrower than she’d thought, and slippery from the earlier rain, but she stood poised, flinging out her arms and pointing one foot in front of her. ‘See, like this.’ She had loved gymnastics as a child, and had lost none of the agility that sport demanded.

Up high, she felt as if she could flap her arms and soar right off the narrow stone ledge, floating above the rooftops, over the sea, the pier stretching out like an index finger into the water, pointing the way to France. As she balanced on one leg, looking straight ahead rather than down at the ground, she smiled at the memory of a long-forgotten nickname ... Fearless. That was what Charlie Drummond had called her once, a long time ago. Funny, she hadn’t thought about him in years. She could clearly picture his freckled

face grinning at her and sending her teenage heart flip-flopping like one of those mood-divining fish that came in Christmas crackers. She shook her head at the memory. Another lifetime. Not one she planned to ever return to.

‘You make it seem easy,’ said Cassandra, hugging her arms around herself and looking petrified.

‘You’ll be fine,’ said Mattie, reluctantly jumping down and landing in front of her. ‘Come on, let me give you a leg-up.’

A few minutes later, Mattie hunched over a tented laptop, where the images appeared as Orazio clicked away. She let out a breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding. She loved this part; everything coming together as she’d seen it in her mind’s eye, imagining the shots blown up beyond life-size on billboards, or appearing in the pages of glossy magazines. ‘I reckon we’ve got it,’ she said to herself. The light was perfect: watery and pale. In contrast, the jewels glowed with barely contained fire. She felt a thrill of achievement. It was something she could feel in her gut; she simply, instinctively knew when she’d pulled off something special. She had been right to insist on Orazio shooting the campaign. In that moment, all of the worry over the weather and the models, all of the late nights of brainstorming and planning leading up to the shoot day were forgotten for this feeling of perfect rightness. She turned to Orazio and gave him a thumbs-up. ‘We’ve nailed it, mate.’

He shrugged. ‘*Prego.*’

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‘Can you believe tomorrow’s nearly here?’ Mattie asked her friend as they packed everything away. Cara, together with Johnny’s mate Nick, was joining them on the ski trip.

Cara winked. ‘One more sleep, mate.’ She stopped and rifled through her enormous handbag. ‘Bullet?’

‘Raspberry? No kidding! You know they’re my favourites – bloody hell, where did you get them?’

‘Special delivery from Mum. She knows what I’m missing. Thinks it might tempt me home,’ she laughed.

‘Never!’ said Mattie.

She chewed on the white chocolate-coated raspberry sweet and was instantly transported. Cicadas droning. Endless blue skies. Flies driving everyone crazy. Sitting on the back verandah, looking out at the rows of lush vines that stretched as far as the eye could see, the Shingle Hills shadowy in the distance. Her brother, Mark, beside her, doling out the lollies, holding the white paper bag up over her head so she couldn’t tell how many were left. He was at least a metre taller than her and ten years older, and she had cursed her lack of height growing up, not least at times like those. She remembered baking-hot days spent chasing the shadows of tall river gums, struggling to stay astride a saddle slick with sweat. Diving into the river – which was always ice cold and ink dark, no matter how hot it was outside – to wash off the dust after a long ride. If she tried hard enough she could almost smell the ripe, equine scent of her beloved Shakira – named after an enduring but ill-advised girl crush on the Colombian-born singer – and feel the comforting solidity of the horse’s withers beneath her. Her heart still gave an

unexpected pang when she thought of the old mare. Shakira was probably the thing she missed most about home.

Despite her assertion to Cara, she felt a sudden longing for the unrelenting heat and wide horizons, for light so bright you had to screw up your eyes against its glare. It had been more than a decade since she'd got on a plane at Sydney Airport, with nothing but a flimsy portfolio, a place at Central Saint Martins and a burning desire to escape her rural roots. She had deliberately made herself into a different person. The woman who directed million-pound advertising shoots with ease was a far cry from Tilly Cameron, the angry teenager who'd practically scorched the earth in her haste to get away from the Shingle Valley.