



**T**hey *are* joking, aren't they?' said Gemma, pausing mid-toenail, bottle of polish tilting at an alarming angle, as she stared aghast at the TV screen. Her short brunette curls were quivering with indignation and a frown puckered her heart-shaped face. Somehow, even the toes of her right foot, resting on her left knee, managed to look exasperated and annoyed as they waggled up and down, like her eyebrows. She leaned forward in the tatty armchair, as if by getting closer to the screen the faux-pas she'd spotted would disappear – or rectify itself.

'What have they got wrong this time?' asked Zoë with a sigh. Gemma's flatmate was lying on the battered sofa, a plate resting on her DD-cup bosom while she munched a slice of toast and flicked through a glossy gossip magazine.

'That bonnet. It wasn't a style that came in till 1840 at least.'

Zoë glanced at her watch. 'Only a few hours old, then, considering it's only twenty-one-thirty now.'

Gemma narrowed her eyes and shook her head. 'I mean . . . Oh, never mind,' she said crossly.

‘So what’s the problem?’ Zoë shut her magazine and put on a semblance of paying attention.

‘This series is set in the Napoleonic Wars so 1840 is far too late. It’s like doing a series set during the Second World War with women wearing mini-skirts and wet-look boots.’

‘If you say so, Gem. But you are the only person in the country who would know or care.’ She reopened her magazine.

Gemma shut up. Zoë was right. In the great scheme of things it was nothing, but it irritated her no end that whoever did the costumes on this production couldn’t be arsed to get it right.

Zoë finished her toast, licked her buttery fingers, then wiped them dry on her jeans, before turning the page to the next story.

‘You going to help in the shop tomorrow?’ she asked, not lifting her eyes from the page.

‘Jean said she wanted me in. Besides, I’ve nothing else to do.’ Gemma sounded completely hacked off.

‘You’ll get another job soon.’

Gemma snorted. As far as she was concerned the whole movie and TV industry sucked. Crewing up for new programmes and films seemed to be done entirely on the old-boy network. Buzzerlugs Productions – or whoever – asked you to work on the next costume drama because you had worked on the last one. But how could you get a foot in the door in the first place if that was the way it was always done?

Getting a foot in the costume-designing door had been Gemma’s driving ambition ever since she could remember. As one of four daughters in a family where money was on the tight side, she grew up watching her

mother run up basic cotton skirts and dresses for her offspring. Consequently, Gemma had been dressing her dolls with the leftover scraps of fabric ever since she had first managed to thread a needle for herself. At first, her dolls had just simple skirts with elasticated waists to wear but, as Gemma's skills increased, she began to try to make them look like the screen heroines she saw on the box when she watched the old movies shown on Sunday afternoons. Before long her dolls had pelisses and fichus, bustles and cloaks and Gemma knew more than was natural for an eleven year old about pin tucks and Honiton lace. She didn't just dress her dolls, she also began to design clothes for herself. Her sisters had all gone through a similar phase of making their own clothes – although they'd never been keen on dolls – but the novelty of cutting out, tacking and sewing had soon palled and they'd preferred to use their evenings and weekends to earn money to spend in Miss Selfridge or Top Shop. Gemma, however, could never understand the draw of shuffling through dozens of identical outfits to find the one to fit you, knowing that you would be bound to see someone in 'your' dress sooner or later. Why not, she argued, make something for yourself that was exclusive? Her older sisters had smiled indulgently (and perhaps a little patronisingly) at her and said she'd understand about fashion when she was older. But Gemma, who studied pattern books and magazines far more assiduously than her siblings, was well aware that fashion didn't necessarily mean being a clone of every other teenager in Southampton.

It was taken for granted that she would study textiles at GCSE and A level, but it surprised all her family when she got a place at a fashion college. Her family didn't do

higher education. Her sisters had all gone straight out to work as soon as they left school, just like their parents and grandparents had. That was what the Browns did, her father, who worked in the docks, had said, but Gemma was adamant about going. Secretly, he was proud of her, of course, though for the life of him he couldn't work out why she had to go to a swanky London college to learn how to make frocks. Couldn't she do that already?

Since leaving fashion college, Gemma had stayed in London because she thought that was where she had the best chance of making it into films or TV. Besides, she and Zoë, her best mate since day one of college, had a flat that was affordable and many of her fellow graduates were also staying put. Over the previous three years on her trips home from college she had decided, rather sadly, she now had far more in common with her fashion student friends than she did with her sisters, whose height of ambition was to settle down and have kids. Of course Gemma wanted to settle down and have kids of her own one day too. Well . . . maybe. But not yet. Not for ages.

She had landed a couple of jobs designing costumes for kids' programmes and had done the styling for a series of mobile phone ads and a video for some sort of corporate training programme. Other than that, she'd been living pretty much hand to mouth, demonstrating sewing machines several days a week in a specialist haberdashery. It was all right for Zoë, she was assistant manager in the same shop – which was why Gemma had managed to wangle a part-time job there too – and Zoë loved what she did, absolutely adored it, although Gemma couldn't see the draw of advising the old biddies who frequented it about crochet cottons and tatting shuttles. However, unlike Gemma, Zoë liked retail: she loved interacting with

people, she got a thrill out of ordering new stock, and she got a buzz out of arranging the skeins of silks and hanks of wool. Besides, Zoë did not have her heart set on a career in films. Gemma sighed at the hopelessness of her ambition.

‘Something will come up. Honest.’

Gemma sighed again. Yeah, maybe, but she’d been out of college almost a year and had precious little on her CV. And being the sewing-machine demonstrator in Sew Wonderful wasn’t going to cut much ice in the media job market.

Gemma finished her toenails and admired the result. Then another costume howler caught her eye and she zapped off the TV in disgust.

‘I was watching that,’ protested Zoë. ‘It’s got Jono Knighton in it. I don’t care how crap the costumes are or how shitty the storyline is, I just want to gaze at him.’

Gemma had to concede she had a point and zapped it back on. The drama might be a pile of pants but he was lush. She gazed, too. Blond floppy fringe, blue eyes, wonderful cheekbones and a smiley, kissable mouth. And the way he strode about, dominating the scene in the film. There was no mistaking who was the star of that production. Utterly gorgeous . . . and talented.

‘Here, have you seen this?’ Zoë, multitasking – reading, watching and ogling – turned her magazine towards Gemma so that she could see the pictures she was referring to. ‘This is their house. Get a load of that!’ The house in question belonged to the Knightons.

Gemma dragged her eyes off Jono and took the magazine off her.

‘Fab-u-lous,’ she agreed. ‘Goodness, what style. Fancy living in a place like that!’ In the pictures Jono and his

wife, American actress Rowan Day, looked every inch the happily married showbiz couple they were. Gemma ignored blonde, svelte and beautiful Rowan and slavered over Jono. He was just as hunky in the photographs as he was on TV. Yup, complete babe-magnet and utterly fanciable but not quite gorgeous enough to keep her glued to the rubbish costume drama. Even Jono didn't have quite enough phwoar-appeal to stop the crap costumes from bugging her. Besides, he was a married man so, realistically, there was no point in lusting after him at all. If he could get a woman like that willowy American sex-bomb, there was no chance for a petite brunette like her. Or a curvy brunette like Zoë. She tossed the remote and the magazine over to her flatmate.

'Well, I'm not going to watch this tosh, even with Jono in it. The costumes are winding me up,' she said. 'I'm going to bed.' And walking on her heels so as not to smudge her newly painted toes, she hobbled into her bedroom.

She sat on her bed and checked her nails were dry, then took off her dressing gown and selected some bedtime reading from the shelf by her bed. *Regency Uniforms and Headdress* hardly qualified as chick lit, but it ticked all Gemma's boxes. As she snuggled under the covers and opened the book at the section on shakos, busbies and bearskins, she wondered if she would ever make the breakthrough into big, glossy costume dramas. Someone completely incompetent obviously had, if the film she had just been watching was anything to go by, so if there was a God, she, with all her knowledge, skill and expertise, should be able to as well.

The next day, Gemma walked with Zoë the mile or so from their dilapidated King's Cross flat, which they had now

lived in together for nearly three years, to the shop in Camden. The flat was pretty grim and the area not the best but, as students, it had been all they could afford and it had the advantage of being handy for the Tube and central London. As Zoë had pointed out, when they'd first viewed it, they only wanted somewhere to sleep. Three years on, they did rather more than that in the flat but they'd got used to it and had stopped seeing the flat's faults.

Rather than walk along the busy, crowded pavements, they took the pretty route along the Regent's Canal, which was looking fantastic in the late April sunshine. It was a slightly longer route but it was much more pleasant than sticking to the grubby, noisy main road. As they walked they chatted with the comfortable ease of lifelong friends despite the fact that they'd only known each other for a shade under four years. When they'd met on the first day of freshers' week they'd clicked instantly and since then, from boyfriend trouble to nights out on the lash, they'd been there for each other.

They climbed up from the canal and along the road to the shop. On the outside, it looked old fashioned: the paintwork was a smoky green, and the windows on either side of the door were slightly bowed with age and Georgian in style. It reminded Gemma of the shop that Bagpuss lived in – even more so when you examined the eclectic muddle of sewing requisites that made up their window display.

Zoë unlocked the door and swung it open. The old-fashioned bell that hung on a spring at the back of it jangled loudly. Zoë picked up the post and then ran through to the back of the shop to deal with the alarm system before it went off. The alarm was about the only

modern thing in the shop – well, that, the electronic till, and some seriously professional sewing machines. Gemma shut the door and switched on the lights, which flickered on down the length of the shop, illuminating as they did the rainbow-coloured racks of ribbons and braids, the silks and tapestry wools, the crochet cottons and sewing threads, bolts of fabric, displays of buttons made of every material and in every conceivable colour, needles for sewing and knitting, crochet hooks, dress and knitting patterns, interlining, zips, snips, hooks and fasteners and anything else you could possibly require if you wanted to work with textiles. Along one side was a long, wide table for measuring out the bolts of cloth and which also doubled as the shop's counter. The place was a dressmaker's heaven.

'Coffee?' called Zoë from the door to the staffroom.

'Please.' Gemma lugged one of the sewing machines off the shelf near the window and put it on the worktable, then, taking several reels of cotton from a drawer, she began to thread it up. It was a complicated job – this was a state-of-the-art overlocker – but Gemma's nimble fingers whizzed the threads around the hooks, spools and wheels. She was halfway through getting it sorted when the phone rang. Gemma walked across the floor to answer it.

'Hello, Sew Wonderful.'

'Hi. Is that Gem? It's Jean here.' Jean was the owner and manager of the shop. 'I'm going to be late in. Some pillock has just T-boned my car and I'm waiting for a tow truck.' She sounded completely pissed off.

'God, I'm sorry. You all right? You're not hurt?'

'I'm fine, thank you – and, sadly, so is the pillock. Although he may not be when I have finished with him.'

He was driving a BMW, which obviously stands for Big Male Wanker.’ Gemma could always tell when Jean was really angry: her language went from very ladylike to something her father would have found profane in Southampton Docks. Judging by the noises in the background, the Big Male Wanker didn’t appreciate her description. ‘Anyway, the upshot is that I won’t be in for at least an hour, maybe longer. You and Zoë will have to hold the fort.’

‘No probs, Jean. I’ll tell Zo.’

‘Thank you, my dear. See you later.’

Gemma went into the staffroom to break the news to Zoë. She was getting the float ready for the day’s trading whilst making the coffees.

‘You’ll just have to serve customers instead of working the machine. Not to worry, it’s unlikely we’ll be overrun with women wanting to buy overlockers. Take this.’ She handed Gemma a dozen bags of coins for the till and a handful of notes. ‘I’m supposed to do the banking run in a minute but I don’t want to leave you alone in the shop.’

Gemma glanced through the staffroom door, back into the shop to make sure it was still empty. It was. That was the thing about haberdashers: unlike newsagents and grocers, people were rarely moved to dash in for an urgent zip or dress pattern on their way to work. They hardly ever got busy till after ten – sometimes later.

‘If you went now, you’d be back before the rush. And you’d probably miss the queues in the bank,’ she said.

Zoë considered the logic of this. ‘You’re right.’ She grabbed the paying-in book and her coat, stuffed the canvas bag with the previous day’s takings in her pocket, then legged it. Gemma clutched the bags of coins to her chest, picked up her cup of coffee, and made her way back

to the counter. She wasn't supposed to have her coffee with her while she served, but who was going to know? She filled the till and then, as she sipped her illicit coffee, she cast about for something to occupy her time till either Zoë returned or a customer walked in.

She caught sight of a trade magazine and began to flip the pages, marvelling at some of the beadwork on the more upmarket dress materials that were advertised in its pages, when the door jangled. A striking woman, who bore a passing resemblance to Sharon Osbourne, swept into the shop. She was attractive but not beautiful, although she had good dress sense and nice hair and nails. She was probably the wrong side of fifty, Gemma reflected, although she knew how to make the most of herself. But she had a hard look about her. Probably something to do with all that varnish and lacquer. Gemma hid her mug under the counter and shut the magazine. She smiled at the customer, who barely acknowledged her as she marched over to the rack of braids, ribbons and piping.

Gemma toyed with the idea of going over to offer advice but decided against it. The old bat could fend for herself if she couldn't even be bothered to be civil.

'Is this all you've got?' The woman's imperious voice matched her appearance and deportment and she gestured to the selection of trimmings dismissively.

'Yes. Is there something in particular you are looking for?'

'I want a flat gold braid, about two centimetres in width.'

'Can I ask what for?' Gemma needed to know because it mattered if it was purely for decorative purposes or if it was likely to adorn something that might need cleaning or

machine washing. Customers didn't like to find that the gold lace they had chosen was going to need a lifetime of specialist care. Much better, in most instances, that the customer chose a cheaper, synthetic, more hardwearing option than the fabulous and sumptuous trimming that had caught their eye in the first place.

The customer sighed heavily. Gemma forced her mouth to keep smiling. Obviously, this woman was of the opinion that all shop girls were complete morons who were barely capable of getting their knuckles off the ground. Huh!

'Frogging.' She said it with a raised eyebrow that signalled *and you won't know what that means, will you, my girl?*

Gemma smiled even more sweetly. 'Is it for a military uniform?' The result was perfect. The woman looked as if she had swallowed a wasp. Gemma had to restrain herself from punching the air. Yesss.

'Erm, yes.'

'Any particular period?'

She looked even more discomfited. 'Regency.'

Gemma thought for a moment. She didn't want to sound too glib. 'Well, there were a lot of different regiments around then. Did you have a particular one in mind?' She could see she had this woman completely wrong-footed. Gemma almost felt sorry for her: she was looking extremely uncomfortable and embarrassed.

'Cavalry.'

'Oh.' Gemma tried to look helpful and caring. 'Like the Twentieth Dragoons?' she asked innocently.

The woman swallowed and said, rather tightly, 'Yes, precisely.'

Gemma made a mental bet that she hadn't a clue what

the uniforms of any of the cavalry looked like and thought that any old gold braid would do as long as it wasn't too elaborate or wide.

The door pinged open and Zoë came back into the shop.

'All right there, Gemma?' she asked as she took off her coat and headed through to the back to hang it up.

'Just fine. This lady wants to buy braid for a Regency cavalry jacket.'

'Well, Gemma's the one to help you there,' said Zoë, breezing past them. 'World's living expert, she is.' She carried on to the staffroom, leaving Gemma feeling deeply smug and the customer looking even more uncomfortable.

'I see.' Sniff. 'And, if you don't mind me asking, how . . . ?' She raised her eyebrows in part question, part amazement.

Obviously, anyone of Gemma's age couldn't possibly want to take an interest in history. Double-duh! She held her hands by her sides to help resist the urge to smack. 'My dissertation at fashion college was on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century military and naval uniforms. Fascinating subject, don't you think?' Gemma stretched her lips over her teeth. It was the best she could manage by way of a smile.

'Er, yes.'

She obviously knew nothing at all about it, thought Gemma gleefully. But she was moved by curiosity to find out why someone with little or no knowledge on the subject wanted to make a replica uniform. Of course, there was one reason that sprang to mind instantly, but Gemma didn't even want to think about going down that path. Besides, if her suspicion was right, what good would it do her? Yet another wardrobe incompetent, with a job in

the theatre or TV that they didn't deserve, making costumes that were anachronistic or just plain wrong, while she, Gemma, who would get it perfect, was stuck here in a shop . . .

No, sod it; she *did* want to go down that path. Who was she kidding? She was squirming with curiosity. She was desperate to know the truth behind this woman's request because there was just a chance . . . a slight possibility . . . She felt her heart-rate step up.

She breathed deeply to make sure her voice was steady. 'So can I ask what this uniform is for?'

'A costume drama for the cinema. A film about the Peninsular War.'

Gemma's heart began to beat even faster. 'Who's making it?' she asked, trying desperately to sound casual.

'Butterfly Films.'

Gemma had heard of them. Actually, anyone with any interest whatsoever in films and TV had heard of them. They had swept the board at the previous year's Baftas for their adaptation of *Mansfield Park*. Like Merchant Ivory, they had carved a very special place for themselves making costume dramas. Except, Gemma thought, that while the *drama* side of their speciality was fine, the *costume* side left a lot to be desired. And if this woman was their costume designer . . . No, she couldn't be. Surely, if you were about to embark on something as big as this, you would have mugged up on everything about the era in question? Perhaps she was just a gofer.

Gemma couldn't control herself any more. A bubble grew inside her – a bubble that was filled with a desire for knowledge. It grew and burst. Gemma wondered if the pop was audible. She asked, 'So have they finished crewing up?'

‘Why?’ The woman shot a cold glance at Gemma accompanied by a sniff. Hadn’t she ever heard of hankies? Gemma wondered, though she knew it wasn’t that kind of sniff. It was the sort of short, sharp nasal intake that made Gemma think of her last head teacher bollocking an unruly class before handing out detentions. Concentrated disapproval all expressed in one, tiny inrush of air.

‘It’s what I trained to do – costume. It’s the sort of thing I’d love to get involved in.’ Out of the corner of her eye she saw Zoë creep closer to eavesdrop on the conversation.

‘Really.’ Sniff. The woman sounded completely disbelieving and uninterested.

Shit, thought Gemma. She should have been more subtle. Too eager, too needy, blown it.

‘Have you done much?’

A glimmer of hope flickered into life. Gemma could hardly breathe. Perhaps I haven’t blown it after all, she thought. Sniffy-woman wouldn’t ask if she were planning to deliver a kiss-off. Gemma detailed her modest CV to date.

‘Not exactly impressive.’ The disdain dripped.

‘She’s only been out of college a year,’ said Zoë. ‘Give her a break.’

Gemma felt her whole body sag with despair. Well, if sounding too needy hadn’t been a no-no then having a friend getting irate on her behalf was probably going to kill any chance dead. The little flame of hope that had been burning snuffed itself out, lemming-like, in an act of suicidal despair.

The woman turned round and gave Zoë a steely stare which should have killed on the spot. Zoë, to her credit, just stared back. For several seconds the pair duelled with

locked eyes like two stags in the rut. The costume lady lowered her gaze first. Blimey, thought Gemma, she had underestimated Zoë completely. Then she realised this might be a bad thing. Damn. The old biddy had lost face. Not good. It was probably the final straw. Oh, well. She sighed inwardly. She would still have the job here in the shop. Who wanted a poxy job in the movies anyway? It would probably be crap, not a bit like her imagination had cracked it up to be.

‘Do you have a card?’ An icy voice brought Gemma out of her self-pity.

‘A w-w-what?’ stammered Gemma.

‘A card? Your address? So I can get in contact with you?’

‘No, sorry. Hang on. Just a mo. I’ll write it down . . .’ God, she was sounding like a moron, burbling and almost incoherent. Gemma dodged back behind the counter, hauled a length of receipt paper out of the till, and wrote her name, address and mobile number on it. ‘Here.’

The woman took it and sniffed again. Then she reached in her handbag and extracted a small piece of card. ‘Give me a ring. I’d like to see your portfolio.’ There was a pause. ‘You do have one, don’t you?’

Gemma nodded vigorously. ‘Yes, yes. When?’

‘Ring me and we’ll arrange a date.’ She swept out.

‘She didn’t buy her braid,’ said Gemma, stunned.

‘Who cares?’ said Zoë, skipping up and down on the spot like a two year old needing a wee. ‘Who cares! This could be your big break.’

Gemma felt quite weak as it all began to sink in. ‘Yes, it could, couldn’t it? How long do I give it before I phone her?’ The bell over the door had hardly fallen silent.

‘You don’t want to sound too needy.’

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‘But I am, I am.’

‘Yes, obviously, but it wouldn’t do for her to know quite how desperate you are. Wait till tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow?’ Gemma squeaked.

‘All right, this afternoon.’

Gemma looked at her watch. ‘But that’s hours.’

‘And promise me one thing,’ said Zoë, suddenly serious. ‘When you talk to her, don’t rubbish the designs you’ve seen on TV recently. The people that worked on the shows may be mates of hers. The designs may even have been hers, for all you know. You really don’t want to annoy her by sounding all superior. If you work for her, you’re going to be her assistant, an underling – don’t forget that.’

Gemma nodded. Zoë was right. She often was.