



'We were superglued  
to the pages of this book,  
and you'll be hooked too.'  
★★★★★ *Heat*

# unsticky

SARRA  
MANNING

How far would you go to  
get the life you want?

## About the Book

### **STATE OF GRACE**

Money makes the world go round – that’s what twenty-something Grace Reeves is learning. Stuck in a grind where everyone’s ahead apart from her, she’s partied out, disillusioned, and massively in debt. If she’s dumped by another rock-band wannabe, squashed by anyone else at her cut-throat fashion job, or chased by any more bailiffs, Grace suspects she’ll fall apart...

### **GRACE UNDER PRESSURE**

So when older, sexy, and above all, *wealthy* art-dealer Vaughn appears, she’s intrigued against her will. Could she handle being a sugar daddy’s arm-candy?

### **SAVING GRACE**

Soon Grace is thrown into a world of money and privilege, at Vaughn’s beck and call in return for thousands of pounds in luxurious gifts, priceless clothes – and cash. She’s out of her depth. Where’s the line between acting the trophy girlfriend, and selling yourself for money? And, more importantly, whatever happened to love?

**High fashion, high art, high expectations – this is *Pretty Woman* for the twenty-first century.**

# Contents

Cover  
About the Book  
Title Page  
Dedication  
Acknowledgements  
Epigraph

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen  
Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty  
Chapter Twenty-One  
Chapter Twenty-Two  
Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four  
Chapter Twenty-Five  
Chapter Twenty-Six  
Chapter Twenty-Seven  
Chapter Twenty-Eight  
Chapter Twenty-Nine  
Chapter Thirty  
Chapter Thirty-One  
Chapter Thirty-Two  
Chapter Thirty-Three  
Chapter Thirty-Four  
Chapter Thirty-Five  
Chapter Thirty-Six  
Chapter Thirty-Seven  
Chapter Thirty-Eight  
Chapter Thirty-Nine  
Chapter Forty  
Chapter Forty-One  
Chapter Forty-Two  
Chapter Forty-Three

About the Author  
Also by Sarra Manning  
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# UNSTICKY

Sarra Manning

Dedicated to the memory of Kate Jones,  
who mentored both book and author.

thanks

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'I seem fated to pass through the world without colliding with it or moving it - and I'm sure I can't tell you whether the fate's good or evil. I don't die - I don't fall in love. And if other people die or fall in love they always do it when I'm just not there.'

*Where Angels Fear to Tread*, E.M. Forster



## chapter one

'I JUST DON'T love you,' he said.

It was the most brutal dumping Grace had ever had. And she'd had a few.

But if Grace was being honest with herself, which didn't happen often, then it wasn't a complete surprise. She'd seen the light gradually dim in Liam's eyes like a torch with dying batteries. He'd begun to look at her in this bemused way, as if the actual dating was a major letdown after the months they'd spent skirting around each other and snogging furiously as they waited for the night bus. He'd even stopped holding her hand when they crossed the street, so Grace didn't need to be a cartographer to read the signs: being dumped was inevitable.

But she'd never expected it to happen on her birthday. In Liberty's. Right by the new season's Marc Jacobs bags.

'You're finishing with me?' Grace clarified, her voice metronome-steady. 'On my birthday?'

Finally Liam found the balls to look her in the eyes, before his gaze skittered away to rest on the tomato-red, outsized Hobo she'd been admiring before he turned up and crunched the day under his tatty Converse.

Grace should have known better than to arrive at Liberty's all quivery and expectant that maybe, just maybe, Liam had finally got his shit together and was going to buy her some serious designer real estate as a birthday present. She wasn't picky; she'd have settled for a key fob or a marked-down hairslide.

'I wasn't going to split up with you. Not today, anyway. But then, I don't know ... I just saw you standing there and I couldn't hold it in any longer,' Liam said heavily, shoulders slumping under his leather jacket. It was too hot for leather jackets even if you were a wannabe indie rock star in your very wildest dreams.

Grace had often wanted to tell Liam that writing whiny mope-rock anthems for teenage boys to listen to in their breaks from wanking and GCSE revision wasn't something to aspire to, and now she watched with satisfaction as little beads of sweat sprang up on Liam's pretty face even though it was cool and closeted in Liberty's. That was one of the reasons why it was Grace's happy place. There was something civilised and genteel about the thick wood panelling that hushed the merciless, hurrying world outside. Well, that and the rail upon rail of pretty frocks, the spindly shoes that looked too delicate to walk in and the beauty hall where she wanted her ashes scattered when she died. Except Liam had just gone and trashed her happy place as well as ruining her birthday.

'Why? Why are you splitting up with me? Should I mention that it's my birthday again, or is that getting boring? Jesus, Liam, what is wrong with you?' Grace's voice was slowly edging towards the red end of the dial marked 'hysterical', but really - extenuating circumstances.

Liam gingerly touched her arm as he gnawed on his pouty bottom lip because she was making this harder than he'd expected. Generally, Grace was the kind of girl he could leave in a corner and not have to worry too much about.

'Gracie, c'mon,' he said helplessly, running a hand through dirty-blond hair, his eyes shutting tight. 'I was going to wait a few days, but it all just got too much. Things aren't good between us, y'know?'

'Is it something I did?' Grace asked, taking pity on him and scrabbling in her bag for her Miu Miu shades to shield

her accusatory glare. 'What did I do wrong?'

'You didn't do anything wrong. We just don't fit.' For the greatest undiscovered singer/songwriter of his generation, Liam was being annoyingly vague. Grace could see he was searching wildly for an excuse. 'Your hair,' he mumbled finally. 'I don't think you should have dyed it black.'

'You're splitting up with me because of my *hair*?'

They both knew that it had only five per cent to do with Grace's hasty decision to go from honey blond to blue black after watching a series of Bettie Page shorts at a Burlesque all-dayer. It was meant to have signalled a new, edgier Grace but it had just made her look peaky and stained her Cath Kidston towels.

'No,' Liam prevaricated. 'Yes - I don't know. Look, we can still go out tonight and hook up or whatever, but I just don't think we're heading anywhere serious, so what's the point of pretending any more? But I got you a card - here.' He proffered a creased pink envelope like it was all done and they could just move along because there was nothing to see here. She was good for a 'hook-up or whatever', but she was never going to make his heart go pitter-patter.

'You're an asshole,' she hissed, voice quivering with the threat of tears. 'You could have picked any other day and cobbled together some lame excuse but instead you do it now, *here*, and you don't even have the decency to be screwing someone behind my back.'

'Don't make a scene, Gracie ...' Liam said in a shocked whisper.

'I'll make a bloody scene if I want to.'

Liam was shuffling his feet like he was about to bolt but Grace wasn't done with him yet. Not when she could shove him square in the chest with two puny fists because he really, really deserved it. Liam rocked back on his heels, arms pin-wheeling to keep his balance, and knocked the Marc Jacobs bag off its Perspex plinth.

It tottered for one terrible second before dangling forlornly from its security chain and setting off a shrieking alarm, which would have made Grace clamp her hands over her ears if she wasn't hunting in her pockets for a ratty tissue. She could feel her mascara slowly descending as tears began to trickle down each cheek.

'You want a reason for me to break up with you?' Liam snarled, deigning to lower his head so he could get all up in Grace's face. '*This* is a reason to dump you. You can be so fucking embarrassing.'

After that pithy summing-up, he gave the hapless Marc Jacobs bag a vicious punch before stalking away.

Grace carefully rubbed her thumbs under her sunglasses, not surprised that they came away streaked with black gunk as a bevy of shop assistants hurried over. Usually, Liberty's staff could be relied upon to be discreet yet friendly. Not like in Harvey Nicks where they called her 'Madam' in a condescending manner as she fingered dresses that she couldn't possibly afford. Mind you, they didn't seem quite so friendly now.

Grace had been dumped, seen her boss taking the new, suck-up intern out for coffee and had had an email from her mother, all of which added up to make the worst birthday ever. Being barred for life from Liberty's would put the icing on the cake. A mythical cake though, because no one back in the office had any plans to take her to Patisserie Valerie this afternoon.

She swallowed hard to dispel the sob that was rising up her throat. But the next one and the one after that were all cued up and Grace's frantic gulps made her start coughing and spluttering and—

'Stop crying,' someone behind her said sharply. 'You'll make everything worse.' The voice had an arm, which curved around Grace's shoulders and ushered her towards the exit. Both his tone and grip left no room for resistance.

‘Let’s get out of here before they have you tried for crimes against expensive handbags.’

There were feet too, in highly polished brown brogues. Still coughing, Grace watched them walk alongside her scuffed ballet flats as she was steered past the flower stall and towards Regent Street. Her bag was banging against her hip with every step and this was just ridiculous – letting herself be frogmarched out of Liberty’s, eyes watering now rather than tearing, by some nameless, faceless man who was cutting a swathe through the jostling crowds as if he was going into battle. Grace slowed down as a prelude to dodging into the oncoming traffic to escape but was propelled forward by a decisive hand.

As he delivered her safely to the other side of Regent Street, Grace ground to a halt and tugged on his sleeve. ‘I’m all right now, thank you,’ she said, sniffing to get rid of the snot – she’d never felt so gross and disgusting as she did at that moment.

She glanced up then, because curiosity trumped tear-streaked vanity every time. He had a thin, clever face that was all angles, blue eyes creasing up against the glare of the sun slanting between the buildings; lips quirked in something that wasn’t quite a smile. Dark-blond hair peaked into little tufts that rippled in the slight breeze. It was easier to focus on his suit: cream, summer-weight wool by Dries Van Noten if Grace wasn’t mistaken. And Grace never was when it came to matters of fashion.

‘You don’t look all right,’ he noted crisply in etched-glass, public-school English. ‘You look as if you need a drink.’

He was old-fashioned looking, Grace decided. Not just the suit, which made him look as though he should be taking the air in one of those fifties movies set on the French Riviera, but as if he was the second male lead in one of those same films. Not matinee-idol handsome enough to get the girl, but good enough to be the best

friend of the one who got the girl. Or the arch nemesis of the one who got the girl, who had his comeuppance ten minutes before the end credits began to roll.

Also, he was old. Or *older*. Late thirties, early forties, which made this whole situation even weirder than it already was.

‘Look, I’m really sorry about causing a scene and thank you for getting me out of there, but I’m OK now. Really.’

‘Where shall we go?’ he mused, looking around. ‘Which street are we on?’

‘Conduit, and I can’t—’ But she could – for the simple reason that his arm was back around her shoulders and he was setting off with a long-limbed stride so she had to scurry to keep up or get dragged underfoot. ‘I have to get back to work,’ she panted. ‘My boss gets really pissy if I take longer than an hour for lunch.’

‘Really? He sounds very tiresome.’

‘He’s a she,’ Grace corrected him as she struggled to keep up with his long-limbed stride. She was being abducted, not to mention manhandled, in broad daylight, and wasn’t fighting or flighting. In fact, she was even glancing in the window of Moschino as she hurried past, but obviously the shock of being dumped and now being kidnapped had made her cognitive thought processes misfire.

‘Come on, chop chop,’ the man said, pulling Grace round one corner and then another until he came to a halt outside an unmarked black door and started tapping a security code into the keypad. The fight or flight part of Grace’s brain was finally firing up and telling her to run screaming for the hills or to the nearest police station. She took a tentative step to the right but his hand, which was still on her shoulder, tightened. ‘Through here,’ he said.

There was a buzzing sound and the man slowly pushed the door open and Grace was ushered over the threshold into a dark space, walls painted a rich ruby red, polished

wood under her feet and a large set of doors slightly ajar to the right. No way was she going any further than right here where she stood, unless it was back out the way she'd come in.

Someone was walking towards her, a smiling woman in a ruffly black dress and pinny, which brought to mind Laura Ashley – if she'd ever had a Goth period. 'Good to see you again, sir,' she said to the man standing behind Grace. 'Are you here for lunch?'

'Just drinks, I think. Maybe afternoon tea,' he said, finally taking his hand off Grace's shoulder and stepping forward. His sleeve brushed Grace's arm and she flinched.

The front door finally shut with a soft but decisive thud so she had the sensation that she was cocooned in this dark red place, where people only talked in low, soothing tones as if anything louder wouldn't be tolerated. It was strangely comforting and suddenly, inexplicably, Grace started to cry again.

Or cry properly, because the tears in Liberty's had just been the warm-up act and this was the main event. Being abducted had been a great diversion, but it was still her birthday and she'd still just been dumped and her life was still sucking beyond all measure. Grace felt her chest shuddering, and then the sobs that she'd managed to mute down ten minutes before were back for their encore presentation. They sounded like death rattles as they ricocheted off the walls.

'Oh dear,' the man said softly, cupping Grace's elbow and steering her carefully down the corridor, the black-clad, ruffly woman bringing up the rear. 'I'm sure he's not worth crying over. Magda will take you somewhere to get your tear ducts under control, while I order you a glass of champagne.'

Grace shrugged, or would have, if her shoulders weren't heaving, and let herself be led through a small side door and up a narrow, curving staircase. The place was like a

very red, very twisty rabbit warren. 'Bathroom's through there,' she was told in that same modulated murmur.

Diving for the nearest stall, Grace sank down on the loo so she could finally, properly, get her weep on.

The attendant averted her eyes as Grace emerged, as if she hadn't heard the muffled howling coming from the cubicle, and dabbed furiously at the shiny chrome taps as Grace washed her hands and stared despondently at her reflection in the mirror. There were dirty grey rivulets running down her cheeks, which she scrubbed away before evaluating the raw material carefully, a tube of tinted moisturiser poised and at the ready.

Parts of her face Grace liked, other parts not so much. She liked that her eyes were grey, a dark, school-uniform grey that couldn't be mistaken for blue or green or hazel, and framed by long lashes so close-edged that she always looked as if she hadn't taken off her eyeliner the night before. There were freckles, the bane of her teenage years, but which she now hoped made her look younger, and a mouth that drooped downwards, even when she was smiling. Her grandmother had constantly told her to stop pouting when she was little but actually the sulking had paid off in the permanent jut of her lower lip.

But Grace's nose was too pronounced to be excused, especially in profile where it looked alarmingly Roman; her forehead wore a deep furrow right between her brows and her chin was in a state of confusion between square and pointed.

It wasn't a face that anyone could get lost in. It was a face that needed a splash of red on the lips, a little animation to give it some distinction. Right now, it would have to settle for some light base coverage, more mascara and a dab of berry lip-stain.

'That's better,' he said when Grace arrived at his table. She'd been all ready to make a dash for the front door, but



there had been another smiling, murmuring woman stationed at the foot of the stairs to guide her into the room behind the big doors Grace had glimpsed before. The promised glass of champagne was waiting for her, along with her bossy abductor. He prodded the cleft in his chin with one long finger as she sat down with her knees tightly pressed together, back straight.

When she'd dressed this morning, Grace had been delighted with the bold seventies' floral graphic on her tunic dress. It was the perfect outfit for grubbing around all day in the fashion cupboard before spending the night crawling from one barstool to another. Now it clashed with the orange velvet of her over-stuffed armchair and made Grace feel less like she was working the Pucci revival and more like she'd failed the auditions to become a C-fucking-Beebies presenter.

'I really have to go back to work,' she muttered, glancing out of the window, almost unable to believe that there was a normal London street outside and not Munchkin Land. His amused smile, as if Grace was a performing seal with a beach ball balanced on her nose, was beginning to grate on her already frayed nerves.

'Don't be so silly,' he said lightly, as if going back to work was an alien concept. 'Drink your champagne.'

Grace decided to stay but only because she didn't want to struggle out of the sinking embrace of the chair like a demented Jack-in-the-box. Besides, she really did need a drink.

'I'm Grace,' she said, her voice sounding rusty as if she hadn't used it for weeks. He gravely shook the hand she was holding out, his fingers warm, brushing against her palm just long enough that she snatched her hand back.

'Vaughn,' he offered, before turning back to the menu.

'Is that your first name or your last name?'

He shrugged. 'Does it matter?'

It didn't really. Grace raised her glass in silent thanks before taking a sip. The bubbles, light and effervescent, evaporated on her tongue as she took three good swallows.

'I have no idea what *fleur de sel* or *grue nougatine* are,' he remarked conversationally as he looked at a menu. 'Do you?'

'*Fleur de sel* is just a fancy kind of sea salt and *grue* are pieces of roasted cocoa beans - don't know about the *nougatine* though. I like baking,' she added defensively as one of his eyebrows arched up because second male leads always had voluble eyebrows.

'Shall we just have chocolate cake instead? And tea. We should definitely have tea. But not Earl Grey, it's too watery. Darjeeling?'

Grace instinctively knew that there was no point in arguing. 'Darjeeling's fine,' she said, picking up her glass again.

All he had to do was raise a finger, quietly and unobtrusively, to have the waitress breaking the world speed record and start scribbling away his order for four different kinds of chocolate cake.

Grace crossed her legs as the waitress scurried away. The champagne was fizzing its way down to her empty stomach, making her restless enough to jiggle her ankle and wonder what, exactly, she was doing here making stilted conversation in a polite voice that didn't sound as if it belonged to her. Her stilted conversation was all used up now anyway, so Grace looked around her.

They were sitting in a room which seemed to have been imported straight from the kind of crumbling country manor that the BBC used for period dramas. There were mismatched chairs, some upholstered, some hardbacked, gathered around scratched and scarred but deeply polished tables, yet the whole effect shrieked money rather than genteel poverty. Maybe that was down to the clientèle. Grace glanced at the last stragglers from the lunch setting

as they lingered over coffee and brandy as if they had all the time in the world and no recession to worry about. Nothing to worry about at all, in fact. Grace's gaze came to rest on Liam's crumpled pink envelope lying on the table and she couldn't help the tiny but heartfelt sigh that leaked out of her mouth.

'I'm glad that you're not crying any more,' Vaughn said, with one of those not-quite smiles. 'If you cry on your birthday then you cry every day for the rest of the year.'

'My grandmother used to tell me that too,' she confided with a not-quite smile of her own. 'Also, that it was bad luck to put new shoes on a table.'

'I think our grandmothers must have been related. Mine was quite evangelical about the dangers of chewing too fast.' It was freaky how he managed to affect such ease while pinning her down with that intent blue stare. 'So, how old are you today?'

'Twenty-three.'

When he smiled properly, Grace got an echo of what he could be. Younger, handsomer; someone that she'd get a totally inappropriate older-man crush on because he smiled as if Grace was the only other person in the world who got the joke. 'And on the twenty-third of July? That's very propitious. Did you know the number twenty-three is meant to have mystical qualities? There are twenty-three letters in the Greek alphabet, twenty-three seconds for blood to circulate around the body ...'

'David Beckham was number twenty-three when he played for Real Madrid.' Great. Now she was talking utter shite. 'Not that it ended well for him.'

'Twenty-three is a good number,' Vaughn said emphatically, as a teapot and delicate doll-sized cups and saucers were reverently placed in front of them. 'This is going to be a very interesting year for you, I can tell.'

'Was twenty-three an interesting year for you?'

'Yes,' he said shortly. 'Will you pour? Milk, two sugars.'

Grace lifted the teapot and tested its heft before she carefully poured tea, added milk to the exact colour of a pair of American tan tights and dropped in two spoonfuls of sugar. 'Do people always do what you tell them to?' she asked, before her courage exited stage left. 'People never do what *I* tell them to.'

Vaughn peered critically at the cup she pushed towards him, then obviously decided that it met his exacting standards. 'By people, you mean your ex?'

She considered the question. 'Not just Liam. Everyone. People just push right past me like I'm not even there.' She shook her head. 'I'm sorry, I'm not usually like this. I mean, I'm not so mopey. I guess I've got a bad case of the birthday blues.'

'You just haven't learned how to make people take you seriously yet,' Vaughn said lightly, leaning forward. 'I find not saying please or thank you helps.'

'I'm genetically programmed to say please and thank you even when I'm not pleased or thankful.' And not to rest her elbows on the table or put the milk in first or any of the other life lessons she'd had drummed into her under the pain of death of her grandmother's most disapproving look. No weapon forged could defeat *that*. 'So, do you make a habit of abducting young women from department stores?'

'I was wondering when you were going to ask me that.'

'Well, I should probably have asked during the abduction but I was too freaked out,' Grace said just a little snottily, so Vaughn would know that she had some backbone.

'Anyway, I wonder if I could ask you for a small favour?'

The way he cut right across anything Grace said was annoying. Not as annoying as the sudden lightbulb moment that *this* ... the being taken for tea and cakes and awkward chit-chat ... had some sinister ulterior motive, which probably involved schoolgirl outfits, whips, and possibly a wife with lesbian tendencies while he filmed the whole shebang.

Grace dragged herself out of the voluminous depths of the chair as their cakes arrived. Which was a pity because the milk-chocolate tart looked deadly. 'I'm going,' she announced icily. Well, it had sounded icy in her head; the reality was a little more sullen. 'I know *exactly* what kind of favour you're talking about and the answer's no. A world of no.'

Vaughn flashed her a smile, which was bordering on a smirk. Grace was starting to dislike him in the way that she disliked Kiki, her boss, and Mrs Beattie, her landlord, and Dan, Liam's best friend, and a whole cavalcade of other people who looked at her with that same blend of sneering condescension. 'Be a good girl and sit down,' he said calmly. 'Haven't you caused enough scenes for one day?'

'Just who do you think you—'

'I saw you in Liberty's and decided that you were the sort of person who'd know her way around a French cuff.' He was already pulling a small, dark purple box out of his pocket as Grace snapped her mouth shut so quickly that she bit her tongue. 'I lost one of my favourite cufflinks this morning, popped out to buy some new ones and I think the least you can do after I've bought you a glass of champagne is help me attach them.'

Grace sank back down in an ungainly sprawl. 'How did you fix your cufflinks this morning then?' she asked suspiciously, because there was probably still a wife lurking.

'Ineptly,' Vaughn explained, holding up one hand so she could see an untethered shirtcuff. 'I'd be for ever in your debt.'

Grace risked an eye roll as she snatched up the Liberty's box and made a vague gesture in the direction of his arm. Vaughn lowered his eyes contritely, which Grace didn't find remotely convincing, as she slipped the pair of Paul Smith cufflinks, which were the same blue as her favourite denim

mini she'd lost at Glastonbury the year before, neatly out of the box. Then she took his hand.

It was a strangely intimate moment. Grace scraped her chair forwards and awkwardly patted her knee so Vaughn could rest his hand on it while she gathered up the excess sleeve. She'd done things, countless things with countless boys under cover of darkness, then conveniently forgotten about them the next morning, but now, with her head lowered, Vaughn's pulse thudding steadily against her fingers, she could feel a blush staining her cheeks.

She did not have a father fixation. Or a thing for older men. Or the need for a strong paternal signifier. She was not that sad kind of cliché. No, she was just a girl having a bad day who'd drunk a glass of champagne on an empty stomach.

'All done,' Grace said crisply, pushing Vaughn's other hand away. He had beautiful hands - long-boned and elegant as if they spent most of their time conducting symphonies with lots of complicated arpeggios in them or performing delicate surgery on previously no-go parts of the brain. Though he had very knobbly wrists. 'I really have to get back to work,' she told him now, 'or they'll think I've been kidnapped.'

'Would you like a cake to take back with you?'

She really, really would. But ... 'No, thank you,' she said primly, standing up.

Cutting her nose off to spite her face was a vocation with Grace. And she suspected that Vaughn knew it too, by the wry twist of his lips as he paused to admire his gleaming cufflinks. 'Well, I hope you enjoy what's left of your birthday,' he said, like he really couldn't care one way or another.

And now, Grace wasn't walking away but hanging back, the hem of her tunic catching against the arm of his chair. 'I shouldn't have snapped at you,' she blurted out. 'I'm sorry.'

‘Another reason why people take me seriously is because I never apologise even when – no, *especially* when I should,’ he told her coolly. ‘No pleases, thank-yous or sorries – remember that and you might have that interesting year I was talking about.’

It seemed like the right time for a brisk handshake, but when Grace extended her hand, Vaughn bent his head and kissed it. It was a proper kiss, brief and warm, that made her pull her hand away with a grunted goodbye.

Grace took her bag, hurried through the room and down the long, red corridor until she was out on the street. She stood there for a moment to get her bearings. If she could feel the pavement under her feet and smell the exhaust fumes, then she wasn’t dreaming. Through the big picture window, she could see Vaughn’s tufty head bent over his plate of chocolate cakes. She hoped that he fell into a fatal sugar coma right there.

Vaughn suddenly looked up to catch her staring at him. He held her gaze until Grace felt the need to raise her hand in a limp wave. Vaughn didn’t wave back, but kept on looking at her as if he was taking an inventory until it suddenly occurred to Grace that she could simply walk away.

Though she tried to ignore it, the place where his lips had touched tingled for the rest of the afternoon.

## chapter two

THE OFFICES OF *Skirt* magazine were on the seventh floor of a high-rise block at the southernmost end of Oxford Street, which looked like it should house a branch of the Civil Service circa some time in the seventies. Their distinctly shabby building was a source of much irritation to the staff of *Skirt*, who lived and breathed the magazine's mantra of 'Fabulous is a right, not a privilege'. Not only did they have to share lift space with the other magazines of Magnum Media's empire, a motley collection of teen mags and downmarket weeklies, but they were also on the wrong side of Oxford Street to pretend they worked in Mayfair.

'Oh, we're just round the corner from Selfridges,' was a phrase heard in *Skirt*'s huge open-plan office at least twenty times a day, but in reality Selfridges was a couple of blocks away and they were actually just round the corner from one of the largest KFCs in the country. It was a sorry blot sullyng the view from the office windows but Grace didn't really care as she sat in the *Skirt* conference room. She was deciding that, if she had a superpower, it wouldn't be anything useful like the ability to turn people into stone for crimes against fashion, or the possession of a highly tuned spider sense to weed out boys with severe emotional problems. No, her superpower would be a telepathic gift to sense that she'd got stuck with the rickety swivel chair *again* and was nanoseconds away from hurtling floorwards.

Face flushing, she picked herself up off the floor and ignored the hissed 'What a *dis*-Grace' comments that the



other members of the *Skirt* fashion team never tired of, even after two years.

‘Did you have a good weekend?’ asked Courtney, the bookings editor, who obviously wanted something done in the way of filing because normally she didn’t much care whether Grace had had a good anything.

‘It was OK.’ Grace pulled a bruised banana out of her bag as Courtney delicately picked her way through a box of sushi that cost twenty pounds from the Japanese place next door. The truth was that she’d spent every waking hour since her birthday last Thursday either drunk or hungover. In fact, for one brief, unpleasant hour on Saturday afternoon, she’d been both. ‘I went to this club and—’

‘Sounds wonderful.’ Courtney didn’t even pretend to pay attention, but shook back her shiny blond hair. ‘Do you notice anything different about me?’

Grace stared blankly at Courtney’s face, which was the same as it ever was: all cheekbones and expensive dental work. ‘Collagen filler?’ she ventured timidly.

‘No! I went to this amazing spa ...’ Ten minutes later, Courtney came to the end of her spiel about the freebie spa weekend that she’d won in a raffle at some charity ball, and gave Grace a rueful smile.

‘Sorry, I bet you had an awesome weekend too,’ she said, and looked thoughtfully at Grace’s Primark blouse. ‘That hard-times chic thing is so adorable.’ Grace suspected that she was taking the piss but it was hard to tell with Courtney. She was an ex-pat American who didn’t see anything morally reprehensible about voting Republican. Or telling people that she voted Republican. Or saying that she was ‘post-humour’.

‘Well, I did a test shoot on Saturday with a photographer’s assistant and some Polish model.’ Courtney didn’t need to know that Sam and the model had got intimately acquainted in a toilet cubicle while Grace had been throwing up in a fire bucket. ‘Then I went to this club

in Hackney, where you can hook up your iPod to the sound system and they had this dance-off with the best tracks.' Again, Grace decided to gloss over the fact that she was the only person in the Western world who didn't have an iPod. 'And I got free tickets to the fashion exhibit at the V and A on Sunday and did some sketches of the Worth gowns.'

'Oh, we found some of those in the attic when Granny died,' Posy, the junior fashion editor, chimed in. 'Flogged them at Sotheby's.'

'You *auctioned* off a Worth dress?' The fashion department all winced in unison at Grace's shrill middle-class tones.

'You're such a fashion geek,' Posy wagged a chopstick reproachfully in Grace's direction. 'I've told you a million times that people only wear vintage if they can't afford new clothes or they have crippling death duties.'

There was a plethora of crushing retorts that Grace could have barked out but she contented herself with taking an angry bite of her manky banana as Kiki Curtis sailed into the room on a cloud of *Fracas* and bad vibrations. 'I've spent all morning in a merchandising meeting. Go and get me some lunch, Grace - a Caesar salad with a very light dressing and grilled salmon, not chicken.'

Kiki Curtis (though Grace had seen her passport and she'd been christened Kimberly) was the kind of brittle-thin, over-groomed fashionista who avoided direct sunlight and had never met a neutral colour that she didn't love. Grace had been recruited by Derek, the former style director after six months slaving away as an unpaid intern and getting paper-cuts from huge amounts of photocopying, filing and cutting up magazines. It had been the happiest six months of Grace's life because she also got to spend large parts of every day with her hands on silk, chiffon, duchesse satin and cashmere so fluffy and soft that she'd hold it up to her face and sigh rapturously. She'd

probably have carried on working at *Skirt* for free, but a junior position had opened up and lovely, lovely Derek had given Grace an interview, which involved sending her out on a complicated coffee run. When she'd returned with his soy milk, bone dry, caramel *macchiato*, he'd given her the job on the spot.

It was strange when all your dreams came true. Or Grace's new dreams – because her old dream was to become the new wunderkind of British fashion but she'd screwed that up by abandoning her course at Central St Martin's days before her final degree show. But *still*, her new dream to become a super stylist like Katie Grand was the next best thing, and fashion assistant on *Skirt* was the first step. Grace could still remember the victory jig she'd done when Derek had told her she was hired. 'There was absolutely no one else I could even consider giving the job to,' he'd said, when he'd taken her for an alcohol-soaked celebratory lunch at The Wolseley. 'Stick with me, kid.'

Grace had stuck with Derek for a whole two days before he'd been suddenly poached by German *Vogue*. She'd been inherited by Kiki, who'd been trying to disinherit her ever since. *Skirt's* famous 'no-fur' policy had lasted a week under Kiki's reign, but Grace was made of stronger stuff. Also, she was the only person in the fashion team who knew the postroom's extension number.

These days they had a simple understanding. Kiki made Grace's life a living hell with some abject misery served up on the side. And Grace took it like a dose of castor oil, because sooner or later, it had to be good for her.

Grace brandished her folder of ideas like a protective talisman in a to-the-death *Dungeons and Dragons* game. Her hands were still aching from wrestling with unwieldy Japanese fashion magazines the day before. 'I've got some ideas that I really wanted to put forward for the next issue.'

'Did you type them?' Kiki asked sweetly.

'Yeah, double-spaced like you told me to.'

‘Well, as long as they’re not written in your usual illegible scrawl, I’m sure we’ll manage to decipher them somehow.’ Kiki held out an imperious hand for the folder, which was making Grace’s shoulders sag under the weight of all the tear sheets and sketches she’d painstakingly collated.

‘But I really wanted to explain them myself,’ Grace said doggedly. She was sick of being sent off on some low-carb errand, only to find that her ideas had been divvied up in her absence.

‘Really, Grace, I think I can take it from here,’ Kiki said firmly. ‘You do what you’re really good at and buy me lunch.’

There was a flurry of activity from all corners of the room.

‘If you’re going out, can you get me some organic chocolate, Gracie?’

‘And I’ll have some orange juice – make sure it’s freshly squeezed but they’ve got rid of the pulp.’

‘Oh, and I want ...’

Grace snatched up some Post-its and started scribbling orders down. Even Bunny, the work experience girl, was getting in on the act. And Kiki could glare as much as she wanted, but no way was Grace adjusting her surly expression or her demands for cash upfront. If Lucie, the senior fashion editor, expected her to trawl the streets looking for organic Mexican chocolate then she could bloody well pay for it first.

Grace got back to the office in time for a riveting discussion about how nasty suburban girls shouldn’t be allowed to ruin the Hermès brand name and how dear, sweet Bunny was super-keen to write something super-fun about fashion and how it would really raise her profile on *Cherwell*.

‘Grace!’ Kiki snapped, clicking her fingers for the salad container. ‘I thought you’d gone all the way to Scotland to

get that salmon. There's been no one to take notes – poor Posy had to do it.'

'Sorry about that.' Hadn't someone told her recently that she should never apologise? Mind you, *he* wasn't here to face Kiki's wrath. 'There was this queue out of the door, and then—'

'I have things for you to do,' Kiki decreed, and just for once Grace wished that someone, somewhere, would let her finish a complete sentence. Just once. 'We're done here anyway.'

Grace could already see that her tear sheets were resting on various laps. She knew young and hungry fashion obsessives were the lifeblood of any magazine, but she was still on £14,000 a year and getting hungrier by the week so she wasn't going down without a fight. 'I'd really like some feedback on my ideas,' she said to Kiki's pronounced shoulderblades, clad in the Michael Kors cashmere jumper that Grace had called in for her, as she exited stage left, her team trailing in her wake like a family of ready-to-wear-clad fluffy ducklings. 'You said you'd think about letting me style the accessories still-lives for this issue.'

'Oh, we're getting Bunny to do that,' Posy told her brightly. 'Turns out that her godfather has a non-executive seat on the board. And she really is very visual for an intern.'

Bunny had to die, Grace decided as the other girl shot her a perky smile. 'I'd really like to set up a time to go through my ideas this week,' Grace insisted weakly. 'Your diary isn't too full.'

Kiki pursed her lips as much as the Botox would allow and Grace couldn't stop the heartfelt and desperate 'Please' that popped out.

'Oh, go on then,' Kiki capitulated, opening her office door with a slightly put-upon air. 'Ten minutes and then I want you giving Milan some serious phone. But first, let's

take a moment to appreciate your ensemble.' Kiki collapsed elegantly on her big, squidgy leather chair and waved a hand in Grace's direction. 'Go on, talk me through it.'

Kiki's incisive analysis of Grace's outfits was a daily routine that Grace bore without a murmur of protest. She suspected that it was the main reason why she was still on the payroll. It certainly wasn't for her awesome styling skills. Grace put down her folder and obediently struck a pose.

'The blouse is from Primark. It cost seven pounds,' Grace said, and watched as Kiki shuddered from being in such close proximity to a cheap, poly-cotton blend. White T-shirts from Gap were as High Street as she went. 'And I made the tulip skirt from an old vintage dress because modern antiperspirant tends to rot out the armpits.' Kiki twirled her index finger and Grace slowly rotated so she could get the full 360-degree view. 'The fishnets are from Tescos and these are Marc Jacobs flats I got on eBay.'

Kiki's eyes raked Grace up and down more thoroughly than any man ever had. 'Your fashion choices are very ... *brave*,' she cooed, eyes glinting with malice. 'I knew there was a reason why I wasn't doing volume this season and I'm telling you this as a friend, Gracie, but that skirt is doing your arse no favours.'

Grace decided that Kiki's smug, satiated look meant she was done critiquing, so she placed her folder timidly on the desk.

'Well, these are very edgy,' Kiki finally remarked, gesturing at the fan of papers spread out on her desk. 'You might want to dial that down. We're doing that *Day in the Life of a Changing Room* idea as one of the main fashion stories - should get the ad department off my back. We're going to pretend a model wrote the piece about fashion-related injuries and we all loved the vintage idea. Maybe it could be shot on geriatric models - there are always a few lurking about from the fifties.'