



IN
FASHION

JODY KLAIRE



CHAPTER 1

DARCY MCGREGOR WAS A BITCH. A big one. She knew it as she snuck into the cab before the elderly woman on crutches, but cabs were like gold dust in London. Surely an internationally acclaimed supermodel, celebrity mum, and star of *The Style Surgeon*—the best live-makeover TV show in existence, thank you very much—had more important places to be.

The cabbie turned, a scowl on his drawn ruddy face, but then his eyes twinkled and he gave her a half-smirk. “Guess I’d better not argue, or you’ll try dressing me.”

She flashed him a smile. “And you wouldn’t enjoy that?”

He coughed, turned back around, and roared the cab into life. He even closed the Perspex screen, muttering something about privacy for ladies. Good to see someone with manners.

She flicked out her mobile and tapped out a quick tweet about hackney carriages needing a redesign. What was with the bland grey anyway? So they needed to be black outside, yes, but where was the sparkle? She glanced through the screen... Better to add something about banning silly ornaments dangling from rear-view mirrors. Hawaiian Flower Chains were so last year. Frankly, it surprised her that such an apparently avid fan of her show would have such dated tastes. Was he not learning anything from watching?

London rolled on outside: The sparkle of Harrods in Christmas lights, the ice rink full of skaters in purple glow overlooked by the Gothic architecture of the Natural History Museum, the city awash with Christmas trees and snowy air. Shoppers laden with items they couldn’t afford ducked out of the way as businessmen dashed across from offices to cabs. Odd people shuffled or slunk their way along, muttering at teenagers with rucksacks and oversized headphones peering over at the ice rink. Cyclists

with tinsel on diced with danger as they whipped through the stream of traffic chased by couriers on mopeds. Fluorescent-clothed workmen in Santa hats, wide-eyed tourists rosy cheeked with cold. London in a festive rush hour. But not a touch of the cheer made any impact on her. She had parties to attend.

Her phone jingled, and she swiped to answer. "If you tell me you've broken something or are sick, I'm sending you to that hovel your father lives in."

"Hi, Mum," Susannah muttered. Sounded like she was eating something, again. "You think Barcelona is a hovel?"

"Yes." She glared out of the window at a man with a camera in hand. But when he lifted it to his face, she turned on her media-ready smile. Idiot. "It doesn't matter *where* he lives. He wouldn't know what domesticated was if it took his football away."

"You have a cleaner *and* a maid." Susannah chomped even louder. She knew full well how much it irked. "But, seeming as you love me so much, *why* am I coming to the stupid party?"

"Because you have left school, and you are not becoming a bum." Oh fantastic. The tourist was using his zoom. She hammered on the Perspex screen. "What is the hold-up?"

The cabbie half turned, then motioned to the queue of traffic trying to get around some van.

"Just take a side street," she snapped. Why wait at traffic? "Don't you sit some exam on London or something?"

He laughed, coughed up half his lungs, and tapped the wheel. "Yeah, but we have Sat Nav now." He fiddled with his radio. Was he turning it up?

"A hundred-pound if you use your brain instead. I'm in a hurry." She raised her eyebrows and thumbed to the guy with a camera. "Two hundred if you get me there in fifteen minutes."

The cabbie sucked in his chin and roared them into a side street. Some red sign said *access for residents only*.

"Don't worry 'bout that," he called over his shoulder, darting around a cyclist. "Chelsea pensioners just don't want a load of traffic."

"You know I'm still here, Mum?" Susannah muttered. "Seriously, two hundred quid?"

“What’s the issue? I give you that as pocket money.” She pulled her fake-fur coat around her—a bitch, yes, but animals were cute—and leaned back into the seat. The tip of an enormous Christmas tree glowed through the arched windows of the Chelsea Hospital. “Why do they need such a large building for a bunch of old people? Surely there are better uses.”

“Why are you in such a bad mood?” Susannah chomped louder. Probably with her mouth open and as dense-looking as her father. “You’re old too.”

“You would say that, you don’t know what a real woman is yet.” She flicked her cellulite-free legs crossed—the wonder of Pilates. Maybe she was in a mood? She shouldn’t be. Was she?

“Do you?” Susannah’s solemnity echoed.

She laughed. Silly child. “Just be ready when I come in.” She scowled out at the snow falling. Ice was not good for heels. “Pluck your bush-like brows, and when I say wax, I mean wax.”

The phone cut out. Hmm. Screen was flashing red as if Susannah had put the phone down. Oh well, must have gotten cut off.

“Kids, huh?” the cabbie said with a smile as he pulled the Perspex screen back. “My daughter is all stripy tights and black lipstick.”

She pocketed her phone in her handbag. “She’s seeking identity, not to mention teenage rebellion. Better tights and lipstick than breaking the law.” Susannah rebelled by doing her homework and spouting off nonsense about women only being looked at as trophies. “Let her grow, and be there to cheer her.”

The cabbie screwed up his face like thinking about it hurt. “My wife wants her to take her cue from you.”

Even in a bad mood? Even in the kind of mood where she thought Tower Bridge was drab and dull? Darcy gave him her most polite smile. Best appease him. “Perhaps she will when she’s ready.”

The cabbie pulled into Kensington and up to her house. White Georgian perfection in a five-storey townhouse, complete with mini-trees with lights on either side of the front door. Of course it was the most stylish on the street. Not only could she make the ugly look good, she had the touch with buildings too. Pleasing.

She pulled out her purse and flicked five fifty-pound notes at the wide-eyed cabbie. “Extra fifty if you are back here and waiting for seven.”

“You got it.” He snatched the notes off her with a grin. “You’re wonderful, Ms McGregor.”

“I know.” She headed out into the bitter air and trotted up the steps. Gladys, her wonderful maid—whom she herself trained, of course—had the door open and her favourite lemon tea at the ready. “You are a trooper.”

“Thank you, Ms McGregor.” Gladys—what a name for a twenty-something Welsh beauty. Sounded like something out of the Chelsea Hospital. “Susannah is upstairs having a bath. I left the wax on for her. Marshall wants to know if you are arriving with him... And your outfit came from Mario.”

“Marshall may greet me there but not before.” Dates were rarely interesting. So he looked good on TV. In reality, he bored her. She plucked the cup from Gladys’s trembling hand and threw her bag on the floor. Yes, Marshall didn’t come close to what she wanted. She needed perfection. She glanced at the ship-wheel barometer on the wall: the hallway was the correct temperature, 22.5 degrees. Didn’t feel like it. Somehow, seeing the ridiculous attempt at nautical fashion conjured her father’s voice from inside her. She could see him, huge man that he was, huge beard, twinkling eyes, and always a joker. “Darcy,” he’d say in his gritty voice, “I’ve sailed all around the world and not seen a girl as pretty as you.”

She tapped her fingernails to her mug, the lemon-scented steam tickling her frozen nose. He’d always been jolly, and her mother intense, but then her mother had done the rearing while he sailed around on his ships. Merchant Navy. Lucrative. If only they’d seen some of it.

“Ms McGregor?” Gladys squeaked from behind her.

Silly to fixate on the past. She turned and fixed Gladys with a stare—dark-haired, chubby, sweet, but she needed to lose two stone at least. “Yes?”

“Mario is waiting to show you the outfit.” Gladys motioned to the front room. “He wanted to check in case it needed adjustments.”

Adjustments? She honed her body. Not a pound under or over eight-and-a-half stone. Perfect.

“I did try to explain,” Gladys mumbled, scurried ahead, and pushed open the white-panelled door. “But he was set on it.”

“Mario, *why* are you here?” She strode in. Gladys had done a good job of the Christmas tree, and there were stockings hanging from the mantelpiece. Good. She put her hands on her hips.

In Fashion

Mario, a short faux-Italian who thought camp worked with a bodybuilder's physique, turned and rubbed at his "arty" beard. "Not you, Ms McGregor, but Susannah." He let out a giggle and covered his mouth with his hand. Thumb out, of course.

"Oh, in that case, stay." She clicked her fingers, and Gladys hurried off. Good luck to her trying to help Susannah preen. No girl should have such manly legs. She'd told her several times over that running was good, Pilates was good. They both elongated, not bunched. Strength and grace. But no, no, not Susannah; she wanted to play football like her father.

She sipped at her lemon tea and let out a long sigh. One could give out half their genes, but it was always a battle to remove the inadequacies of the other. Served her right for getting drunk with a footballer seventeen years ago. Good thing neither of her parents had been around to witness that little slip-up.

"Mum?" Susannah wandered in with her dressing gown on. She was unmistakably her daughter, but her father's Portuguese influence would make Susannah breathtaking when she got through adolescence. Although, knowing Susannah, she'd tie her hair back and cover it all up with baggy clothes.

"You've eaten?" Darcy stroked a stray hair from Susannah's forehead. "You need me to make something?" She glared at Mario, who was watching. Best not to show too much emotion; he might think she was nice, and it was not wise to be nice when in unpleasant company.

"No, I'm fine." Susannah glowered at Mario, who waved at her. "Marshall called again. He told me that if you didn't call back, he'd have me fired." She scowled until her forehead wrinkled up. "He threatened to fire Gladys too, twice."

"He'd better not have." Marshall had been barely tolerable as it was, but he seemed to think he could get his feet under her table. That would have to be fixed. "Gladys is far too useful."

Susannah narrowed her eyes. "This like when he clicked his fingers, and you spent the whole day having pictures taken—on *our* holiday?"

"He had a film coming out." Susannah had enjoyed the day at the hotel pool while she'd had to pretend she wanted to be drooled over. The things one had to do to be "caught" by hired paparazzi.

Jody Klair

“But he didn’t have a clue who I was.” Susannah put her hands on her hips. “Bit like you.”

Didn’t she understand they had the gaze of gossip on them? “Of course he did.” Marshall better know who Susannah was. “He was just teasing.” If he knew what was good for him. She fussed with Susannah’s hair again, dark like her father’s, with a touch of a wave through it. “He will have the two most beautiful ladies with him. How could he forget who you were?”

“You look wonderful,” Mario said, fiddling with his stubby fingers. “I know the dress will dazzle on you.”

“Yes, it will.” She smiled around her cup. Yes, she was a bitch, but at least she was a beautiful one.

CHAPTER 2

KATE BONVILSTON CLAPPED HER FROZEN hands together and let out a shuddering breath as she stood at the school gates. Always reminded her of a prison with the high walls and spiky rails on top. Wasn't much more welcoming inside. Then again, when were schools meant to be friendly places?

"Kate?"

Ah. Laura—her cheating, lying scumbag of an ex. Even the sound of the voice grated. Flipping fantastic.

She took a breath as Laura plodded over with a smirk on her face. What was her deal? "Yes?"

"You look rough. Did you catch another cold?" She laughed. Why was that funny? And when had she decided to get her nose pierced...three times? Ouch. "Bennie always uses that wash stuff. She never looks rough."

"I know." But why would she care? Why should she give a shit about her ex-friend? The ex-friend she'd been a sucker for until she'd decided on a fresh start with Laura... Yeah, that had worked out great, hadn't it? She rubbed at her aching forehead, frowning again.

Mum had issues with her frowning, some weird advice from a TV show saying it would turn men off. Hopefully men were a lot less shallow than that. The men she knew were. The Style Surgeon? She shook her head, hoping that Laura would take the hint and find someone else to natter at. Who called themselves a Style Surgeon?

"You here for Mikey?" Laura wasn't going anywhere, by the daft grin and lack of personal boundary. It had been bad enough when they *were* together. Who wanted to cuddle with an ex?

“Yes.” Why else would she be there freezing her ass off if she wasn’t waiting for her brother? If Mikey’s teachers hurried up, she might not get hypothermia...or need therapy.

“How is he?” Gone was the smugness and the Laura she’d known. Kind, quirky, compassionate peeked through. Nice to know Bennie hadn’t completely squashed that side.

“You know Mikey. He’s good.” She shrugged. Mikey had a lot more resilience than her. He smiled more too. Considering he was the one with a traumatic brain injury and he didn’t look like he understood and couldn’t always speak, he was the wisest person she knew. Maybe having more shit on his plate made the small stuff more heartening?

“Is he getting any better?” Now Laura had threaded a hand around her arm. She peered up, a soft look in her eyes.

“No, it’s permanent.” She pulled away. A sudden urge of irritation flushed through her. “What do you care anyway?”

Laura sighed. “Yes. I messed up.” She shoved her hands in her pockets. “You never let me explain. You never let me close to you...not really.”

Three mums bustled by, waved, and called out “Merry Christmas.” Kate glared up at the school. What were the teachers doing? Why did they have to wait so long to let the kids out? So they had a “disco,” but it was five o’clock. “Mikey needs dinner.”

“I want to explain... Bennie wants to.” Laura reached for her arm again. “I love her, I really love her. She loves me. I didn’t want to come between you. Can’t you see that?”

She snapped her arm away. Stepped away. “He’ll get a bad stomach if he doesn’t eat. It’ll bring on a fit.”

“I miss you, but Bennie... She’s heartbroken.” Laura stepped closer again, glancing around as if only now she got the whole being in public, school gates thing. Yeah, best the parents didn’t know too much. Don’t show, don’t get stressed. “She talks about you all the time. You don’t want to give up on so many years together, right?”

“You make it sound like I was married to her.” She shut her eyes. Great. There was the opening. Laura never missed an opening.

“Weren’t you? Even though you were with me, you spent more time with her... You were inseparable.” Laura stood shoulder to shoulder and snaked a hand down to clasp hers. “Thought it would be you and her.”

In Fashion

“You made sure it would never be.” She pulled her hand away. What were they doing in the school, having a sit-in?

“She said it had been.” Laura’s tone filled with the edge that had become so familiar. Yeah, the nice side never lasted long. “Friends with benefits?”

“Before you came along.” She slapped her hands together again. A fresh start with Laura to forget Bennie? Yeah, that had worked out. Stupid, but she didn’t even feel cold now; she just wanted to smack something. “But, then, a lot of things were better before you.”

Laura winced. “Ouch.”

“Not half of what you laid on me.” Great, now she was pitying herself? What would Mikey think of that? She was better than that. “Anyway. Enjoy the holidays.”

Laura laughed. “Ah, there’s the polite side. Always count on you to buckle. Shame you weren’t so polite with my kids.”

“Your kids throw bricks through windows and think it’s funny.” She glared at her. Yeah, the three brats only visited Laura on the weekends, but she thought filling them with sugar and sticking them in front of a computer was good for them. Kate hadn’t. But then, they’d never agreed on anything. Why had it taken so long for her to see that?

“They’re just being kids. It was an accident.” Laura strode up to the gates as her three brats ambled out, coats hanging around their waists. They looked the spit of her; they *were* the spit of her. One even stuck their middle finger up while the other started a dirty version of some pop song. Laura just laughed and ushered them to her pimped-up Subaru. How did Bennie cope? She hated kids. Guess that’s why she wasn’t doing the school run.

“Kate-oh!” Mikey’s jolly soprano rippled over the buzz of over-sugared kids. There he was, reindeer hat on, a snowman Christmas jumper with half his lunch over it, and the biggest beaming smile any nine-year-old could muster.

Her mood vanished, and she held open her arms. “Alright, babe?”

He broke into a stuttered run, his left side not quite catching up with his right, and flung himself into her arms. “I made snooooowballs.”

His American accent always sounded a bit Scottish, but it was better than hers.

“To eat?” Dumb question as there was no snow.

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“Yup.” He pulled something out of his pocket and handed it up to her. “Made this...you.”

She gave him a squeeze and tried not to pull out tissues and mop his face. Laura had always said she was more like his mother than his sister, but wasn't that what a big sister really was anyway? She pulled open the card, which told her she was the coolest sister ever complete with igloo and some kind of penguin, if the flippers on black blob were anything to go by.

“Thanks, babe.” She scooped him up and wriggled him about. He giggled, carefree and joy-filled. “You're the coooolest brother.”

He pulled back and gazed up at her with awe. “I am?”

Yeah, who cared about exes when Mikey was around? “Yep, who else would I sing carols with?”

He burst into “Silent Night” amid fits of giggles.

She held his freezing hand and led him across the busy road. Would take ages to warm up, even walking. Ah well. It was Christmas. They'd warm up with song.

CHAPTER 3

IT WAS A LITTLE-KNOWN FACT to the millions of followers on social media that Darcy McGregor, in possession of an award, was more smug than most. She enjoyed the victory over her fellow celebrities, the victory over other shows, the victory over those in the media who tried blackening her good name, and that her name looked good on expensive chunks of gold.

“Darcy, you’re wonderful,” Marshall oozed, swanning over and kissing her on the cheek. They both turned to the camera, beamed, and snuggled close.

“I know.” She shoved him away and headed to the side. Had he really threatened to fire Susannah? Could one fire a family member? Be forced to resign as a daughter? She held up the award for Susannah to see. “What do you think?”

“That a load of money went into that, and all it’ll do is sit on the shelf.” Susannah shrugged, her sleek brown hair around her slender shoulders, dress tight at the waist and flowing over her hips. She looked delightful when dressed correctly. “Probably enough to pay for someone’s retirement.”

“They can pay for their *own* retirement.” She pursed her lips. Marshall was approaching again.

“Darcy, you’re a busy thing, aren’t you?” He smiled at her and tapped her on the buttock. He was good stock. Well-known, well-established acting dynasty. His frame was elegant, his jaw broad, and he did look right on camera. “You haven’t had time for me.”

Susannah glared up at him. “She’s a woman, not a piece of meat. Hands off.”

Darcy laughed. She shouldn’t encourage her, but it was endearing.

Marshall looked Susannah up and down. “Why don’t you run off and get me a glass of champagne?”

“Get your own champagne,” Susannah snapped back. “You could do with the exercise.”

Marshall narrowed his eyes at her. “If you don’t want to lose your job, girl, get me a champagne.” He clicked his fingers. “Now.”

“Stay where you are,” Darcy said, her tone icy to her ears as she moved in front of Susannah. He must know Susannah was her daughter. Who didn’t know how wonderful she was as a mother? *Shimmer Magazine* had voted her Best Mother five years on the roll. “Marshall, she has more column space than you, darling. At least be a good sport about it?”

Marshall sucked in his chin. “Column space? Who would want to write about a nobody like her?”

“Susannah is my baby girl.” She yanked Susannah to her, giving her the best motherly squeeze she could. Another camera—she placed a kiss on her forehead and beamed at the lens—trying not to let the odd curl of anger in her stomach show.

“And a photo opportunity,” Susannah muttered and folded her arms. “Whoever *you* are, you’re a sleaze.”

Marshall narrowed his eyes. “I’m an award-winning actor, girl.”

“So? Why does that make you clever?” Susannah’s eyes glinted like his tone hurt. “Why does that give you the right to talk to people that way?”

The anger bubbled. Susannah was right. But the key was to keep cool. Cameras were watching.

“The fact I have more money,” Marshall hissed, towering over her. Something odd rumbled up at his tone, icy and fiery all at once. “And I’m worth more than a little dy—”

Darcy slammed her fist into his jaw.

He dropped to the floor with a yelp.

Susannah stared at her with complete awe. “Nice shot, Mum.”

Her hand was swelling. She would have puffy fingers for days. What would the skin care sponsor say? They didn’t pay her to advertise puffy fingers, did they?

“Bitch.” Marshall clambered to his feet and brushed himself off, his chin sporting a gash. “We’ll talk about this through my agent.”

In Fashion

“Not unless you want me to accuse you of...” Think. What would an ignoramus like him worry about?

“Assault, harassment, discrimination...” Susannah stood beside her and lifted her swelling hand into the air. “My mum knows what to do with jerks.”

The snapping press cheered—no doubt they hated Marshall because he was richer, handsomer than them, *and* he had dated her. Perfect reason to dislike him.

Susannah kept hold of her hand and dragged her out of the doors to the limo, then shoved her inside. “I can’t believe you just stuck up for me,” she said once the door was closed behind them.

“I’m your mother. It’s my job.” She placed the award on the seat. Good thing she hadn’t clocked him with the award, or she’d have needed to sell it for the bail.

“You don’t normally let that bother you.” Susannah took her hand and pulled off the rings. She shoved her hand into the ice bucket, yanked the cloth off the champagne bottle, and put the ice in it. “I mean, you belted him one.”

“What do you mean I don’t let it bother me?” She took the ice wrap and placed it on her knuckles. “Do men talk to you like that normally?”

“Everyone talks to me like that.” Her frown was deep like the bad-tempered child who whined about wearing dresses and gave the dolls man-cuts just to irritate her. “*You* talk to me like that.”

“When have I ever talked to you like that?” She tied the ice wrap tight, grabbed for the champagne bottle, and popped it open. Forget the glass. Pain management needed.

“When you tell me I have to straighten my hair to go out with you, or wear a dress, or wax.” Susannah snatched the bottle off her. “Or you tell me no one will look at me if I don’t wear make-up.”

“I heckle. I’m your mother, it’s my job.” She took the bottle back. “Heckling is allowed.”

“Yet you just belted the bloke who talked to me the same way?” Susannah splayed her fingers over her chest. “Double standards from the star herself.”

Darcy downed a fair few gulps, not sure if she was wobbling or if they were in motion. “Why are you angry with me when I just hit him?”

“I’m not angry. I’m shocked. I’d be in awe if I thought you actually meant it.” She shook her head and stared out of the window. “Nothing you do is genuine.”

That stung. Stung more than her throbbing knuckles. Must be the champers. More needed. “I am completely genuine.”

“No, you’re more of a fake than the rip-offs on the stalls.” Susannah sighed and tucked her hair behind her oversized ears—from her father’s side, of course. “But I can hope.”

The stinging seeped into her chest and knotted her stomach. It was the same thing she’d told her father before he left. He was a fake. In fairness to her, he’d had another family, and her mother had never known. “I stick around. I don’t abandon you.”

“Don’t you?” Susannah met her eyes, tear filled, and her mascara was definitely not waterproof. “I’m only around when I’m needed for promo.”

Swigging more champers didn’t help. The pain was squeezing her stomach in two. “You don’t even like me.” There, there it was. *Why* would Susannah want to be around her? She hated clothes, she hated fashion, she never shut up about equality and all that angsty teenage rubbish. But she didn’t have to put money in the bank now, did she?

“No, but I’d like to. I only wish you’d bother to like me.” Mascara lines blotted her now-ruddy cheeks, and she looked a fright. Hopefully there were no cameras outside the house.

“Fine. You can come to the set. I’ll even get you a job. But don’t whine when I am talking about important matters.” She nodded and poked herself in the eye with the bottle. Ow. “Body shape is the cause of so many fashion crimes.”

Susannah rolled her eyes but then let through the sweetest smile. “You know, I’d actually like that.”

“Good.” She leaned over and rubbed the mascara off Susannah’s cheeks, then held up the bottle, still squinting. Ow, ow. “Marshall had to go. Skinny trousers are not flattering. I don’t care what the designers say.”

“We agree on something, then,” Susannah said with a sniff, and that smile grew.

“You don’t find skinny trousers flattering?” Could this be a breakthrough?

In Fashion

“Not that. I don’t care what the designers say.” Susannah chuckled and tapped her on her good hand, then swiped the bottle from her. “And champagne gives you a hangover.”

Darcy sighed. So close.

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BY JODY KLAIRE

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