

Don't Believe the Hype

Natalie Lewis is an expert with over thirty years' experience working in fashion PR with the biggest names in the business including Net-a-Porter, Jimmy Choo, Matches, Diane von Furstenburg and Anya Hindmarch. After selling her agency in 2007, Natalie consulted on a freelance basis with a range of high-profile clients including Bella Freud, Robbie Williams, Victoria Beckham and Claudia Schiffer. In June 2020, Natalie took a sabbatical from the fashion world to write *Don't Believe the Hype*.

NATALIE LEWIS

Don't Believe the Hype


HODDER

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

I

Copyright © Natalie Lewis 2023

The right of Natalie Lewis to be identified as the Author
of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by
any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance
to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN 978 1 399 70578 3
eBook ISBN 978 1 399 70577 6

Typeset in Plantin Light by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable
and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable
forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to
conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

For Catherine, Emma & Goo. Wish you were still
here. You may have found it slightly funny.

Author's Note

While I have indeed worked as a PR in the fashion industry for many (many) years, the story and characters in this book are entirely fictional and are all figments of my imagination.

PUBLIC RELATIONS (PR) – the practice of managing and disseminating information from an individual or an organisation to the public in order to affect public perception.

More commonly known as engaging in the practice of smoke and mirrors.

Prologue

‘You remember that pair of boots last winter that you absolutely had to have? You saw them in every magazine you flicked through: at the hairdresser, in the doctor’s waiting room, in the checkout line. You noted every celebrity wearing them proudly and looking effortlessly amazing. You heard there was a waiting list, that they were a limited edition. You were desperate for those boots. How did those celebrities get them? Could you get them? Would your friends get their hands on a pair before you did? They were the ultimate statement in fashion that season. If you had those boots, well, you’d look amazing too.

Let me tell you what really happened.

A pair of boots was created six months earlier. They were given by the designer to the fashion PR. The PR gave them a name. The “Cassandra”. They had those boots photographed, artfully. They then called up their favoured publication and told them they had an exciting exclusive for them. The boot of their dreams. They could write a story about them using images of all the VIPs wearing them in the pictures everyone was going to see. The PR wouldn’t let anyone else write about the boots until their story had come out. The magazine eagerly agreed.

That same fashion PR then told the designer to make twenty pairs of those boots to give to their chosen celebrities, who were never going to buy them themselves. They sent them out with a personal note from the designer, as a gift.

The PR had written the note. The grateful celebrities wore those boots when they knew they were going to be photographed. They posted a picture of them on their social media when they were told they could – by the PR.

You wanted those boots so badly. You still believed there was only one pair left in your size, on a resale site based in Sweden.

In a fashion PR agency showroom somewhere in London, those boots had sat on display in five different colourways for months. They had been sent with couriers to photographic shoots on a daily basis, shoved in paper bags. The factory was poised to make thousands of them, once thousands of you believed there were none left.

That boot became the “it” boot. For one month. You bought those boots using your “buy now, pay later” app, to try to convince yourself they weren’t the price of a small car. You wore those boots twice. You swooned when your pair arrived, but they didn’t look quite the same on you as they had in the pictures. And by the time you had tried them on in your bedroom, a new summer sandal, the “Frida”, had arrived in another PR showroom and was about to go through exactly the same process. You would feel as passionate about Frida as you had about Cassandra in approximately six months’ time.

And that, in a nutshell, is fashion PR. Any questions?’

‘But what do you actually *do*?’

Oh, for fuck’s sake. Really? Even after all these years, it’s constant. Today I’m back at my old university’s careers forum to address it. Again. *Fashion PR? Q&A with Frankie Marks.* I stand at the lectern, look out at the sea of students and try to focus on the task at hand, rather than the packet of crisps stuffed into my handbag and the fact that I am absolutely starving. But let’s be honest, if only they had seen me at the beginning. I was just as confused as they are . . .

PRESS NOTE

It was a momentous day in the world of fashion PR as Frankie Marks made her first appearance inside the doors of leading agency Georgina Galvin Communications. Frankie was at once inspiring, enigmatic, modest and exceptionally well prepared.

'Frankie who?' commented the members of the GGC team as they sipped their skinny lattes.

ENDS

The wooden floor of our bedroom was covered with a piled tangle of clothes and shoes and tights. There wasn't really that much room for such a big pile. But there it was. And so many tights. Ribbed. Opaque. Plain. Patterned. Woollen. Silk. The shutters were half open, the bed wasn't made, and I was struggling to decide what to wear. The options were all impossibly unsuitable for where I was heading. I had veered all the way from jeans and plain black polo neck, through to an A-line skirt with striped shirt, via a dubious dungaree dress and flared burgundy cords. I opted for my original choice. Jeans, polo neck and the one blazer I owned. Casual but formal. Confident but low-key. No tights required. *Jesus, I couldn't go through this every bloody morning*, I thought, as I yanked my head though the polo neck for the tenth time. I also knew James couldn't go through this for five more minutes.

‘Just wear the jeans, for God’s sake. You’re interviewing to be the intern. No one will be looking at you.’ He laughed at me from the tiny adjoining bathroom before switching on his electric toothbrush.

I poked one denim-bedecked leg through the bathroom door into his line of sight and wiggled it dramatically for confirmation.

My boyfriend of four years came into the bedroom, all tousle-haired and minty. ‘You’ll be fine. They’d be lucky to have you. Frankie Marks, the most unlikely candidate for fashion PR. Oh, this could be funny.’

I looked up at James and stuck out my tongue as I continued my deep dive into the sock drawer. He bent down to kiss the top of my head and gave my hair an affectionate ruffle.

‘My hair!’ I screeched, frantically patting the tonguing down. ‘You’re such a fucking pain. Now look at me.’ I scowled.

‘Now now, Frankie, you’re going to have to remember to keep your thoughts to yourself. From what I understand, PRs have to smile. And be nice to people. Even when they hate them. Just try to remember that.’

He had a point. I wasn’t entirely renowned for my people skills. Generally, if anyone tried to embark on polite chit-chat and ask how I was, I liked to reply ‘terrible’ to end any potential ensuing conversation. Same went for the interminable question, ‘What have you been up to?’ My standard reply – ‘nothing’ – normally did the trick. I also had an extensive list of behaviour I found unacceptable in others – chiefly, I absolutely could not bear to hear anyone chew or swallow loudly. *Ever.*

But, as the dozens of letters I had written to art galleries and auction houses since leaving university the previous summer, extolling the virtues of my degree in art history and my unparalleled willingness to intern for nothing but my bus fare, had resulted in no joy, I was determined that this would

finally be my employment break. Of sorts. I hadn't been fussy. I'd thrown the net wider. Publishing, PR, marketing, production – you name it, I had sent them my sparse CV. I was desperate. I urgently needed to get on to the career ladder, and my mountain of rejection letters and emails was depressingly high. But a friend-of-a-friend had known someone's sister's boyfriend who had once met Georgina Galvin and had sent her an email on my behalf, which she had promptly forwarded on to her PA, who had called me out of the blue. Fashion wasn't exactly my forte – my wholly unsuitable pile of clothing options was testament to that – but I believed there was room to manoeuvre.

'If Sotheby's don't appreciate what I have to offer in relation to my thoughts on seventeenth-century Flemish art, then surely I can apply myself to growing an interest in hem lengths for a finite period of time?' I said to James, with absolute false confidence.

'I'm sure you can find as much value in velvet as you would have done in Vermeer.' James laughed. Again.

The call had come in unexpectedly the day before, just as I was debating whether it was too greedy to have sour cream AND cheese on my daily baked-potato lunch for one. *If I have both today, I can have just tuna tomorrow?*

'Frankie? This is Debbie. From GGC.'

'Hello, hi, GG who?' I had frowned, scrambling to remember what GGC was.

Noticing my hesitation, she went on, 'Georgina Galvin Communications. We've had your CV in and would really like it if you could pop into the offices tomorrow. We've had an unexpected vacancy come up – an intern who didn't quite . . . well, anyway, are you free to come in for an interview?'

'Oh my God. Yes, of course. That would be wonderful. Thank you.'

'Ask for me. Let's say ten a.m. See you then.'

I hadn't heard of Georgina Galvin before. I came to understand she was legendary in the fashion world – the woman everyone knew of, feeling they knew her intimately while not actually knowing anything about her at all. She had moved through the industry seamlessly, having first come to its forefront as the right-hand woman to one of the most significant designers in Milan. How she had got there, nobody knew. Her age, a mystery. But when, after a number of years, she announced she was moving back to London to set up her eponymous agency, every designer and brand clamoured to be a part of it and be represented by her. Now she was something of an enigma. Floating in and out of the public eye. Appearing when necessary. Disappearing whenever she felt like it. But the mention of her name in fashion circles garnered attention and admiration in equal measure. She was the epicentre of numerous urban myths. And I was about to be placed in front of her – totally and utterly unprepared.

Debbie, who, as it turned out, was a perky, freckled brunette, met me in the hallway when I arrived at the imposing Georgian townhouse in Marylebone that was home to GGC. She efficiently placed me in a light-filled meeting room with a quick and terrifying pep talk.

'Don't be nervous. Georgina likes confidence. But don't be too confident. Be friendly. But don't be overfamiliar. And ask questions. There's nothing she likes more than giving advice. But don't ask too many questions. She'll wonder why you don't know anything.'

I sat down, sweltering in my coat and scarf until it occurred to me that I could perhaps disrobe. I placed them on the chair next to me. I sat at one end of an incredibly long glass table, the walls around me covered in framed magazine covers and pictures of a woman I assumed must be Georgina, with clients all over the world. None of it really meant anything to me, but there was the iconic eyewear shoot with the dripping lipstick

Don't Believe the Hype

that even I was aware of because we had talked about it in one of our Dali seminars in my first year. My interest was piqued. Here was the designer duo Dante, renowned for their A-list celebrity following, hugging Georgina backstage after what I would later learn was their infamous show on the tube tracks at Old Street station. Clearly Georgina knew them well, because scrawled at the bottom of the white surround was a message: *We'll always have Old Street! Love, your Dante boys.* Further along the wall I spotted an image of a Hollywood A-list actress – whose name I couldn't quite remember – leaning over a tray of diamonds, with Georgina just out of focus in the background. I sweated and fidgeted, waiting for what felt like an interminably long time. Just as I was about to grab a mint from my bag to combat my increasingly dry mouth, the door flung open. I stood up.

'Hello, I'm Georgina, sit, sit, please.' The woman standing at the door gestured. She was beautiful in a masculine kind of way. Brown hair, slightly messy topknot. Make-up minimal. Age undefinable. Anywhere from a mature forty to a brilliantly surgically refined sixty. Jewellery delicate but deliberately styled. She didn't pause for niceties. I would find out she never paused for niceties – and that she was never really around.

'I'm running late, and I've only got five minutes, I'm afraid. Debbie went through your CV and she's shared it with the team, and quite honestly this is just for us to meet so I can put a face to a name. We need someone with energy, enthusiasm and a can-do attitude. This job involves a lot of running around, anticipating everyone's needs and thinking on the go. Our last intern didn't quite cut it,' she said, glancing down briefly at my CV, 'but I'm sure you're more than capable. This is most definitely *not* a nine-to-five job, so the most important question is, can you be flexible with your working hours?'

Despite the inflection, this was most definitely NOT a question.

Georgina's phone rang then, and she put it on silent and turned it face down.

'Oh yes, absolutely. No problem.' I nodded fervently.

'Great. Let's make this quick, then. We'll start you on a three-month trial. From Monday. Debbie will explain how to claim expenses, and if you do well, we can look at a permanent position depending on how you manage. A lot of the team started as interns. Do you have any questions?'

Of course I froze, my mind a perfect blank.

'Umm. Not that I can think of right now. But I just want to say, thank you so much for the opportunity. I'm so excited to learn. You're such an inspiration.'

'Oh really? Why?'

Shit.

'You know . . . just so inspiring?' Oh, the shame of it. Good grief. *Think before you speak, Frankie.*

Georgina left an agonising silence as I floundered and tried to look meaningfully into the distance.

'I mean . . . Dante . . . so great . . .' I whispered, pointing at the photo on the wall.

And with that, she raised an eyebrow, pushed her chair back, pulled down the cuffs of her immaculate white men's tailored shirt and left the room as I sat, my toes curling in painful silence. Later on, I would often replay this moment in my head and the memory of it would make my eyes water.

'You're such an inspiration.' For fuck's sake. Had I really said that? I wanted the floor to swallow me up. And *no* questions? I had a hundred questions. Mainly, 'How did I end up here?', 'How old actually are you?' and 'Did you tie your hair up with pins or a band?'

I picked my bag up off the floor and shuffled from foot to foot. Was I supposed to follow her or wait to be fetched from the room? As I considered the merits of either approach, the door opened.

Don't Believe the Hype

‘Come on, then, don’t just stand there!’ Georgina said sharply from the other side. I grabbed my things, left my CV on the table and followed her out to where Debbie was waiting in the hallway, holding her laptop and staring at a diary screen. The two of them walked and talked as they went down the stairs. I followed gingerly behind.

‘So, you have a ten thirty a.m. with the guys from *The Forward* to talk about their special sustainability issue; they’re coming here. Then at midday, you need to sit down with the team to go over the dinner tomorrow night; they urgently need you to give final approval on seating plans. Then you’re done for the day here. Lunch is at Zaffano’s with Amanda at one thirty. You have a facial at three thirty and drinks tonight to discuss Dante’s show music with Marcel.’

Georgina nodded while checking her phone. ‘We need to change Zaffano’s. Amanda is on some new keto diet – she can’t eat Italian. She can do sashimi. Can you change it? To that Japanese I like in Mayfair. But get a table by the window. On the ground floor. Not the basement. Too stuffy down there. Get Andrew to package up that Dixie scarf for me to take for her as a gift. I know she liked it. Let’s have some gluten-free breakfast in for *The Forward* guys – one of them is coeliac. Ask Nicky to email me that plan so I can look at it in the car on my way in first. Can Marcel come to my house? I don’t want to have to go out and put make-up on after I’ve had my face done. Oh, and did you tell them I want the oxygen facial this afternoon? And not with that new therapist. She gave me a rash.’

I needed a lie-down just from listening to Georgina’s list of demands. She took a sharp left into another room, and Debbie told me she would take me on a quick tour of the building.

‘This is the office and where we all sit – Georgina likes to be able to see us all when she’s in.’

Debbie gestured towards a separate glass office with one desk at the far end of the room, where I spied Georgina already talking on the phone, simultaneously applying hand lotion and sipping a coffee.

‘We all work incredibly hard but it’s fun and she’s a great boss. I mean, she has high expectations, but she’s the best. Just ignore everything you’ve heard.’

I nodded. *Yup – I’ll ignore everything I’ve never heard.*

I looked around a double-height room filled with desks in arrangements of two, three and four. A gentle vanilla scent wafted from numerous large candles strategically placed between phones, laptops, whirring printers and a crowd of perfect, shiny people.

‘Guys, this is Frankie, our new intern,’ Debbie said.

‘Hi, Frankie,’ the perfect people mumbled, barely looking up. I smiled and gave a sort of half wave with my free hand to anyone who was looking. Which they weren’t. In the other hand I was heaving my coat and scarf and bag.

‘That’s Andrew, he’s one of our account directors, and next to him normally is Jemima, but she’s dropping something off somewhere at the moment, I think – clients are always scrimping on courier bills.’

Debbie pointed at one of the groups of glass desks covered in laptops and a printer, magazines, chargers, notebooks and litre bottles of sparkling water. Andrew was immaculate – alabaster-skinned with symmetrical features and perfectly coiffed hair – and I watched as he flicked through a magazine, inserting coloured Post-its while dialling someone frenetically on his landline. I glanced down quickly at my own jeans and platform loafers with a significant tassel detail and saw, with a sinking heart, the glittery Elsa embroidery snaking up my navy socks that I hadn’t noticed in my bedroom. An emergency Disney store purchase at the airport last year when I had aptly frozen ankles preflight. *I want to*

Don't Believe the Hype

die. Right now. I was definitely going to be uncovered as a fashion imposter by Day Two. But I needed this job. And in the meantime, I'd carry on writing to every single gallery in London just in case something more suitable came up.

'Over in this corner is Nicky's team. She's the Senior Account Director but she's on holiday this week. She doesn't really *do* winter in England. Her Account Director is Zoe but she's not here either. She has boyfriend troubles. I saw her scrolling through Tinder and crying so I sent her home.' Debbie corrected her overshare and got back to the task at hand. 'You'll be sitting at that desk with them.' She pointed to an empty desk. 'I'll get IT to set you up with a laptop and email address on Monday. Always keep it password-protected, and if you leave it here overnight, remember to lock it up in the drawer next to your desk. Don't eat hot food in the office, Georgina hates it. And never, ever wear open-toed shoes unless you've had a pedicure. She has a thing about it.'

I made a mental note to ask my best friend Charlotte where on earth to go for a pedicure should we encounter a sudden heatwave in January.

We wandered out to the hallway and Debbie directed me back down the stairs, passing a small room on the half landing.

'This is what we call the sample room, but really it's a cupboard where all the samples go in and out of every day. It's where Eloise, the Showroom Manager, sits. No idea where she is, though,' she said with a shrug as we moved past.

I managed a fleeting glimpse into a dim box room, crammed with a desk and paper bags filled to the brim with clothes and shoes. There was a rail haphazardly stuffed with an array of hanging clothes in a cacophony of colours and materials. Post-it notes covered the walls with scrawls, dates and a lot of question marks. *A lot.*

'And this is the main showroom.'

We were back on the ground floor. I peered inside a large, white-walled space. Rail after rail of clothes. Shoes in rows all along the perimeter. Plinths holding expensive-looking handbags. Glass boxes full of jewellery of all shapes and sizes. Sunglasses in rows on display stands. I'd never seen anything like it.

'There's a second adjoining room for the other clients, but that can wait till next week,' Debbie said, waving her hand. 'So that's pretty much it for now. You need to provide all travel expenses to claim back at the end of each week and I'll see you nine a.m. on Monday.' She was ushering me back to the front door and checking her phone. Clearly my time was up, and clearly no one at GGC did only one thing at a time.

Stuttering my thanks into thin air, I emerged on to the pavement, reeling. I felt like I'd been whacked around the head by ten metaphorical patent shoes. I had questions. So many. Primarily, how on earth had I just got this job? I turned back expectantly to Debbie, who promptly smiled and closed the door behind her. Who were these people? What did they actually do? How could I ever survive in that environment? Did they really all look like that, every single day? *Shit*. But regardless, and most importantly, I realised I had an internship. Georgina had seen some sort of value in me and I would make it work for as long as it took to get a glowing reference and something else. I wrapped my scarf around me and texted James.

Frankie

I really am going to work in fashion PR. Who knew?

Next, Charlotte.

Frankie

I have a job. Sort of!

Don't Believe the Hype

Then I called my father. He didn't do texts.

'Fashion PR? What on earth is that? And what do you mean, for free?' He sighed down the phone.

'They'll pay for my travel.' The panic about how much longer I could get by without an income was real, and I could hear myself whining slightly, my pitch going up a notch and betraying my anxiety. I always regressed when I wanted my father's approval, and I hated myself for it. His mantra to me had always been to look after myself. The day I lost my pocket money, age ten, on the way to buy a KitKat, and sobbed inconsolably when he refused to advance me the following week's fifty pence, was my first harsh lesson about taking responsibility for my own actions. Plus, my father had memorably added, 'Who wastes their money on chocolate when they could have bought a newspaper instead?'

'You need a salary . . . you need to start paying James a fair share of the rent. There's no such thing as a free lunch. All those university loans for *this*?'

'I know. I really know. But Georgina said it's likely, well, it's *very* possible I'll get a paid job there. It could be a good opportunity, and let's be honest, it's my *only* opportunity at the moment. It's not like I haven't tried. I'm sure I'll find something better soon. It's just a stepping-stone – it'll look good on my CV and get me a professional reference for a start. I'm sure James will understand.'

'It's a ridiculous world, full of ghastly people, and a total waste of your education. Try Christie's again. Use your degree, for crying out loud.' Apparently, as far as my father was concerned, I was the only art history graduate on the job hunt. 'Find yourself a real job, don't get stuck there for too long.'

'Oh God, I won't be there long,' I said quickly. 'No way. What do *I* care about fashion anyway?'

PRESS NOTE

GGC is delighted to announce the appointment of Frankie Marks to the highly sought-after role of intern. CEO Georgina Galvin said, 'With her exceptional passion for the industry, Frankie will be a wonderful addition to the GGC team and we look forward to welcoming her next week.'

Frankie Marks commented, 'I am thrilled to be joining GGC and to gain further insight into how appalling my wardrobe is. Opportunities like this come around once in a lifetime.'

ENDS

'But they're all so well dressed, like they haven't tried at all,' I wailed to Charlotte on the phone, while crunching on a poppadum, the Sunday night before I was due to start at GGC.

'Which means they've probably all tried incredibly hard to look like they haven't tried at all,' she retorted.

That was easy for her say. She hadn't seen the team at GGC in all their full designer glory. My notoriously lacking sense of style extended beyond the aforementioned Disney socks to a terrible mistake with pleather jeggings purchased for Charlotte's eighteenth birthday party – which was followed by six months of begging her to delete all photographic evidence of the catastrophe that was my thighs. High fashion was way out of my depth, but I was determined to be

the best badly dressed intern they had ever had. Now I just needed to make sure the curry I had devoured last night hadn't been too garlicky. Should have thought of that. I took a discreet breath test against my wrist and checked I'd remembered my mints.

Okay, so: there was Andrew, someone missing called Jemima, Zoe, and another one who was on holiday. And a girl in the sample room. I couldn't for the life of me remember her name. I reached into the recesses of my brain. Nope. Nothing.

I sat on the jammed top deck of a bus on my way from Ladbroke Grove to Marylebone for the first morning commute of my working life, to a place I would never have imagined myself working in, with the kind of people I would never have imagined working with. I fiddled with the top of my polo neck as I stared out the window, watching a freezing London morning pass me by. I stared furiously at anyone who tried to sit next to me until they moved past. James wasn't wrong. I wasn't good with strangers.

James and I had been together since my first year at the University of Manchester, having collided drunkenly into each other by the warm vodka station at some godforsaken house party. We had been a couple ever since. I was up from London, studying History of Art. James was a third year with a no-nonsense attitude to . . . well, to everything, including me, apparently. He had studied something to do with economics and was now working in something financial that I didn't understand, but he was assuredly on the first rung of his solid and well-paid five-year plan. He had always known what he wanted to do. We couldn't be more different, but quite frankly we couldn't imagine not being together – as much as we sometimes annoyed the hell out of each other. I adored him. He was laconic and dry-witted. He loved a balance sheet. I didn't understand what that was. I was prone

to outbursts, didn't suffer fools gladly and never quite knew when to bite my tongue. But James grounded me, and as much as I detested the thought of it, he looked after me. And let's face it, he put up with me and happily acted as my social wingman when appropriate interactions failed me.

'A PR intern. Being polite *all* the time. Thank you, Lord, for this gift that will just keep on giving,' he had said that morning as I was leaving the flat. My new job was going to present him with hours of anecdotes and one-liners, I just knew it. And it was going to be really irritating.

We lived in his minuscule one-bedroom flat off the less salubrious end of Ladbroke Grove, where he subsidised me – and I, in return, perfected the art of the takeaway order and attempted something vaguely akin to keeping things ticking over while he was at work.

'Subsidised *until* you get yourself a job,' James had jokingly specified on numerous occasions. A joke which I suspected had a time limit, and a job which I had so far spectacularly failed to deliver. *Until possibly now*, I thought, as the bus veered left after Marble Arch.

I decided to get off a stop early to gather my thoughts and give myself a little pep talk from under the woolly hat that was pulled down to the top of my eyebrows.

'You can do this. You *can* smile at everyone. You will *not* speak out of turn. You *will* learn to love lurex. The girl on holiday was Nicky! Yes!' I remembered. Now God help me retrieve the sample room girl's name. I took a deep breath and rang the buzzer of the glossy black front door. No answer. I rang again. 9.04 a.m. Was I the first person in?

At 9.06, Debbie hurtled around the corner, clutching a coffee.

'Oh God, sorry! Isn't Eloise here to let you in? She's always bloody late. Hold on, let me find my keys, hold this. Don't spill it. It's for Georgina. She's coming in today.' Debbie thrust an oversized takeaway coffee cup into my gloved hand

and rooted around in her significantly large bucket bag. 'Here, found them.' She waved the huge bunch of keys triumphantly before she unlocked the door, quickly punching in a code on the alarm inside the dark lobby.

She flicked the switches and the lights came on one by one. She unlocked the doors to the showroom on the left and carried on up the stairs. She unlocked the sample cupboard on the half landing and took a look inside.

'Shit, she really left it a mess on Friday, fucking Eloise,' Debbie muttered, her perkiness drooping for a second. She carried on up another flight to unlock the doors to the main offices, switching on more lights as she went, while I mentally unpicked the chaos behind that sample cupboard door.

I followed in her wake, still clasping the huge coffee and praying it wouldn't slip through my gloves and stain the immaculate grey carpet, as the building snapped to life around us. I could hear the front door beginning to open and close two flights down, and the sounds of chatter echoing up the stairwell.

'God, how is it already Monday again?' Andrew walked in with a messenger bag, a croissant, and sporting an interesting take on a deerstalker hat with fur inlay that I was pretty sure Harry Styles had worn in his latest music video.

'I really am over him now, I promise you.' A girl was talking intently down her phone as she walked into the room. So, that must be Zoe with the boyfriend trouble. She was beautiful. A cropped pageboy cut, cartoon-sized, almond-shaped hazel eyes and a heaven-sent set of full lips. Did she look in the mirror every morning and say, *Thank you, God?*

'Hi, everyone! Good weekend?' A tall, striking black girl with a broad smile shook off a camel coat at the other empty desk Debbie had pointed out to me last week. Jemima, I guessed.

'I cannot believe my holiday's already over,' groaned someone glossy with a mahogany tan who must be Nicky,

relieving herself of a quite excellent cross body bag which she flung on to her desk. She threw herself into her chair with a flourish and a sigh. 'This weather doesn't suit me. At all.'

'Okay, everyone, Georgina's on her way,' Debbie announced, looking up from her phone. 'Let's get into the meeting room with the papers. Frankie, can you stay down here and answer the phones till Eloise appears? Just press whichever line is ringing. Don't forget to take a message and always take their numbers to call them back. Even if they say we have it.' She pushed a pack of Post-it notes and a biro in my direction and swiped the coffee from my hands.

'Where the hell is Eloise, anyway?' I heard Nicky asking as they all trooped up the stairs holding their newspapers.

'Oh, and Nicky, this is Frankie. She's our new intern; she wears glittery Elsa socks,' Andrew added with a wicked grin as he left the room.

'Hi, Frankie. Ignore him. Welcome. And I know . . . my tan is fabulous.' Nicky smiled as she sashayed out.

Note to self: do intensive shiny-sock clear-out tonight. Urgent.

The room was silent. I stared around me, shell-shocked. I didn't have a computer yet. I didn't have anything. In fact, I didn't have a clue. *Holy fuck, I'm fucked.*

The door opened and shut again, throwing in a quick icy blast from the street.

'I'm heeere.' I recognised Georgina's voice as it carried up the stairs and heard Debbie run down to greet her.

'Morning. How was your weekend? Let me take your coat. Did they send the right driver? We're all ready for you . . . your coffee's up there. Eloise still hasn't shown up but Frankie's manning the phones.'

'Who's Frankie?' I heard Georgina ask indifferently.

'The new intern? You met her last week,' Debbie replied.

'Oh, right, right. Of course. Yes. Okay.'

Don't Believe the Hype

As James had reminded me, no one was looking at me. My new boss couldn't even remember hiring me.

I sat in the silence contemplating what I was doing there, why I hadn't eaten breakfast, what time I would have lunch, and how I could ask Nicky where her bag was from (so I could look for a high-street equivalent. I found myself quite liking the idea of a crossbody bag).

Suddenly the phone rang, interrupting my reverie. Line one flashed. I picked up the receiver.

'Good morning, GGC,' I said in what I hoped was my best proper-job voice.

'Can I speak to Andrew, please,' replied a weary female voice.

'Oh, I'm sorry, he's just in a meeting. May I take a message?'

'Urgh. Yes. Okay. It's Natasha from *My Style*.'

'Can I have a number for him to call you back?'

'He has my number.'

The line went dead before I could reply. More ringing as line two flashed.

'Good morning, GGC.'

'Nicky, please. It's Amanda Starling.'

'I'm sorry, Nicky is currently in a meeting. Can I let her know you called? Is that starling as in the little bird?'

'Seriously? Just get her to call me back asap.'

And once again, I was left speaking into the ether as the line clicked dead.

I googled Amanda Starling. Editor-in-chief of *Avalon* magazine. Shit. I really needed to do some homework. No wonder her keto diet had been high stakes for that lunch I'd heard Debbie and Georgina discussing on the day of my interview.

An hour passed in much the same vein, a rinse and repeat of 'Good Morning, GGC' followed by a flurry of names I'd never heard of and numbers I somehow never managed to

get. By 10.30 my head ached from the effort of so much enforced politeness, and my stomach had passed the growling stage and was positively baying for food. The elusive Eloise still hadn't shown up by the time the team drifted back into the office.

'God, that was awful.'

'We've never had such a bad weekend haul of editorial.'

'Georgina was in foul mood.'

I scurried from desk to desk, sticking my scribbled Post-its in front of each of my new colleagues and wondering if Georgina was watching my efficiency from her glass box.

'I'm really sorry, most people wouldn't wait long enough to give me their numbers for you,' I apologised repeatedly.

'Don't worry about it.' Nicky waved her hand. 'Can you go see if Eloise has arrived yet and ask her to come up? Meanwhile, do we all feel like a cup of tea?'

'That's the royal "we", Frankie,' said Andrew. 'What Nicky means is *she* would like a cup of tea. But actually, while you're down there, I wouldn't mind one too. Builder's. No sugar.'

'See, I knew I wouldn't be the only one who wanted a cup. Same for me, please, Frankie. No sugar. But strong. Not too much milk. And I only like the mug with the blue and white stripes.'

I headed down to the kitchen on the ground floor. It was tiny. I had a poke around the fridge. Two dairy-free yoghurts. One half-eaten punnet of grapes. Half a pint of skimmed milk and someone's leftover salad that had seen better days. I opened up the cupboard, took out the mugs and after a quick rummage, located the teabags. I had a sinking feeling I would be spending a lot of time in this room.

As I was squeezing the life out of Nicky's teabag, I heard the door open and close quietly. I stuck my head around the door and saw an average-build brunette who looked to be pretty much my age and in startlingly bright purple tights,

Don't Believe the Hype

phone clamped between her ear and shoulder, whispering urgently.

'Yes, yes, I know. Look, I'm late again, but I'll have a look at everything later and let you know. Got to go.'

I put the spoon down with enough of a clang to cause the brunette to look up and in through the kitchen door. When she did, I waved the spoon aloft in a vague gesture of hello. She looked at me suspiciously.

'You must be the new girl. I'm late,' she said as she ran up the stairs. That must be Eloise.

'Nicky asked if you could go up to the office. If you're Eloise? I'm Frankie, by the way, nice to meet you.'

'Fucking Nicky,' she said distractedly, climbing the stairs and disappearing round the corner, hurriedly stuffing her phone in her bag.

'Nice to meet you too, Eloise,' I muttered to myself and the teabag as I heard the sample cupboard door slam shut.

Eloise had clearly been at the back of the charm queue with me. This could be interesting. She was either going to be my new best friend or my new worst enemy.

PRESS NOTE

Frankie Marks is delighted to announce that her first month at GGC learning how to take lunch orders and pick up dry cleaning was heralded an enormous success and she looks forward to discovering even more about tuna baguettes in the coming days.

Nicky Harris, Senior Account Director, commented, 'We are so impressed with how Frankie navigated the deli counter. We can't wait to see what further skills she brings to the team in the future.'

ENDS

'Oh hi. Remember me? James? I think we met once by the fridge. Or was it next to the recycling bins?' James called me as I was rearranging hangers in the showroom, a few weeks after my first day at GGC.

'I'm not really sure. I think those bins were part of the set for an *Avalon* shoot last week. Were you there?'

He said he was pleased for me, despite my sudden interest in duchesse satin. I wasn't entirely convinced, but I didn't have time to worry about it as I spent that first month absorbing, listening, eavesdropping and nodding a lot, in between getting lunches, picking up coffees, running errands and hanging clothes. GGC was a machine. The door buzzer went continuously. Couriers came in and out of the building constantly. Dropping back samples from publications, picking up samples

going to publications. Stylists came in for appointments, selecting clothes, shoes and jewellery for their shoots. Everyone was working a full season ahead. The summer collections in the showrooms in January would be replaced by the winter collections, after all the shows in February and the selling campaigns in March were finished. Then there were the collections called pre-collections. They were created in between seasons, and were also in the showroom. 'They're more commercial, Frankie – by which I mean people actually want to buy them because they haven't been designed for the catwalk,' Zoe had explained. I didn't understand. Why design anything in the first place that wasn't going to be sold?

'The catwalk collections create a halo effect. They're then adapted to fit someone who isn't seven feet tall, for a start,' she added. *Ridiculous*. I struggled to get my head around it. And curiosity was already getting the better of me. I wanted to see one of these shows. I just needed to last long enough to be there for London Fashion Week in a month's time, to see the catwalk clothes created for seven-foot models that no one would buy.

'It's like they're all on a hamster wheel, with no breathing space to get off and rest their legs, let alone hand-hold the intern. And that's just in the office. There's a whole life out of hours that they have to fully embrace . . . drinks, dinners, cocktail parties, openings, galleries . . .' I breathlessly relayed my observations to Charlotte in between mouthfuls of crisps one day, as I marched back to the office with a matcha tea for Zoe. My new colleagues' lives were relentless, but also kind of exhilarating, and as I watched each of them spinning twenty plates in the air every day, my fascination with the team and the agency grew. As someone who found very few people tolerable or remotely interesting, their allure was not only perturbing to me, but increasingly compelling.

Georgina was hardly ever in the office, but I observed everyone else with fierce concentration and started to engage with them a bit more day by day.

Zoe loved to overshare. She was beautiful, with an ability to carry off that pageboy cut hairstyle with a high-waisted jean that bewitched men and women alike. For some reason she couldn't hold down a relationship, but careered endlessly from man to man. I spent a lot of my day staring at her and considering her love life. She just couldn't work out what she wanted. But while she figured it out, she was an infamous beauty on the fashion circuit.

Nicky – well, Nicky was a law unto herself. Permanently tanned and always in the most beautiful and extortionately priced clothes, with perfect hair thanks to her brunette bob being blow-dried twice a week. I was shocked by the extravagance, but she entertained press constantly – breakfast, brunch, lunch, afternoon tea, cocktails, dinners – although she was always on a diet. And she was funny. She had a husband Mark who no one ever saw, but who definitely had a job in the City and definitely adored her, but hated her job. She didn't want children yet but planned to start trying soon – after the next Fashion Week, but before her next holiday. I kind of really wanted to be Nicky.

Then there was Andrew, who was just brilliant. Full of gossip and breathless stories, potty-mouthed, and always exhausted from unspecified late-night shenanigans. He was also very kind, and the others all adored him.

I tried to not dislike Eloise following our first encounter. I really did. But she had no interest in pretending she didn't dislike me, squinting and sighing loudly whenever I asked a question, so I gave up. I mean, I wasn't quite sure why she had taken such an aversion to me so quickly. I had truly been on my best behaviour and had even once asked her where she procured her neon Post-it notes from. She was always dressed

Don't Believe the Hype

in her own weirdly self-conscious interpretation of the latest trends, which always included terrible purple or pink tights and huge platform lace-up boots. She was stand-offish, constantly seemed to be on the phone, had frayed nerves and kept a lot of apples on her desk. Which she crunched on really loudly. Therein sealing her fate as someone I could never be friends with anyway.

And then there was Jemima. She had come to GGC straight out of college and was a Londoner born and bred, like me. She had also started as an intern, one who they all realised they couldn't live without. Tall and languid, she had the sweetest temperament and was consistently good-natured. Nothing was ever a problem. On my second day, it was Jemima who had taken me to the deli around the corner to talk me through what everyone did and didn't eat.

'When Nicky says she wants a chicken salad, she wants the chicken on the side. She doesn't want the dressing. She keeps a bottle of balsamic in the kitchen. Zoe doesn't eat tomatoes or garlic. And when she says she wants a ham baguette, she means she wants a wholemeal baguette with ham *and* cheese. And when she says she needs the low-fat mayonnaise, you'll tell her it is the low-fat – they don't have low-fat, but she won't notice, and as she'll never step foot in here, she'll never know. She also likes it cut into four pieces. Andrew always thinks he'll have a soup and then remembers he's not allowed to have soup if it's a day Georgina is in. He'll still ask you every day to call him to tell him what the soup of the day is, and will take ages deliberating. But he'll always end up having a tuna sweetcorn sandwich. And you'll never have to get Georgina anything. Unless Debbie isn't in. Although Georgina's rarely here, and when she is here, Debbie wouldn't dare not be here, and on the very off-chance it does happen, you'll be getting her sushi. And it won't be local. But even if she's on her death-bed, Debbie will talk you through that potential minefield.'

If my father could see me now, I thought to myself, as I carefully placed everyone's lunches in front of them. He'd be mortified.

Oh, it's great, I had emailed him that first month. *I'm learning so much. It's really exciting. I'm getting involved in everything. It's really going to help me when I reapply to the auction houses.*

The team had all seen my CV, so they knew my background – they weren't astounded by my average intellect. As it turned out, Andrew had a First in English from Edinburgh, Jemima a 2:1 in Psychology from Sussex, Nicky a 2:1 in History from Bristol, and Zoe had a 2:2 from Durham in Anthropology. Which would have been a 2:1, she assured everyone, if she hadn't split up from her boyfriend just before her finals. They were all really, really clever. They had all fallen into the industry by chance, mistake or good fortune. I put the information in my back pocket for when I needed to rebut my father's next onslaught. I had always been creative when trying to bring him around. Like the time I proudly told him what a great essay I had written about the scrotum – the holiest place in the Roman Forum – for my year seven history test. And when he exclaimed it was the *sacrum*, not the scrotum, and told me what a scrotum actually was, I insisted it must just mean I had an excellent grasp on biology. I wasn't certain he bought it – and at some point in the conversation he definitely lost the will to argue the logic – but I focused my efforts on getting top marks in my next biology test to prove my theory and appease him. I would now need to apply the same logic – work hard, excel, and invent a new mathematical theorem for the exacting job of spacing the hangers in the showroom.

In the first week of my second month at the agency, I marched down Oxford Street, clasping a bikini in the branded GGC

paper bag that Eloise had pushed into my hand with an address label on it and no further direction or word of thanks. I deeply regretted wearing stiff leather boots. They were rubbing against my heels and I could feel all the hallmarks of blisters starting to take shape. My Google Maps kept flipping the wrong-side up as I navigated the side streets of Soho searching for the address. When I finally arrived at an annoyingly inconspicuous entrance with a door buzzer marked 'My Style', I was flushed and ever so slightly sweating, despite the winter chill.

'Bikini from GGC,' I said to the girl at the nearest desk to the door and handed it to her without further introduction or niceties. She reciprocated in kind, stretching out her hand and grunting a barely audible 'Thank you' under her breath.

Back on Oxford Street, across and down from Selfridges, through garden squares, criss-crossing my way on to the high street, I checked my pocket for Nicky's ticket for the dry cleaning she had asked me to collect. Shit. I checked my other pocket. My back pockets. I must have left it behind. My panic escalated as I pushed open the door to the steaming hot dry cleaners.

'Look, I've left her ticket, but I have to pick up a dress for Nicky. You know Nicky?' I implored. 'I'm in a bit of a hurry.'

'Nicky?' said the man behind the counter, who was wearing little round-framed glasses and a tape measure around his neck.

'Yes, we know Nicky. She wants the silk dress? Hold on. But I need the ticket. And she also left two jumpers and a suit,' said an older lady, rummaging through a sea of hanging plastic bags, pulling down four and placing them on the counter in front of me. Nicky had insisted she needed her dress by five p.m. for some drinks do. I couldn't fail.

'I don't have either ticket. I really, really need the clothes. Please, I can't leave without them. It's an emergency,' I begged.

‘Well, I don’t know . . .’ The woman looked at the man. He looked back at her. This gaze between two dry cleaners became the singularly most important moment in my new professional life.

‘It’s my first month at work. I can’t go back without them. I just can’t.’ I tried to muster a tear. I bit my bottom lip.

‘She’s another new one from that office.’ The woman tipped her head knowingly to her partner in crime. He in turn shook his head in pity.

‘Remind Nicky we do delivery,’ the woman said as she pushed the bags in my direction and I gratefully swooped them up, swallowing down my irritation that Nicky could actually have had these things delivered.

I clutched the plastic bags over my forearm, which was now raised to stop the dress hem from sweeping the streets. The plastic stuck to my cheek. The top of the wire coat hangers banged not so gently into my right thigh with every step. My arm started aching. My blisters were burning. I carried on marching. Wearing my arctic parka with intense insulation didn’t seem such a smart idea anymore, as I felt a trickle of sweat pool down my back with another stop to make. I still needed to get Andrew’s coffee.

‘An extra shot, caffeinated, low-fat cappuccino, please,’ I said briskly at the coffee counter. It was 4.44 p.m. I now had sixteen minutes to make Nicky’s deadline. Ninja-like, I pushed the door open with my elbow, caught the bottom of it with my foot, and edged myself through the narrow space back on to the street. Burning coffee on one side. Dead arm on the other. Blisters. I was nuclear red, and a bead of sweat neatly ran from my hairline down the side of my cheek.

Oh God, did I put enough deodorant on this morning?

I rang the GGC doorbell with my non-dead elbow. No answer. Through gritted teeth I buzzed again, and as the door

opened I could hear Zoe cursing Eloise from inside the showroom.

I felt like I'd just completed some kind of bizarre obstacle course as I walked up the stairs into the office, but remembered to switch on a magnificent smile as I came through the door.

'Thank you! And my Saint Laurent suit and my jumpers! I totally forgot they were all still there.' Nicky extricated the pile of bags from my hands and threw it down. 'Drinks aren't happening now. Apparently, I got the wrong day. But I never do that. And it was in the diary.' She was frowning at the shared office calendar on her computer. 'Anyway, it's great to have everything back.'

Not. Even. Going. For fuck's sake. I had practically been on my knees negotiating the release of those clothes. I slumped into the chair at my desk, yanked off my boots and lowered my socks. Peeling raw skin and burst blisters. Great.

Andrew absent-mindedly put his coffee to his lips as he scanned his emails, and just as quickly banged it back down.

'NO!' he screamed. 'I don't fucking believe it.'

'Is it the wrong coffee?' I sat bolt upright.

'We're losing Cooper & Co.' He began reading. "'Such a great job. Been a wonderful two years. Time for a change.'" Blah, blah.' He took a gulp of coffee. "'Termination in two months, as per contract. At that time, please send all samples over to . . . FUCKING FIVE STAR.'" Okay, so they didn't call them "fucking" Five Star. That's my artistic licence. Shit. *Shit.*

'Sunglasses client,' Jemima explained to me.

'That fucking Dominic Carter. Georgina's going to kill us. And then him,' Zoe chimed in.

'Who's Dominic Carter?' I asked, understanding immediately that this was information I needed to know.

‘Literally our arch-rival. He runs Five Star PR. He’s always on our tails,’ Jemima said. ‘So losing a client to him is painful, Frankie.’

‘And channel that pain into hating him. It’s an important part of the job,’ Zoe half laughed with a grimace.

‘Let’s not tell Georgina till she’s back from New York.’ Andrew gestured Debbie over. ‘When’s she back? And for how long?’

‘In the office on Monday week, for the day. That’s as far as we’ve got with the diary,’ Debbie said as she walked over studying her laptop. ‘You can tell her then.’

‘Well, I’m one hundred per cent taking the cat’s-eye pair in black before they go,’ Nicky said. ‘They’ll go really nicely with my new bikini.’