



# NINA HARRINGTON

Her Moment in the Spotlight

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Nina Harrington

**Her Moment in the Spotlight**

«HarperCollins»

## **Harrington N.**

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Welcome to the fashion event of the season...Mimi Ryan's debut fashion show is her dream come true! She owes it to every girl who ever donned her mum's high heels or sat at a sewing machine until four a. m. to make it a success. And if she's being a little bossy towards Hal Langdon, the grumpy photographer, he will just have to live with it! What is this adrenaline junkie doing at a London fashion show anyway? He looks as if he'd be more comfortable climbing up a mountain, or – with those eyes and that rugged jaw – in a movie...or in her arms... Back to reality, Mimi! This is your moment – if you have the courage to step forward into the spotlight...

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28



## *Praise for Nina Harrington*

‘I look forward to reading this author’s next release ...  
and her next ... and her next. It truly is a stunning debut,  
with characters that will remain in your thoughts  
long after you have closed the book.’

—pinkheartsocietyreviews.blogspot.com on

*Always the Bridesmaid*

‘Rich with emotion,  
and pairing two truly special characters,  
this beautiful story is simply unforgettable. A keeper.’

—RT Book Reviews on

*Hired: Sassy Assistant*

‘A well-constructed plot and a scrumptious,  
larger-than-life hero combined with generous amounts  
of humour and pathos make for an excellent read.’

—RT Book Reviews on

*Tipping the Waitress with Diamonds*

## *About the Author*

**NINA HARRINGTON** grew up in rural Northumberland, England, and decided at the age of eleven that she was going to be a librarian—because then she could read *all* of the books in the public library whenever she wanted! Since then she has been a shop assistant, community pharmacist, technical writer, university lecturer, volcano walker and industrial scientist, before taking a career break to realise her dream of being a fiction writer. When she is not creating stories which make her readers smile, her hobbies are cooking, eating, enjoying good wine—and talking, for which she has had specialist training.

## *Also by Nina Harrington*

The Last Summer of Being Single

Tipping the Waitress with Diamonds

Hired: Sassy Assistant

Always the Bridesmaid

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Nina Harrington



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## CHAPTER ONE

MIMI FIORINI RYAN picked up the poster for London Fashion Weekend and scanned down the list of events until she came to a small paragraph of elegant bold script, which encapsulated her entire future in a few short lines and sent her heart racing:

Langdon Events is proud to present an exclusive fashion show in aid of the Tom Harris Foundation for Climbing for the Disabled.

The New Classics collection from Studio Designs will be introduced by their head designer, Mimi Ryan, one of London's brightest new talents.

Tickets selling fast.

The words were almost swimming in front of her. Mimi had to blink several times to clear her head and come to terms with the fact that she was awake, and that this was not a dream.

'Well, what do you think? You look a bit stunned.'

Poppy Langdon leant across the desk and bared her teeth. 'Do you hate it? Because I'm not sure I can change anything with only a week to go.'

Did she hate it—hate the fact that, after ten years of study and working every evening and weekend, she finally had a chance to show her clothing designs to the public? *Hate it?*

Mimi grinned at the bubbly blonde. She had only known her for a few weeks but she was rapidly becoming a good friend whom Mimi felt able to trust with something as important as the organisation of her dream fashion show.

'No—I don't hate it. It's just that ...'

'Go on. I can take it,' Poppy whimpered. 'Tell me now and get it out of your system.'

Mimi coughed a reply and shook her head for a second before coming round to the other side of the desk and hugging Poppy warmly before grinning down at her.

'It's just that I have been working towards this day for a very long time. It means so much to me, I can't tell you. Thank you so much for giving me a chance. I don't *hate* it at all—I *love* it.'

Poppy breathed out a sigh of relief and hugged her back.

'You are welcome—but I should be the one who is thanking you! If you hadn't stepped in last month I wouldn't have a charity fashion show at all. You are going to be a total hit! I predict it now. We have already sold loads of tickets, so you can stop worrying and start enjoying yourself.'

Poppy grinned and crinkled her nose. 'Even if we are in the middle of a heat wave,' she added, flicking her long hair away from her neck. 'Why is it so hot in June? And how do you manage to always look so cool and elegant in black?'

Mimi took a breath and tried to answer Poppy without betraying the inner turmoil.

If only Poppy knew how very hard Mimi had worked to look so cool and elegant. It was all about looking the part on the outside. From the black trouser-suit that had taken her a week to tailor down to her simple mocha-silk tee and antique gold wrist-watch she had inherited from her mother. Every breath Mimi Fiorini Ryan took was totally focused on one thing: persuading Poppy Langdon that she had made the right decision to use Mimi's first clothing collection as part of her charity fashion show.

'Me?' Mimi replied, glancing down at her wide-leg trousers and loose top. 'Natural fibres, I suppose—and I am indoors most of the time.' She paused then tilted her head. 'How is the iced coffee?'

'Divine!' Poppy replied with a warm smile, fanning herself with a brochure and shrugging up her shoulders in delight. 'I had no idea there was an Italian bistro just around the corner. You are so resourceful!'

'Not really. My parents and I used to come to this part of London a lot when I was at college. I'm just pleased that the bistro is still here and the coffee is as good as ever.'

Poppy saluted her with the cup. ‘Nectar. Seeing as you are a total life-saver, I do have one final treat for you.’ She took one last long slurp then started sorting through the stacks of folders on her desk. ‘The hotel has come back to me with a few ideas for the catwalk part of the show. I know you want elegant and sophisticated, and the hotel ballroom is just perfect, but we do need to confirm how much space we need before they start renovation work on the rest of the hotel. Can you stay a little longer?’

Mimi could only chuckle at that question.

She would happily stay here for the rest of the week if Poppy would put up with her.

‘Of course. But here’s an idea—why don’t I pop out for refills on the coffee? I’ll be right back ...’

If there had been an Academy award for ‘leading man in your own drama’, then Hal Langdon would have been determined to head the list of nominees.

Hal swung himself out of the London black cab with the help of the hand rail, his one crutch and a special sideways slide-and-stand motion which had taken him weeks to perfect in the numerous ambulance trips between his chalet in the French Alps and the local hospital.

Pain shot through his left leg as soon as he shifted his weight from the crutch onto the ankle wrapped in an inflatable boot. The thrill of finally being free of the heavy plaster-cast which had protected what was left of his smashed ankle and broken leg had soon faded when he’d realised just how far he still had to go before he could walk on his own.

But that was what he was going to do.

One slow, faltering, painful step at a time.

He was going to prove to the world that he could walk again—and perhaps convince himself at the same time.

It was all about going forward and pretending to the outside world that his old life was not a total sham, while his new life was as yet a complete mystery.

The doctors had made it clear: no more climbing, no more high-risk sports, no more doing the job which had taken him all over the world filming the more exciting experiences an adrenaline junkie could find on this planet.

And in his heart and gut he knew that they were right. Not just because his body was no longer capable of taking that amount of relentless punishment month after month, year after year, but because of something more important.

The day that he had lost his climbing partner was the day that his old life had ended.

Tom Harris had saved his life more than once since their first crazy adventures at university. Tom had been his best friend, the older brother he’d never had.

And now Tom was dead, killed in a fall that Hal relived in Technicolor detail every night in his dreams, and was reminded of every single time he looked at his leg or felt the ridge on his head where he had fractured his skull. It had been five months, but the memory of those terrible few minutes on the mountain was still as fresh as yesterday. Just as vivid; just as painful; just as traumatic.

And some part of Hal had died that day too.

This made his decision to come back to London and work on the charity Tom had founded both logical and ridiculous at the same time. Every time Tom’s name was mentioned it was like an ice-axe going into his gut again.

But what else could he do? He was the one who had suggested to Tom that the events company he’d created with his sister should organise a fundraising event for the work with disabled climbers that Tom had become passionate about during the last year of his life.

It was little wonder that Poppy had telephoned him to ask when he was planning to arrive to help her with the arrangements, claiming that she was snowed under with other work she desperately needed to spend time on. His sister certainly knew which buttons to press to bring on even more guilt. It had been his decision to leave Poppy to run the company on her own while he had enjoyed

the life of action and excitement he had always yearned for during the years they had spent building up the company together.

But it was more than that, and she knew it.

He was expected to be at the fundraiser, both as Tom's friend and as the co-founder of Langdon Events—even if that meant that he would have to endure the constant reminders of the man Tom had been.

He would survive the next week in the same way that he had survived the last five months: one day at a time. Each day was filled with the confused feelings of anger and resentment at the way Tom had died blended with his own overwhelming feeling of failure and the endless self-recriminations.

He had to start taking action and getting back into some sort of work—otherwise he would be guilty of failing Tom all over again.

Head back, chin up, chest forward, Hal glanced at the huge plate-glass doors that marked the entrance to the elegant stone building where Langdon Events rented a second-floor office. He gave a low chuckle and shook his head in disgust.

There were three flights of steep stone steps between the pavement and the entrance. He knew that there was a ramp at the back of the building, but he had not spent his life leading from the front to use the disabled entrance now, even if his sister Poppy did call him stubborn. He was determined to negotiate the steps leading up to the front entrance just like he had before.

Hal Langdon looked up at the glass doors, clenched his fingers tight around the rubber grip of his crutch and braced his jaw even tighter.

Just as Hal was about to take that first step with his good right leg, he was distracted by a flash of movement from inside the building; a few seconds later the glass doors slid open. A pretty girl skipped down the steps onto the pavement, and in seconds was on the other side of the road.

Her attention was so fixed on her target that she had not even glanced once in his direction. He watched in amusement as she weaved her way through the bustling crowds and clusters of tourists who flocked to this part of Covent Garden.

She was clearly a girl on a mission.

He could not resist a smirk at the way she ducked and dived from side to side, onto the road then back onto the pavement, shoulder-bag tight across her chest, elbows tucked into her sides. Her face was totally focused on the goal—so focused that she probably did not realise that she was biting her lower lip in concentration and that her reddish-brown hair was flying up around her pale face.

Black trousers and a coffee-coloured blouse could not disguise a great figure—and also a tantalising glimpse of a shapely ankle above shoes with the kind of heels Poppy would kill for. Someone somewhere must be in desperate need of coffee to send this poor girl out on a mission in that outfit in what passed for a warm day in London.

He was almost disappointed when she turned the corner and was immediately swallowed up out of view. *Good for you*, he acknowledged with a twist of his upper lip. *Mission accomplished*.

Time to find out if some of that sense of purpose would rub off on him.

Ten minutes later he stepped out of the elevator, his ankle still aching with the effort, his T-shirt damp with perspiration. He steadied himself for a few minutes to cool off, before taking the few steps to the office he had last seen over a year ago.

Not much had changed, not even the small blonde girl sitting with her head down behind the wide partners' desk they had bought with such enthusiasm all those years ago so that they could work together from the same office.

Buying such an enormous desk had seemed like a good idea at the time.

Now she looked tiny, and swamped by the stacks of boxes and folders which seemed to cover every flat space in the room.

A twinge of guilt heightened the tension in his shoulders. She was overworked and would probably have asked him back even earlier if it had not been for his injury.

He shuffled on his crutch and her head lifted. ‘Oh, that was fast, Mimi. How did you manage to ...? Hal!’ Poppy squealed and flung herself out of her chair and into his chest, her knee connecting with his leg as she pressed against him.

‘Ouch!’ He flinched and hugged her back, one-handed.

‘Sorry,’ she replied and ducked her head. ‘Your leg; I had forgotten for a minute.’

Then she stood back with her hands on her hips and slowly shook her head. ‘Something is definitely different about you today.’ She pretended to scan him from head to toe. ‘Is it the hair—which is desperate for a restyle, by the way? Or perhaps the jacket? No?’

Hal snorted and Poppy laughed, stepped forward and kissed him warmly on the cheek.

‘That boot may not win many fashion awards but it is certainly a big improvement on the horrible cast. You look a lot better.’

Then she play-thumped him on the arm.

‘You pest! I should be annoyed at you. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming? I could have picked you up at the airport—made a fuss of you.’

‘You mean apart from the fact that you have a bucket-seat sports car built for one tiny person and their handbag?’

‘Well, yes, apart from that small detail.’ Poppy waved her arm towards the office chair and Hal lowered himself into it very slowly, leg out in front of him. The office was so small that Poppy had to step over his leg to reach her chair.

‘Tell me everything, big brother. How is France? How long can you stay? Because, in case you haven’t noticed, I am swamped. Oh—and you know that you are always welcome *chez moi*; my pals would love to see you. They are totally into cosseting and, darling, you need some serious love and care. What? What?’

Hal held up one hand in surrender.

‘Please can I have a word in edgeways? Okay. France is great but I’ve rented out the chalet and put my stuff into storage. I am staying long enough to get through Tom’s fundraiser, then we can see what I can do to help you with that workload. And, thank you, I would love to sleep on your couch. But no cosseting. I’ve had more than enough cosseting these last few months.’

‘Wow,’ Poppy replied in a low voice and sat back. ‘Now you have surprised me. You love that chalet. What made you rent it out?’

Hal inhaled a couple of deep breaths before even trying to reply.

Back in France the Langdon Events team had protected him from the press, the media and whoever else wanted the inside story on how Tom Harris had died. Did they really think that he had not noticed how they almost took shifts to make sure that there was always someone there when he woke in the night? How they had started to fuss over him when he was finally out of a wheelchair and onto crutches and something close to being mobile? That they were guarding him, as though he could not be allowed to be alone?

After five months he had felt trapped, enclosed by walls which seemed to be pressing down on him, desperate to be free from the constant pressure to talk about Tom. Desperate to heal.

Hal looked into Poppy’s eyes and he could see her happy expression fall away. They had been close once, but he had pushed her back to London the minute he’d left hospital. There was so much he wanted to tell her, but that was impossible without breaking his word to Tom, and his frustration was too fierce to inflict on anyone else. Poppy deserved better than that.

‘This is all about Tom, isn’t it?’ She asked in a low voice. ‘You couldn’t stand to be living in the same village where Tom and Aurelia used to live. Oh, Hal. I am so sorry.’

‘Too many reminders.’ He shrugged. ‘I needed some time away. The team back in France can run the events programme without me getting in their way.’

His crutch tapped gently against the side of his boot. ‘The cast is off and I’m ready to get back to work, even if I am barred from anything even vaguely sporty.’ He grinned across at her. ‘But right now

I have to get through this fundraiser next weekend. It was my idea, and the sponsors will expect me to be there. So now it is your turn to tell me everything. What grandiose schemes for world domination are you working on these days?’

‘Ah. That, my darling brother, is one of the many reasons I called to check that you were mobile. I need your help and I need it now.’

Mimi lifted her precious cargo of iced coffee over the heads of a pair of tourists who were too busy huddled around their guide book to notice that they were blocking her path. She did not relax until she reached the safety of Poppy’s office building.

The heat and the stress of the last few weeks were beginning to kick in.

Of course, Poppy did not need to know that Mimi had only finished off the final piece of crystal work on the nude-pink floor-length evening gown at two that morning.

She had been so busy organising the end-of-year show for her students at the local fashion college; it had been a real struggle to squeeze in the time for such delicate work outside shop hours. Finding the perfect crystals and creating the embellishment on the bodice had taken her weeks of hand sewing but it had been worth it. The gown was stunning, even if she said so herself, and the final garment was ready seven days before the show.

Her first fashion show. Her first collection of clothing she had designed and made herself.

It was so close that she could almost touch it. A week; that was all. Seven days!

This was the chance she had been longing for during the dark days of the last few years when a career as a fashion designer had seemed like a distant dream meant for other people, not girls who ran knitting shops while grieving for a lost parent in an unfashionable part of London.

Just the thought of it give her an instant zing of energy, and she practically skipped all the way back to Poppy’s office.

She was just about to push open the door with her foot when she heard Poppy’s distinctive light laughter, which was immediately followed by a very male voice.

Her hand froze as her brain worked through the options. It was a lovely sunny, warm Friday evening. Perhaps Poppy was going out for dinner or had a date? And why not? She had been working so hard these last few weeks; Poppy deserved to be spoilt. And they were running late. Perhaps it would be better if she took the plans with her back to the shop and left Poppy to enjoy her evening.

Mimi knocked with her knuckles on the door and pushed it open a little wider.

Poppy was still sitting at her desk, but sprawled across the whole length of the small office, and blocking her path to the desk, were the long denim-clad legs of a man who looked like a fashion stylist’s idea of a playboy biker. Except that one of his legs was wearing a casual training-shoe while the other was encased from toes to knee in what looked like a surgical-support boot.

Conscious that she was staring at his leg, Mimi looked up into his face just as he turned to face her. Two dark-brown eyes gazed at her so intently that she almost blushed under the fierce heat of that focus.

He could have passed for a male model for the fashion show if it was not for the crutch leaning against Poppy’s desk and the distinctive thin, white scar which curved across his forehead and down one side of his temple. And the dark, heavy eyebrows which made him look almost fierce.

His well-used black-leather jacket was stylish rather than beaten up and cut so as to accentuate the broad shoulders and slim waist beneath the T-shirt.

All blended with something more intangible, something which had nothing to do with the ego of a male model.

He had not said one word but in those eyes and that face she saw something powerful, at the same time quiet and deep.

This man filled the small office with his presence. Not in an intimidating way; far from it. She simply recognised that this was someone who knew what it was like to give instructions and have

them followed to the letter. He was authoritative, commanding and probably the most handsome man she had seen in a very long time. Most definitely not the kind of man who came into her knitting shop.

He could be Poppy's date, but everything about him screamed power, position and authority. He had to be one of Poppy's other clients, one of the influential, powerful ones who paid her large fees to manage their corporate events so that she could afford to run charity fundraisers.

Poppy laughed out loud in delight at something he had said, whoever he was, lifted her head to face Mimi and waved at her to come in.

'Mimi; perfect timing. I need your help. I've just been trying to persuade my brother Hal here to work with us on the fashion show, and he is pretending to be reluctant.'

'Oh, no. I haven't forgotten all of the fashion events I organised when you were working as a model and we were struggling to get this company off the ground. I think it put me off for life,' he replied as he glanced back from Mimi to Poppy. 'Now, if you need a photographer, that I can help you with.'

Her brother!

Mimi's body locked into a 'half in the corridor, half in the room' position. She simply could not move. It was as though her feet were bolted to the carpet tiles. Just as firmly her eyes found something deeply fascinating in the cardboard tray she was still holding so tightly that it had started to develop a definite wobble. She dared not turn around or move one step forward.

It was his voice, of course, deep, husky and sensual—and just about as far away from the voices that she heard in her ordinary life. All she could do was stay rooted to the spot, feeling slightly stunned as the whirlwind of masculine energy twirled around her.

Oblivious to her predicament, Poppy reached forward with one arm and hugged Hal with a beaming grin. 'I might take you up on that. There is still a lot to do behind the scenes, and we have a list of events over the next few weeks where I am desperate for a photographer I can rely on. But this week I need help with the show. What can we do to convince you to get involved?'

'Would iced coffee help?' Mimi finally managed to squeak out as she inched forward a little closer to the desk, terrified that she was going to spill coffee over her precious plans or Hal Langdon's knees.

Only then did Poppy give a dramatic sigh. 'Oh, fantastic! And now I am being horribly rude. Hal, this is the fashion designer who is working with us for Tom's charity fundraiser next week. Mimi, meet my brother, Hal, the other half of Langdon Events.'

She cursed her vivid imagination. Mimi's attention was riveted by the sounds created by leather sliding against leather, the crunch of his boot and the scrape of the crutch on the carpet as he pulled his leg back, slid his left arm into the crutch and heaved himself to his feet. All set against the gentle whirring from the desk fan, which was totally failing to cool her hot neck. Her hair felt clammy and damp against her neckline. Not her best look when she was trying to impress her events manager—or that manager's brother.

'Oh, please don't get up,' Mimi said, and stepped forward just as Hal bent and stretched out his right hand towards her.

Only the gap between them was too close, and as she half-turned to shake hands she could not avoid colliding with the solid mass of his muscular frame and the crutch.

Her cardboard tray tilted as it was crushed between them, and it was only at the very last minute that Mimi's brain kicked into action and her arm whipped out sideways to prevent an explosion of iced coffee.

Her plan almost succeeded.

The tray stayed intact, but in the sudden movement a trickle of coffee escaped over the top of the ill-fitting plastic lid of one of the cups, dribbled down over the tray and onto her foot, soaking through her thin stocking and into her favourite black shoes.

As Mimi gasped in horror, it took a few seconds for her to realise that Hal had taken hold of her arm and was physically holding her steady. As she looked up from her damp shoe into his handsome face, he frowned and said in a low voice, 'I am so sorry. That was very clumsy of me. Are you okay?'

Standing only inches away from his body, she was very much aware of the remarkable, overwhelming masculinity of this man. If she inhaled deeply their bodies would be pressed together chest to chest. He smelt of dust, man sweat and something fragrance manufacturers had been trying to capture and bottle for decades without success: masculine energy and drive, with a shot of pure attraction and goodness knew how many pheromones.

It was a heady combination that many women would save up to be able to afford—and she was one of them. This magical aroma, combined with the sensation of the rough skin of his fingertips on the back of her arm, sent a shiver of totally shocking but delightful anticipation and sensory pleasure through her body and robbed her of speech.

'Fine. Not a problem,' she eventually managed to say. 'No damage done.' And she braved a small smile before slipping out away from his grasp and lowering her tray to the safety of Poppy's desk.

Poppy looked across to Mimi with a shake of the head. 'Ignore my brother, Mr Famous Mountaineer, outdoor man. It's the bungee jumping, you know. High Altitudes. Affects the brain.'

'I like to think of myself as the overseas section of the company.' Hal smiled at Mimi with a gentle nod, his eyes locked onto her face. It was not a casual glance but a stare so deliberate and focused she felt uncomfortable under the hard, bright heat of it. His heavy, dark eyebrows were squeezed together as though he had recognised her from somewhere and was trying to place her.

One thing was certain—if she had met Hal Langdon before, she would certainly have remembered.

'Pleased to meet you, Miss ...?'

Swallowing down a nervous lump the size of Scotland, Mimi managed to croak out, 'Ryan. Mimi Ryan,' only a second before Hal turned back to Poppy, who was sighing in exasperation as he spoke.

'You should be,' Poppy sniffed. 'Mimi has had to drop everything to pull together her first collection in time for the show next weekend.'

It's going to be a huge success, and bring in tons of cash for Tom's charity, but we are not there yet. Still loads to do. So be nice to poor Mimi.'

Hal stood in silence for a few seconds before sitting down with legs outstretched on the corner of the desk. His bottom covered Mimi's poster and her floor plan, ruining any chance she might have of grabbing them and making a run for it.

'Here's a suggestion.' His fingers seemed to tighten around the grip inside his crutch. 'Seeing as I am well and truly grounded at the moment, why don't I make myself useful on some of the other projects we have going? That way you can focus on the fundraiser while I ...'

But before he could finish his sentence, Hal's voice was drowned out by the loud ringing of the desk telephone and then Poppy's mobile phone only seconds later.

Poppy took one glance at the caller identity, sucked in air between her teeth, mouthed the word 'Sorry,' then picked up the phone.

'Hello, Maddy. How are you and ...? Oh. Well, I'm very sorry to hear that. Did you talk to ...? And then what did she say? Now, Maddy, I need you need to calm down just for a second. Take a deep breath, that's it. Inhale slowly. Well done. Now, start at the beginning—why exactly do you want me to cancel your wedding?'

Seconds stretched to minutes as Poppy scribbled down notes and made sympathetic noises down the phone until her eyes closed and she splayed out her fingers across her forehead.

'It's all going to be fine. I can catch a flight to Florence tonight and we can have a breakfast meeting in the morning and sort the whole thing out. Yes, I know the hotel. See you tomorrow, Maddy. I know, I know. Bye for now.'

In the stunned silence that followed, Mimi looked from Poppy, who had her head in her hands, to Hal, who pushed himself up off the desk so that he was facing Poppy.

‘Did I just hear you say that you were going to Italy?’ he asked, his voice low, deep and resonant. ‘Please tell me that I am mistaken.’

‘There’s no point scowling at me like that!’ And then her shoulders sagged. ‘Do you remember that French redhead I worked with in Marrakech? The one you said had even less dress-sense than my other model pals?’

‘Was that the one who pushed me into the pool when I said that she looked skinny in a sarong?’

Poppy nodded. ‘That’s the one. Well, she is supposed to be getting married to a very charming and very wealthy Italian aristocrat in Florence in three weeks and Langdon Events is planning their wedding.’

Hal raised his eyebrows. ‘Poppy the wedding planner? How sweet.’

She inhaled deeply. ‘Do not mock. Some of us like weddings, and the income pays for this office. The problem is that I thought there would be plenty of time to produce the charity show then move on to the wedding, but the woman is driving me crazy. They have already changed the venue and reception menu twice. That call was the final straw. Apparently her mother hates the church and venue, and has now decided that she is allergic to all of the food on the menu for the reception and that it would be far better for her to take over the wedding plans herself and move the wedding to Paris.’

Poppy shook her head. ‘I cannot change the wedding arrangements, not now, but this is not the kind of discussion I can have over the phone. I need to be on a flight to Italy tonight if there is any chance of saving this wedding. Maddy is relying on me to create the perfect wedding she’s always dreamt about, and I promised her that I would do the very best I could to make that dream come true. I can’t let her down now.’

Poppy sat back in her chair, her fingernails tapping out a fast beat on the table for a few seconds before they paused and she looked up across at Hal with a mischievous grin. ‘If only I could find someone to take over the fashion show and run the office for a few days while I am in Florence. I would *hate* for any lastminute problems in London to ruin the event.’

Mimi turned back to face Hal, who instead of sympathising and offering immediate assistance had folded his arms and was staring at Poppy with his eyebrows raised.

‘Poppy, darling. I know you far too well. I smell a plan being put into action here where I am shanghaied and sold down the river without a word to say about it. Could this wedding be the *real* reason why the normally super-efficient Poppy Langdon called me from my sick bed in France? Have you been planning this all along?’

She looked at him, fluttered her eyelids a couple of times and smiled sweetly. ‘Me? Well, that would be very devious of me, wouldn’t it? Either way, now that you are going to be working full time, it seems to me that you have arrived just in time to save the day, big brother. Congratulations, Hal—you are now the official organiser for the Tom Harris Foundation fundraiser and fashion show. Isn’t that wonderful news?’

## CHAPTER TWO

MIMI reached across and tugged at the pristine linen tablecloth so that the edge was perfectly aligned along the length of her old family breakfast table.

As her fingers ran along the fine fabric, she was taken back to a warm summer evening when both of her parents had been alive. They had decided over a stunning Italian *al fresco* dinner on the patio to embroider a full set of table linen with bright flowers and yellow swallowtail butterflies so that they could enjoy a taste of summer over a cold, grey London winter.

Mimi had offered to help with the tablecloth as a diversion from her university design-work. In the end her mother had given in because they were so busy in the shop that the napkins would be easier for them to work in the few spare minutes between customers.

Four napkins—*four*. That was all her mother had managed to complete before the telephone call that had summoned her back to Milan and the Fiorini family. And after that? Somehow there had seemed little point. The joy had left their lives.

Yet it seemed so right to bring out this tablecloth to help celebrate her mother's birthday. Celebrating her birthday every year was just one of the many promises by Mimi that her mother had insisted on in her lucid moments, such as making sure that she kept the knitting shop solvent—and taking every chance she could to prove that she was a professional fashion designer who could stand on her own two feet and make her designs a success without using the Fiorini name to do it.

Small promises Mimi had made with every intention of keeping them.

*At the time.*

But it was so hard now that she was alone.

Her eyes closed and just for a second she gave into her desperate need to sit back in her chair and steal an hour or two of wonderful, refreshing sleep in the early-morning calm before the storm of the day ahead of her.

Working late was nothing new, but she had become so desperate to make sure that her work was the very best it could be for this showcase that working until two or three in the morning had started to become the norm over the past few weeks since Poppy had agreed to stage the show.

Her designs were good—she knew that—but even in these last few days she was still looking for ways to improve. She could feel the strain of the pressure of continually altering and reshaping the garments, pushing herself harder than she had ever pushed herself before. There was so much work she could still do. It was not surprising that she felt so stretched out, beyond tired and pushed to the limit.

And so very much alone.

She envied Poppy so much; at least she had a brother who was willing to drop everything to come and help when she needed him.

Sniffing away the wave of sleep-deprived grief that threatened to overwhelm her, Mimi forced herself onto her feet with a sigh and drew open the full-length glazed patio doors which led to the flight of stairs linking her flat to the shop below, and the paved area which was both her delivery bay and what served as her small private garden.

Through this open door she looked out onto the gardens of the family homes on the other side of the small lane that separated the shops from the residential area around them.

She had been looking at the same view every morning for as long as she could remember.

Seasons were measured through the changes in the tall mature trees which towered over the lane from her neighbours' gardens: the fresh green leaves of beech and lime blossom in the spring; lilacs and apple blossom; a silver birch with its silvery leaves and shiny bark.

And her favourite: a mature cherry tree which had to be at least forty feet tall. Soft pink-and-white blossom had been replaced now with young cherries, much to the delight of the wild birds that spent much of their day in the tall branches.

These trees and gardens were such a part of her life now that she could not imagine eating breakfast without that view to enjoy. But the risk was very real. Without extra income she was in serious danger of losing the shop she had inherited from her parents, her chance of making a living and her home. The only home she had ever known—or ever wanted.

She had often wondered what it would be like to be a traveler, rootless and wandering, without a fixed place to call home.

Someone like Hal Langdon, for example.

Perhaps that was the reason he was so very, very fascinating. As a person, as a professional and very much as a man.

He was a mystery, a muscular, handsome, unshaven and challenging enigma. He was a man used to being completely spontaneous in his life and his work. Used to making decisions on the run.

But if anything that made her worry all the more.

Poppy knew her brother, and clearly must trust him well enough to leave him in charge of the charity project, but what if Hal had his own ideas for the show? Poppy Langdon had spent most of her working life either as a professional fashion model or in the trade. But what about her brother? All Mimi knew was that he was an adventurer, photographer and had once worked with Poppy when they were getting the events company off the ground—but that had been years ago.

Well, she would find out soon enough.

He had called late the previous evening to tell her that Poppy had arrived safely in Florence and to arrange to meet at the studio the next morning to talk through the plans. She had explained that she would be at a student exhibition most of the day but that had not seemed to deter him in the least.

Mimi suddenly felt the need to sit down as the enormity of what she had taken on threatened to overwhelm her.

The last time she had trusted a photographer with her work had been at her first-ever photo shoot. He had been a well-known fashion photographer who had agreed to work with some of the top fashion-school graduates as part of a newspaper feature on new British talent. Her tutors adored him, the other students had sung his praises and she had been green enough to trust him with the theme for her graduation show. He'd even brought his own stylists.

It had been a complete and utter disaster, beginning to end. She had never been so humiliated in her life. Being laughed at and mocked was not fun. How did she know that Hal was not going to be the same? And now he had taken over from Poppy at Langdon Events, which effectively meant that he was the boss—whether she liked it or not.

Yet she knew that she had no choice. She had committed to supplying the clothing; she had to go through with this.

It would be so wonderful to spend the whole weekend working on the show, but her normal salary paying life had to come first.

Saturday was the busiest day in the shop for the knitting classes she had started, so she had asked her friend Helena to help out in the shop and run the classes. Helena was one of her best customers and a natural saleswoman.

Apart from the shop, there were going to be six of her fashion-design students crammed into her studio for most of the morning—the ones who had left their hand-knitting course work to the very last minute—and they would all need help to complete their projects and get them to the gallery for their end-of-year exhibition before noon.

She exhaled loudly. The students needed to make the grades for their course work and it gave them a showcase for their work. She could not let them down now, especially when some of them had helped make the clothes for her collection.

And now Hal Langdon was going to turn up in person and add even more stress!

No pressure, then. None at all. *Whimper.*

She was exhilarated, exhausted and more excited than she had been for months.

Her mind kept wandering all by itself to

Hal Langdon. The sexy way his amazing eyes creased around the edges as he smiled. That sensuous mouth.

It totally infuriated her that he had wormed his way into her brain like that.

It all went to prove one thing: she really should get out more!

But not now. Not when she was so close to achieving her dream.

Birdsong from the cherry trees rang out clear, sweet and invigorating through the open window and Mimi looked out into the faint sunshine and smiled.

In the same way that the trees broke out from their winter hibernation into fresh green buds of new growth, she needed to move forward to a new season in her life.

Poppy Landon might have given her a chance, but now it was her turn to prove that she knew what she was doing.

She was going to show Hal Langdon that she was capable of handling any challenge that he could throw at her. They both wanted a great show and that was what they were going to create. She would listen; she would give her suggestions, help him understand how important elegance and sophistication were to her designs, and everything was going to be fine.

She was going to have to trust him. Because one thing was becoming so very clear: whether she was prepared to say it out loud or not, there were simply not enough hours in the day to do everything she needed to make this show a success. She needed Hal and Poppy even more than ever.

She had promised her mother that she would prove to the world that Mimi Ryan was as fine a designer as any other member of the Fiorini family.

But she was not just doing this for her mother. No. This was for *her*. She needed this boost to break her out of the past six months of painful grief and save her business.

Mimi turned to face a silver-framed photograph of a stunningly pretty dark-haired woman which was propped up by a cushion on the table, and raised her glass of orange juice in a toast.

‘Happy birthday, Mum,’ Mimi said. ‘What do you think I should wear today? Any ideas?’

Hal Langdon steadied himself on his left crutch and raked the fingers of his right hand back over his scalp, pushing his hair away from his forehead. Maybe one of Poppy’s stylist pals could give him a haircut after the show.

If they were not too exhausted by then.

He chuckled to himself at the thought of what he had just left behind in Poppy’s apartment. His little sister had assembled a top team to make sure there would be enough models available for all of the clothing in Mimi’s collection—namely her flatmates Lola and Fifi and their many friends who had agreed to give up a precious Saturday for a good cause.

This meant that his breakfast had been disturbed by an assortment of leggy fashion models bickering over yoghurt and cranberry juice while they planned their assault on the London shops in search of shoes, bags and luxury spa products—apparently all necessary preparation for a weekend of full-on pampering in advance of the big day.

Some men would have found being surrounded by gorgeous, leggy girls a sweet start to the day, but he had been through this process way too many times and the attraction had definitely worn off. There were only so many times you could tell a girl that her knees did not look fat in micro shorts—and the sound of excited females competing for attention while he was still in his boxers under a duvet on Poppy’s sofa had been exhausting. Especially when they had decided to tease him about the new grey hairs on his chest, forcing him to decline the offer of both eyebrow tweezers and a free waxing-session.

They would enjoy seeing him suffer far too much.

Back in France, he had forgotten a few essential details about his sister's apartment—such as the fact that it was on the second floor and there was no lift. Oh, and that it only had two spare bedrooms and that both of them were fully occupied by girls who managed to make the rooms feel even smaller. Hence his very uncomfortable night on the sofa with his leg propped up on the scatter cushions while he'd fought the urge to be outside under wide skies, all the while knowing that was not an option.

Cramped living space and several flights of stairs he could just about cope with. But he had not been prepared for the constant reminders of his life working with Tom Harris which had assailed his senses throughout the flat.

Tom Harris and Hal Langdon had made a name for themselves filming in the most dangerous and adrenaline-inducing locations on earth. Their photographs of the high mountains and the people who lived to climb them had been published in magazines and newspapers all over the world, vivid, sometime stark but always exciting and dramatic. They had won awards and prizes on every continent. And they had loved every second of it.

They had been champions of the universe, indestructible and fearless, destined to succeed at everything they set their mind to do. And they had succeeded time and time again.

The evidence of that success was captured in those photographs, which were everywhere he looked in Poppy's apartment.

She was so proud of her big brother and what he had achieved.

How could she know that now they only served as constant reminders that he had lost his best friend and probably his career at the same time? The doctors and specialists had made their prognosis quite clear—he had destroyed his ankle and broken his leg very badly. Even with ten surgical pins and two metal plates, the bones and supporting tendons and ligaments would never be the same again. His mountaineering days were over.

Every photograph and every image screamed out one message: *failure*. He had failed. Failed Tom, failed himself.

He had tossed and turned most of the night, and every time he had opened his eyes there was his best friend Tom grinning back at him from every wall, slim, rugged, happy and clever. A natural sportsman whose love of the high places and sense of humour had carried them through every hardship in supposedly inaccessible places photographers could not get to.

Their life had been a constant buzz of travel from one remote location to the next, until Tom had fallen in love with a supermodel who had brought him to his knees when she had returned his love. She'd even given up her career to show Tom what true happiness was like.

And then he had watched Tom die.

He was so angry with Tom. With himself. With the absurdity of life.

Lying on Poppy's sofa in the cool light of a London dawn, the constant reminders of his failure and his guilt threatened to overwhelm his determination to see his friend's legacy through to the end.

He had promised Poppy he would take care of the event and that was what he was going to do. Because if he didn't ...? There was a limit to the number of failures a man could take in his life.

His little sister had been devious enough to call him back to work on a project she knew full well he would not be able to refuse. It had occurred to him several times as he'd tossed and turned that perhaps this emergency trip to Florence was just a little too convenient. Poppy had always adored working in Italy when she'd been a model. He suspected she had always planned to spend a few fun days with her friend in total indulgent luxury, finalising the no-doubt amazing wedding they had planned together. Leaving him to hold the fort.

Clever; very clever. She had lured him back to work in the full knowledge that once he had committed to the project he would not allow it to fail.

It dared not fail.

A shiver ran down his neck and across his shoulders. Hal shuffled inside his leather jacket and shifted his crutch to a new position so that he could massage his right thigh muscle which had started to cramp.

He swallowed down the rush of intense resentment, pain and regret that had overwhelmed him so many times these last few months that they were starting to feel like familiar friends. The kind of friends it would be too easy to welcome inside so that they could all wallow and feel sorry for each other and drown in the anguish of painful memories.

Pain kept him alert, alive. Even if it had robbed him of his sleep.

He had spent most of the night putting together an action plan based on the notes Poppy had left him. By the time the girls had taken control of the bathroom that morning, he had made deals for equipment and props which would make this a show to remember.

Providing, of course, that the clothing was as stylish as Poppy had suggested. She did have excellent taste, but all he had seen so far were sketches and a few photographs. Could Mimi Ryan deliver on time? He had been impressed with her energy yesterday. Time to find out more about Studio Designs and exactly how much of a challenge he had just taken on.

If he could find the place!

He stared across at a small row of shops then double-checked the address Poppy had given him. This was the right street, only there was no sign of a warehouse or stylish boutique of any type.

Hobbling across the quiet London road, Hal quickly scanned the numbers above each of the shops. There had to be a mistake because Studio Designs should be at this address instead of a knitting shop called Etalia Yarns.

Well, that couldn't be right.

Perhaps there was another street with the same name in another part of this area. London was a huge city; there was bound to be some duplication.

Or was it possible that Studio Designs was hidden away at the back of these shops?

It would make sense for him to enquire inside.

Hal sniffed, pulled his camera bag over his right shoulder and grasped his crutch more tightly as he stared at the front entrance of Etalia Yarns.

A knitting shop; this was going to be a new experience. Tom Harris had taught him to be an explorer and an observer in any new location, no matter where, and those skills still served him well. He liked the small things that told him a story about the people and the place.

It was the details he looked for as a photographer—the tiny body movement and individual characteristics that made one sportsman unique and could make or break an action photograph. It had become second nature for him to look for exactly those details in every shot.

Now he took the time to take a closer look at the shop itself—or rather what looked like a small house in a normal-looking street of family homes mixed with small shops: a dry cleaner, a hairdresser and Etalia Yarns.

The name had been etched out in a large cursive font along the top half of a large picture-window which would have been the bow window of the living room when this house had been a home. The bottom half was etched glass with a scrolling curling pattern.

The green-and-white paintwork was fresh and attractive. A large, circular brass doorknocker completed the look.

The only vaguely kitsch thing about the shop window was the tiny long-haired toy sheep which had been placed on the inside window-ledge so that it seemed to be looking out to face the street. A broad black smile in the shape of a half circle shone out in welcome.

So this was what an upmarket knitting-yarn shop looked like? He was clearly way out of date!  
But where was Studio Designs?

The same minute that thought came into his head he spotted a small metal plaque which had been screwed into the door frame above his head: Studio Designs. At last!

Well, well. Mimi Ryan worked above, beyond or inside a knitting shop.

Who knew what strange new customs and traditions the inhabitants followed? He certainly had no clue what to expect.

Which was far more interesting and exciting—not that he would ever admit it—than he had expected.

*Into the unknown.*

Just as Hal shuffled forward towards the entrance, two teenage girls in denim trousers and bright T-shirts giggled their way past him and through the shop door, giving him sly glances as they did so. Each of them was carrying a bulging, oversized plastic bag and it made perfect sense for Hal to hold open the door and slip after them into the shop.

Or, rather, a gallery of rainbows.

Pale wooden storage-cubes were aligned along every available piece of wall space, and each cube was stuffed with yarn in a complete spectrum of rainbow colours from deepest purple through blues, greens and yellows, to reds and pinks and white and cream. It was as familiar to a photographer as his favourite camera. And it was twice as pleasurable to see the raw energy of colour softened by textures, shapes and sizes.

Natural light from two long windows filled the narrow space, helped by down-lighters of just the perfect intensity and spectrum to make the colours of the yarn pop in their display cubes.

Very clever.

Instead of stacks of yarn, the long narrow room had been split into two halves by a long antique pine dining-table with comfy chairs on each side. Two older women were selecting soft balls of tweedy stuff from wooden baskets piled high with yarn, while the teenagers laughed and giggled their way to the back of the room.

Their girlish laughter was shared with a tall woman with an amazing figure who was facing away from him, one arm around the shoulders of the youngest girl as they pulled out their creations from the plastic bags. He caught a glimpse of strands of yarn, what looked like string and a pair of enormous wooden knitting-needles that made his eyebrows lift.

Intrigued by the exhibits, and still in awe of the rainbow effect of the yarns around him, Hal slowly strolled down the room and smiled at the other customers, who seemed to be far too focused on the goods to pay him any attention. He was almost in the middle of the room when one of the teenagers spotted him and nudged the other, and the woman turned around to face him.

And every thought in his brain was frozen, mesmerised by the stunning woman he was looking at.

It was Mimi Ryan.

He should have recognised the hair, the creamy skin, the voluptuous figure which had only been hinted at in the street and later in Poppy's office.

Forget hinting; this version of Mimi was full-on gorgeous.

The black trousers fitted her so perfectly that they must have been made to measure, but it was her coral-coloured knitted top that burnt a pattern in his retinas.

The soft, flowing fabric looked to have faint, pink, fine stripes with a cleverly constructed narrow lapel, fitted in at the waist so that there was no mistake that this lady was curvy—and meant business.

Light from a stained-glass panel in a side window fell onto one side of Mimi's face highlighting her high cheekbones and delicate chin and features. The bow lips and warm smile seemed to illuminate her face as she turned around to face him and grinned.

With the coral top bringing a natural glow to her skin, Mimi Ryan was stunning.

If he was a receiver then Mimi Ryan was sending out just the right messages to flick on all of his switches. And it sent his brain into a spin.

Red warning-lights started flashing. This was the last thing he had been expecting and it shocked him to the core.

He could not allow himself to be attracted to a city girl like Mimi. Not now, not ever. He was *not* going down the same route that Tom had taken. He had to bury that telltale prickle of attraction as fast as possible.

This was probably why he found himself incapable of doing anything more than nodding when Mimi finished chatting to the girls and strolled over to him so that they were only inches apart.

Luckily for him, Mimi took the initiative and broke the tension he had not fully realised existed by speaking first. Her voice was light, warm and as welcoming as a faint breeze on a hot day. He revelled in the very sound of her voice.

She was captivating and he swallowed down a tinge of regret and resignation that he would never see her as anything more than a girl he had to work with over the next week to get the job done.

It was a pity his body had not received that message yet.

‘Good morning, Mr Langdon. I hope you slept well.’ Mimi smiled. ‘I wouldn’t want to wear you out on your first day back.’ Her mouth creased into a cheeky grin which was impossible to ignore.

Since speech was barely possible, he stretched out his right hand and wrapped his long fingers around hers. Her hand was soft, warm and surprisingly delicate, with fine bones, but she pulled away before he had a chance to decadently slide his fingers down the back of her hand.

‘Oh, I think I can manage,’ he stammered out and stood back to pretend to admire the room. ‘And please call me Hal. Are you ready to go? I thought we might make an early start. Is Studio Designs upstairs?’

Mimi looked at him with raised eyebrows for a second before biting her lower lip.

‘This *is* Studio Designs, Mr Langdon,’ she replied. ‘This is my knitting shop and my studio.’ Lifting both arms in the air, Mimi gestured gracefully around the room. ‘Welcome to my world.’

## CHAPTER THREE

‘I TOOK over the family knitting business about a year ago, but I also use the workshop area at the back of the shop for Studio Designs. That way I can move between the two projects any time I like, and so far it has worked extremely well.’

‘A knitting shop. Wow,’ he gushed, cursing himself for being so out of control of his faculties. ‘Not that I have much experience of yarn stuff.’

In desperation, and anxious to find something to do with his hands, he snatched up a loose ball of what looked like thick fur, except that it was pink with a silver thread going through it.

‘What do you make with this type?’ Hal asked, turning to Mimi with the yarn still in his hand.

‘I don’t use that particular fashion yarn for my designs,’ she replied, stroking an identical ball in a basket on the table. ‘But the students love eyelash—the brighter and flashier the better. A bit of fun; it’s great. And makes terrific scarves.’

Hal nodded and carefully replaced the ball very slowly onto the table. ‘Eyelash. Scarves. Right.’ He looked back to see Mimi smiling across at him.

It struck him powerfully that this was the first time he had seen Mimi smile from the heart. His photographer’s sense of vision caught the telltale curvature of her lips and the gentle, warm creases at the corners of her shining eyes. Back in Poppy’s office Mimi had seemed too stunned by the sudden change in management to be herself, but here it was different. Here she was in her own world and the difference was startling.

*She should smile more often.*

‘This is the first time you’ve been into a shop like this, isn’t it?’ Mimi asked. ‘That’s okay. You don’t have to be scared. The inhabitants are quite friendly most of the time—although I should probably warn you about a few local customs. Take yarn, for example.’

Mimi walked across to the next set of cubes and drew out a ball of a fine, smooth fibre in a deep red colour. As he watched, she unconsciously stroked the fibres as she squeezed the small ball, eyes half-closed, an almost sensual pleasure warming her face in the few seconds it took him to hobble the few steps to stand next to her.

‘Squidging is an essential part of our daily rituals. This is one of my favourites: silk; fine-spun, twisted with viscose to increase the shine. Here, have a try. You’ll soon get the hang of it.’ She held out the yarn to him, forcing him to look away from the smooth skin and amazing mouth.

It was not often that he was wrong about women, but he had been wrong to judge Mimi yesterday. The passion she had for these yarns shone out from her in the way she spoke and handled these bundles of thread with such loving care. She meant it. It could be that Mimi Ryan did know the fashion trade after all.

Her enthusiasm swept him along so much that he was taken aback by the tiny ball of soft stuff she held out towards him, and he made a point of rubbing a few strands between his finger and thumb. Her fingers were long with pale neat-polished nails. No rings.

In contrast, his fingers were rough and calloused and furrowed by deep ridges from holding ropes and cables and grappling for tiny hand-holds on rock faces where his life had depended on being able to take his weight on his fingers. His fingers and hands were as important as any other piece of equipment he relied on to keep him alive.

The rough skin instantly snagged on the delicate fibres and he released his grip. He had no business touching balls of the softest silk.

But he could still enjoy the sensation for a moment through what few nerves were left in his fingertips.

‘How am I doing?’

‘Not bad,’ Mimi replied, stepping closer. ‘Try stroking rather than squeezing the life out of it. That’s better.’

‘Nice colour. What can you make with it?’

He looked up into her face and made the mistake of focusing on her eyes. They were mostly green, and in those heels she was not much shorter than he was.

‘Anything you like; that’s the magic. You take this ball of thread and two sticks and out comes a fabric. The cardigan I’m wearing came from a blend just like this one.’

Mimi popped the cherry-coloured ball back into its slot and pointed to the next cube.

‘You made it yourself?’ Hal asked, genuinely impressed as he glanced down at the fitted coral top, which up close he could see had some sort of twisted design down one side.

‘Please don’t sound quite so surprised, Mr

Langdon. I *am* a textile designer, and this is my work. And my pleasure. Does nobody in your family knit by hand?’ Mimi asked. ‘It’s quite a tradition in mine.’

Hal chuckled out loud at that one, and the sound of his own merriment shocked him more than he cared to admit. It had been a while, months, since he had last felt like laughing. There had to be something in the air in this shop. Was it the colours, or the talented woman who had asked him a question?

He shook his head. ‘I don’t think so. Maybe Poppy made me a scarf once when we were at school, but I don’t remember what happened to it. No; Poppy likes to shop, buy things other people have made—designed—whatever.’ He paused for a few seconds as Mimi rearranged the balls into a neater design. ‘I don’t think a creative gene runs in our family. Not so far, anyway,’ Hal added, well aware that he was babbling now and relieved that Mimi did not seem to mind that he was acting like a loon and probably thought that he was trying to play the idiot.

*If the cap fits ...*

‘Um, well, that might be a problem,’ Mimi murmured, just as a bustle of activity swept into the room on a wave of female laughter and bawdy bellows. ‘I’ll be right back. My

Saturday knitting club has just arrived and the Knitty Chickies are on a mission.’

She gestured to a door at the back of the showroom which had been decorated with pictures of cute kittens playing with balls of yarn. ‘Studio Designs is just through there. Why don’t you have a look around for a few minutes? My college students are getting ready for their end-of-term exhibition but they won’t be in your way. Please feel free to explore. You’ll find a map and compass near the door on your way in.’

And with that Mimi was immediately swallowed up by the group of ladies of all ages who clustered around her like chicks around a mother hen and drew her into their conversation and laughter which echoed around the room.

Just as Hal opened the door to the studio, he took one glance back to see what Mimi was doing. Her head was back and she was laughing out loud with the other ladies at some joke about knitted body parts. Her laughter came from deep inside her body, a resonating, sweet, joyous sound that was strangely distinctive, even though this was the first time he had heard it. Her voice was musical and warm—and something else. Something special. Something genuine. She was the real deal, and as unique a character as he had ever met anywhere in the world.

The Knitty Chickies were clearly enjoying knitting a lot more than he was, and the camaraderie of their group made his throat tighten.

Suddenly he felt very much alone.

This room and these women were all a very long way from the Alps, and the narrow ice-covered ridge where his life had changed for ever.

What was he doing here? Mimi Ryan must think he was totally pathetic—and she would be right!

His world was ice picks, crampons and cold-weather cameras—not knitting yarn or women’s clothing. Not even close.

It was pathetic that he should think working on a fundraising event could in any way lessen the weight of the overwhelming blanket of guilt that hung heavy around his shoulders.

A week; he could give this project a week of his life. He owed it to Tom.

Then he would work on the small matter of what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

Suddenly Hal was not so sure he could handle any more surprises in one day. Turning reluctantly away from the life, energy and joy in the knitting shop, he hobbled into Mimi’s studio and closed the door behind him.

He stood in silence for a few seconds to take in the room.

In contrast to the kaleidoscope-shock of textures and colours in the shop area, the studio walls and woodwork had been painted in a pale cream which seemed to absorb the overhead light and reflect it back onto four large worktables which took up over half the floor space.

This was quite an achievement. The studio was the width of the entire shop building, and at least thirty feet long.

The overall effect was stunning and professional.

One thing was clear: this was a work room, not a hobby store.

From the hard-sealed flooring to the false ceiling-panels, it was the kind of spotless clean space which made Hal want to whisper and take off his boots—then run riot with a paint-ball gun just for the fun of it. As it was, his crutch hammered out his presence with every step.

A group of teenage girls were busy at the far end of the room, which was flooded with natural light from what looked like patio doors, so he strolled up to the nearest long white table.

It seemed to be covered with all shapes, sizes and colours of amazing objects.

He bent over slightly and squinted at the printed labels on cards folded in front of each object: ‘knitted installations’.

On the far left was a cheerful and completely realistic tea set: knitted cups with handles, knitted saucers, plates, sugar bowl and even a milk jug. On the plate were knitted cakes with knitted coils of white toppings made from a thicker white yarn. Everything was in bright primary colours—perfect for kids. The label on the solid maple-wood tea tray said: ‘soft tea’.

The next table was ‘wearable art’ and there was only one exhibit—but it was certainly different. A short sleeveless tube of knitted mesh shaped like a dress was hanging on a tailor’s-model form. It seemed to be made of coated electrical cable, and two wires were hanging from the dress, one on each side. The left was attached to what looked like a normal old-style cassette player. The other was wired into the back of a large amplifier.

Okay. He took a breath before checking the label a little more carefully this time: ‘because your clothing says something about you. Press Play on the tape to hear about who’s wearing the dress. Rewind when you leave. Thanks’.

‘Hello again. Found anything you like?’

Hal turned around so that he could face Mimi as she walked up next to him and scanned the studio, turning his head from side to side.

‘You weren’t kidding about the student work. Is this the last group of exhibits?’

Mimi nodded. ‘Yep. The college transportsystem is a little slow today. In the meantime, feel free to wander around and take a look. You are welcome to come with me to the gallery if you like. I only need to be there for a few hours this morning and we can talk on the way.’

‘Okay. That sounds like a plan.’ Hal nodded and glanced around. ‘This is actually a very impressive studio. Has this always been a knitting shop?’ he asked as Mimi stood next to him, gently packing away loose hanks of chocolate-and-cream yarn into long, transparent plastic boxes.

‘A gentleman’s tailor. My father trained with Mr Bloom for years before he decided to go into the wholesale business, but he loved working here. So, when the house and workshop came onto the

market, my mother made the old maestro an offer he couldn't refuse. He's retired now, but he only lives a couple of streets away and comes in now and again.

The skylights and patio were his idea, and they still work. You need natural light for colour matching.'

Mimi stopped packing and looked at Hal with a shrug. 'Sorry; I was forgetting you are a photographer. You probably know a lot more about light than I do. Please carry on.'

'What do you use the tables for?' Hal asked, blushing slightly at her compliment, and gestured at the huge long smooth surfaces stretching the width of the room.

Mimi paused for a second and took a breath. 'I am a designer, Mr Langdon,' she sighed, then looked at him in surprise. 'This is where I assemble the finished garments, collate together the knitting kits I sell on the Internet and cut out fabric patterns. Oh, and I run workshops for college students three days a week. I am so lucky to have this space. Good studios are very hard to find in this part of London.'

'Tell me about it,' Hal replied with a snort of exasperation. 'I am going to have to find somewhere to work and set up a centre of operations for the show before Monday or I am toast.'

'What about Poppy's office in Covent Garden?' Mimi asked, her brows coming together in concern. 'Or the hotel where we are staging the event? Don't they have spare rooms you could use?'

'Poppy's office is already cramped enough without trying to pack technical equipment into it. Besides, I don't do well in cramped offices.' Hal pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders as he frowned. 'As for the hotel? I called in to introduce myself this morning. They did have two reception rooms we could have used, but the plans have changed. They are renovating the upper floors ahead of schedule and they need those rooms for storage. Poppy persuaded the manager to give us the ballroom, but I think we are lucky to have it—all of which leaves me looking for some space to rent in a hurry.'

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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