

CHAPTER 1

It was bad luck that I happened to take that afternoon off work. My boss said that it wasn't a problem because it was quiet. Had I been working away in our little phone store just off the main street, I wouldn't have ended up on TV. Unlike many, I didn't want to be famous.

In any case, I was standing in a corner of a TV studio, partaking in an afternoon show's new makeover fixture, and felt very lonely. There was no reason to feel lonely because they had picked another couple of victims for the show. One of them was a new grandmother in her fifties, who I think worked part-time at a school office, and the other was a recently divorced policeman in his thirties. We hadn't spoken much, mainly because there was no time, but also because we were too nervous. Maybe we wouldn't have even been allowed to talk in a TV studio during a broadcast - not that anybody told us not to.

Neither had anybody told me how hot the spotlights in a TV studio are. I felt my clothes clinging to my skin, and I had an uncomfortable feeling that my face was red and covered in sweat. Of course, it was not a major concern at that stage as my makeover hadn't started yet. We had to be introduced to the audience in our 'before' states first.

The tall, stylish woman who had stopped me in the street appeared in front of me. I hated that she convinced me to do this - my face was not TV-friendly - but she had been persistent and persuasive.

"Lea, your turn." She waved towards the stage, pointing at the same spot she had mentioned earlier.

I glanced around, and the grandmother gave me an encouraging smile. I took a few hesitant steps forward. Six feet left of the couch, three feet from the edge of the stage... Or was it the other way around? My eyes darted around looking for the woman who had been directing me. Bianca, wasn't it? I spotted her beside the cameraman, and she raised a well-manicured thumb with its flashy, red nail. I must have hit the right spot.

We were told that the ad break was over and we were live again. One of the presenters welcomed the viewers to the second part of the show. She started to approach me with her microphone, and I saw the camera inching closer. It might as well have been a gun, that's how fast my heart was beating.

"This is our first candidate, Lea. Lea, welcome to the show. Could you please tell our viewers what you do for a living?"

My first thought was that I wouldn't be able to utter a word, but the presenter was smiling so sweetly at me that I had to respond.

"I sell phones. I mean mobiles."

"Ah. Mobiles. Very up-to-date then. And can you tell me, is this how you normally dress?"

My brain was desperately ticking away. Was this the way I normally dressed? Like most people, I spent 40 hours a week at work, so it was the way I dressed most of the time...

"Well, this is my work uniform. So, this is how I normally dress for work. The rule at work is black trousers and a black top. No trainers."

"Sounds like a relaxed place," the presenter said to the camera. "Let's ask a few members of our audience what they think of Lea's outfit."

Nobody had mentioned this to me. I didn't want anybody to tell me that I had the worst dress sense ever and did not dress for my body shape.

"And your name is?" the presenter was asking a woman in the audience who had stood up.

She introduced herself and answered the question, "I think Lea is well dressed. So many young people nowadays have no sense of style. She is smartly dressed and comes across as elegant."

I wanted to let out a big, audible sigh of relief. Maybe I didn't look like an idiot in everybody's eyes after all. She had complimented me; there was a chance I could get away with this criticism with my pride intact...

"I'm Tom. Lea could dress a bit more suggestively; she has a great body. Lea, can I get your phone number?" The young man standing up grinned.

This inspired a few wolf whistles from the audience, and I could feel my cheeks flushing. The presenter patted my shoulder and laughingly reminded the audience to behave –

it wasn't a dating show.

The camera then turned to a little blonde. She stood up, making a big show of herself, and said, "I had that top five years ago too. It was alright then, but not anymore."

Any other day, I would have given her as good as I got, but on a live TV broadcast, I didn't get the chance. The presenter asked the grandmother to join us on stage, and the camera turned to her. She and the divorced policeman got the same treatment although the audience seemed to be much kinder to them. Was my face so awful that it was impossible to say anything nice about my looks? Even Tom had said that I had a great body. Did that mean my face was hideous and he wished that I had a prettier head?

I hadn't time to worry about it because the presenter gave us a signal – which was the word 'shopping' – to leave the studio. The three of us waved at the audience. In the backroom, Bianca's assistant, who looked about 15, guided us to a door and a van that would take us to the shops. On the van, we were directed to our personal stylists. Mine was called Maria. She was a small woman whose size clearly didn't bother her. She was dressed in huge heels and a fashionable mini dress. She was annoyingly pretty and was sporting a shiny, new gold ring on her left hand.

The next half hour flew by. I have never seen anybody buy as many clothes in as short a time as Maria did that afternoon. When time ran out, we ran to the main doors of the shopping centre where the van was waiting along with the rest of the crew. Some passers-by gave us curious looks, and some pointed at the Transporter van with the TV channel's logos on the side. Maria told me that my hair would be looked after next, then my make-up, and eventually, the clothes I would be wearing at the end of the show would be picked. When we returned to the studio, we were shown into another part of the building which only existed to improve people's appearances.

By the time I got back to Maria, I was told that we were running more than a little late and would have to hurry up. I did as I was told and got into a skin-tight, knee-length skirt and a satin top

that matched the purple print on the skirt. From one of the numerous boxes and baskets in the dressing room, Maria pulled out a decent pair of tights, and she threw herself on her hands and knees on the floor to help me pull on a pair of black, heeled boots that we had bought at the last minute. I had a feeling that she planned this outfit all along as my make-up also included purple eyeshadow.

“Have a look in the mirror, Lea,” Maria said triumphantly.

I was almost scared when she pointed at the full-length mirror on the wall.

I would never have dared to wear a high-waisted skirt; they were out-of-date and didn't fit my body shape - or so I had thought. This combination made me look tall and skinny and gave me a waist. In everyday use, the make-up would have been too flashy, but it was perfect with my outfit. My new hairstyle was casually messy, yet stylishly shaped. The colour was nice and smooth and made my face look less pale - or maybe it was the make-up.

I had no time to even thank Maria before Bianca's young assistant showed up and told me to hurry up. At the door leading into the studio, Bianca was nervously shifting her weight from one foot to another and pushed me towards the stage as soon as she saw me. She whispered for me to walk over to the presenter.

As soon as the camera caught me, I felt like I was dressed in my badly fitting trousers, five-year-old top and flat, muddy boots again. I happened to glance at the audience just as the presenter turned to me. Tom, who had commented on me earlier, stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly. I felt my cheeks redden and hoped that the make-up would not let me down.

The presenter said that before and after shots of me were now showing on the screen. As if by some miracle, Maria had shown up and explained why I had been dressed in the outfit I was wearing, considering my good and bad points, my pigment, my colours, my body... The audience seemed to agree with her. The presenter turned towards me again, gave me a flawless white smile and turned to one of the couches.

“Boys, what do you think?”

Only then did I notice the foursome sitting on the sofa. I didn't recognise them, but it wasn't hard to tell that they were a rock band of some kind. All four turned to look at me, and I again felt awkward under scrutiny. The band members were well-mannered as they all said something complimentary. What stuck in my mind most were the comments from the rocker sitting closest to me about how natural I looked both before and after. It wasn't the words so much as his eyes. He seemed to mean what he said.

We were soon kicked out of the studio. Bianca's assistant showed us into the canteen for a buffet of sandwiches, tea and coffee. I realised that I was ready to collapse with hunger and asked for the biggest possible cup of tea before I sat down with the other two victims to devour my tuna, ham and chicken sandwiches. The policeman, whose name turned out to be James, praised the change in us two women. Grandmother Annie and I complimented his youthful appearance, and Annie surprised me with an embarrassing comment about how physically fit James was. We all nearly fell off our chairs when the screech of a guitar sounded from the studio. I assumed that this was intentional as, soon after, the smooth sound of bass and the rhythmic thudding of drums reached our ears. I was surprised that I didn't recognise any of the band members and that the song didn't sound familiar. I had always thought I kept on top of the latest in music and new budding bands.

A few minutes later, the canteen was filled with people - cameramen, assistants, lighting personnel, presenters and, of course, the band that had been sitting on the couch. The foursome was loud, and Annie gave them sceptical looks. I found myself looking at them with interest.

The band members were my age, possibly a little younger. One of them was short and a little plump, but he had well-shaped, muscular arms, so I assumed he was the drummer. Another one of them was an ordinary-looking, tall fellow with a shaved head. Then there was a blonde, kind-looking bloke with a tattoo that I couldn't figure out on his right arm. The one who caught my attention was the one who had commented so kindly about my appearance. He had mid-length brown hair which looked like he was trying to grow it long. He had grey eyes surrounded by long eyelashes and he was

almost too skinny - not that there was anything wrong with his body. His tight black t-shirt didn't leave much to the imagination. He wore black skinny jeans held up by a belt with a chain hanging from it. His shoes had so much punk attitude that I fancied them for myself.

James, who was the sociable type, got up and said he was going over to talk to the band. He beckoned for me to follow and explained that he had been in a band when he was younger. He joked that it may have been better to stay on the good side of the law after all. The money wasn't great, but at least it was guaranteed, and he didn't have to worry about his looks. I was about to say that was now sorted too when one of the band members, the blonde one, noticed us and came over to shake hands.

He introduced himself as Mick. He said he was the guitarist and gestured towards the rest of the group. Like I had guessed, the stocky guy was the drummer. His name was Jamie. The hairless fellow was called Alex, and he played bass. The remaining band member also played guitar and sang lead vocals.

"Gary will rock all," Mick said, pointing at his friend.

The singer swung around to look at us. He grinned and started to walk towards us. James and I exchanged confused looks.

"His name. Gary Will Rock All." Mick laughed.

We were still puzzled when Gary came over. He shook hands with James first and started to explain while taking my hand, "Gary Rockall. Gary William Rockall. Gary Rock All is a stage name; Will is not part of it. The lads just like to joke about it at this stage."

Gary let go of my hand, and I was subconsciously considering never washing my hand again, just in case he was famous - or at least would be famous.

I heard James asking if they were a new band. Mick started explaining that this was their first time on TV and that they hadn't released anything yet. James asked about the band's name, to which Gary replied with a grimace, "The Remotes. I know, I know, it's a terrible name, but it is what it is. The record company thinks it's easy to remember, short and simple, and all good bands have

'The' in their names... It could also be an advantage that it's so like The Ramones." He shrugged apologetically.

James carried on asking about their influences, and when he found out that they were along the same lines as his old band's, there was no end to his curiosity. Especially not after it turned out that The Ramones was one of their favourites. I kept quiet because, despite being a keen music listener, my own musical talent was non-existing.

The conversation was interrupted by persistent ringing from Gary's jeans pocket. He apologised and left the canteen with his phone stuck to his ear. My attention turned to Bianca who had appeared beside me. She informed me sharply that it was time for us to leave. I looked around for Maria, wanting to thank her. I didn't need to look for long as she half-ran into the room carrying a pile of clothes wrapped in plastic.

"Here's another outfit for you to keep. And your own clothes." She glanced suspiciously at the plastic bag hanging from her wrist.

I was about to thank her, but she waved me off and said she was only doing her job. I took the clothes and followed James and Annie out of the building.

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Later that evening, I was over at my best friend Sinead's house. I had texted her in panic when I realised I was going to end up on TV and asked her to record the show. I wanted to see how much of a fool I'd made of myself. We sat in our armchairs, eyes glued to the screen. We had just reached the point where I appeared on the screen after my makeover. Sinead was leaning forward in her chair, nibbling on white grapes with a bottle of water at her feet. I didn't know anybody more health conscious than Sinead. She jogged to work every morning, had a shower when she got there and still had enough time to make herself look glorious. Her evenings consisted of gym time, dance classes and more jogging. It wasn't far off a miracle that she had agreed to sit in front of the TV that night. I had dropped into a newsagent on the way in for a big bar of chocolate, half of which was already gone thanks to my shredded nerves.

“You look good on TV,” Sinead said. “That hair really suits you, especially with the make-up.”

I grabbed another piece of chocolate.

“If only I could do my own make-up like that.”

Sinead shrugged, but it was easy for her to say. She was naturally good-looking, skinny and tall. She could, and bothered to, do her make-up, which was more than I could say about myself.

“Hey, do you know that fella?” Sinead pointed at the band sitting on the studio couch. I gave her an incredulous look. I had already told her everything about the band and said as much.

“That’s not what I mean. I mean, did you know that blonde fella from before? Mick Morrison?”

My expression must have said it all because she carried on, “But everybody knows Mick Morrison! He’s from around here. What did you think they were doing on this show?”

I had to admit that it had never crossed my mind. Surely no up-and-coming band would come to our local studio for their first TV appearance.

“I don’t know him. Are they all from around here?”

Sinead shook her head. “There are no hotties like him around here,” she said with a nod towards the TV. On the screen was a close-up of the hairless fellow, whose full name seemed to be Alex Rhodes.

“What! Sinead!” I shouted. Alex was certainly no pin-up.

“Well, you know me. Tall and bald men.”

I made a gagging gesture, making Sinead laugh. Our tastes in men were polar opposites.

“Well, which one then?”

I stared at the screen. Jamie Jones, the drummer, was too chubby for my liking. Mick Morrison was easy on the eyes but not my type although I had to admit that he was a lovely person. My eyes went to Gary who was laughing at something that one of his bandmates had said.

“It would have to be Gary. He’s really cute.”

“Ah, Gary’s just an ordinary singer, full of himself.” Sinead got up and walked to the kitchen to refill her water bottle.

She might be right, but there was nothing wrong with eyeing up a good-looking singer on TV.

The band moved to the centre of the stage where a whole pile of musical instruments had appeared, as if by magic. I had heard the song earlier that day, but hearing it again, I realised that it was better than I first thought. The verses were slow and teasing, but the chorus was heavier and faster. When it came to the vocals...

“Having said that, the boy can sing. Pretty good voice, huh?” Sinead gave me a questioning look.

I wanted to sink under the floorboards or hide behind the armchair or do anything whatsoever to drown out Gary Rock All’s wonderfully soft voice that was still perfect for rock music. I knew that I would want to hear much more of it in the future.