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Opening extract from

Model Under Cover: Stolen With Style

Written by

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Published by

Usborne Publishing Ltd

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Cazzie stood at the window, watching the traffic far below. Her voice was a whisper. "If we don't have the diamond back by Friday evening, then I'll have to tell Noah and the police – and Sid Clifton, the owner of this building and the magazine." There was a pause before she turned to look at me, shoulders heavy with fear and fatigue. "Please, Axelle," she begged, "please, you have to find the diamond. I didn't steal it, but somebody in the studio at that photo shoot did. And if I don't get it back…"

We both left the rest unsaid.

For Ellen, Marina, and Victoria

First published in the UK in 2014 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. www.usborne.com

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Cover illustration by Yusuf Doğanay

Author photo by Anne-Marie Mulot

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

ISBN 9781409563709 JFMAMJ ASOND/14 02991/1

Printed in Chatham, Kent, UK.

MONDAY MORNING

The Big Apple

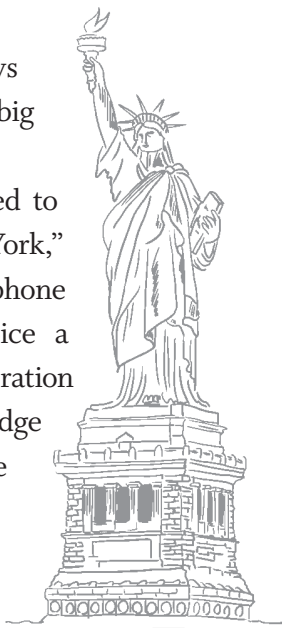
I'm on my way to *Chic: New York*, the fashion magazine – or, more specifically, to their head office located just off Times Square in New York City. And before you start thinking this is another one of my mum's hard-core plans to get me modelling…it's not.

You see, I'm not in New York City on my way to *Chic* as a model. I'm on my way to *Chic* as a *detective*.

Not that I know many details yet about the case I've been asked to solve…

The call from *Chic: New York* came two days ago, just as I'd wrapped up solving my first big mystery during Paris Fashion Week.

"Axelle, I thought you might be interested to hear about a call I've had from New York," my modelling agent, Miriam, said into the phone on Saturday afternoon, her breathless voice a conspiratorial whisper. I remember the exasperation I felt as I stood, ice cream in hand, on a bridge over the Seine, trying to formulate an excuse



to get out of whatever modelling job this was surely about.

But the call wasn't about a modelling job, and my exasperation quickly turned to excitement when I heard her continue: "Have you ever heard of the 'Black Amelia'? It's the most famous black diamond in the world. *Chic: New York* is – was – using it on a cover shoot, but…it's missing. It hasn't been seen since yesterday. *Chic* would prefer not to involve the police just yet…so they are wondering if you'd be interested in accepting the case?"

Interested? Are you kidding? Do fashionistas wear black? Do I like French fries?

The *Chic: New York* team must have heard the news about me solving the mystery of missing French fashion designer Belle La Lune – and that I'd managed to find her before the French police! I was thrilled that they'd asked for my help and accepted the job straight away. But before jetting off to the Big Apple, I went home to London with Mum to repack my suitcase, and to see my dad and Halley (my West Highland White Terrier). And so this morning, I caught a direct flight out of London.

Sitting in the back of the enormous black Cadillac Escalade SUV (sent by *Chic*) that had picked me up at John F. Kennedy Airport, I stretched my legs and stifled a quick yawn before pressing my face against the window. I silently ogled the view as the driver, whose name I'd learned was Ira Perlman, deftly weaved his way through the late morning Manhattan traffic.

In case you've never been, New York City looks like a film set. As we navigated our way out of the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, all around me I could see shiny skyscrapers, pavements crowded with a gazillion people, and honking yellow cabs. And even if it had been my first time in the Big Apple (I'd actually been with my parents a couple of times before), the gridlike street layout would still have felt familiar from various films and television shows (like *Law and Order* – my gran loved the US version and watched it for years, in between *Midsomer Murders* and *Miss Marple*). The city seemed to vibrate with a frenetic energy all of its own.

I watched as plastic bags blew across the streets and leaves fluttered in the early spring wind. Cool, sharp gusts were blowing in off the New Jersey shore. I had to admit that my mum had been right to insist that I pack the new trench coat she'd bought me ("Burberry!" she'd chirped. "And only half price!").

Apparently my mum was psychic too, because at that moment my phone rang. Bracing myself for the onslaught of questions, I answered.

"Axelle, darling! How was the flight? How's New York City? Wonderful, isn't it? I wish I was with you! Your baggage didn't get lost, did it?" The questions came so thick and fast that I didn't even get a chance to respond, until finally I heard, "I have to go now, Axelle, I have to meet a client" (Mum is an interior designer) "but I'll call you later.

Your father and I are so proud of you. Modelling in New York City!"

Modelling! Argh! My mum was *so* in denial! *When*, I asked myself, *will she finally understand that all I want to do is solve mysteries? And that modelling and high heels and hairspray mean nothing to me?* At least, nothing more than offering the perfect cover for sussing out fashion crimes, like tracking down a missing designer or a famous black diamond. My mum's big dream has always been for me to model – like, *real* modelling, not *undercover* modelling. And clearly – annoyingly! – even after cracking last week's big, juicy case in Paris, it's *still* her dream for me.

Grrr!

I took a deep breath to control myself and said as lightly as I could, "Well, I have to go now, too, Mum. I have an appointment at *Chic – about the case*."

"Yes, well, have fun! Maybe you'll shoot a cover – I'll keep my fingers crossed! Bye for now, darling."

As I slipped my phone back into my pocket it vibrated. I pulled it back out and read my new messages. There was a cute one from my dad and another one from my BFF at home in Notting Hill, Jenny. Ellie B (non-modelling name: Elizabeth Billingsley), the new friend I'd made last week in Paris, had also sent me a text welcoming me to the Big Apple and asking if we could have dinner together later. She'd just flown into town for New York Fashion Week, which was starting on Wednesday. The last message was

from Miriam, my agent, checking that I'd arrived safely, and that the car *Chic* had promised had picked me up from the airport as planned.

Miriam – Miriam Fontaine, Paris-based agent supremo – had been super-helpful and kind since the events of last week. I've known her my whole life, as she was my fashion-editor aunt's oldest friend, and it was her agency that represented me when I modelled (undercover) at Paris Fashion Week. After the story of how I'd found Belle broke, Miriam made sure I was all right, fending off the press and keeping my mum calm. She also – together with *Chic* – organized this trip to find the Black Amelia.

But in the aftermath of all that had happened, I'd occasionally caught her looking surreptitiously at me through slightly narrowed eyes; and while she didn't say anything, I knew she'd been completely surprised by the fact that *I'd* solved the mystery of Belle's disappearance – even if she did know that I'd been obsessed with solving mysteries since, like, for ever.

Fortunately for me, Miriam also had an agency in New York City, and was happy to continue representing me as a fashion model here, too. Because, yes, I'd decided that the best course of action for solving this crime was once again to go undercover as a model. It was the easiest way for me to infiltrate the closed world of fashion, especially during Fashion Week when no one in the business would have any time to spare for my questioning. But to work as a model I

needed the help of an agency. And who better than Miriam and her well-respected team? I knew I could trust her to be discreet, and I knew she'd help me keep up my modelling pretence.

Hervé (my booker at Miriam's agency in Paris) had also sent a message wishing me luck and something about an option for a magazine editorial in Paris.

I quickly looked through my messages again. No, there was definitely nothing from Sebastian.

But had I really expected there to be?

My throat tightened at the thought of his cool grey eyes, and the warm smell of his leather jacket – not to mention our last conversation. *Argh!* I fiddled with the buckle of my La Lune shoulder bag for another moment then, pushing Sebastian out of my mind, I looked back out the window.

Once we turned north onto 3rd Avenue, I was fascinated by the speed at which we flew past the bisecting streets: 38th Street, 39th, 40th, and on and on. Ira, the driver, was seemingly unfazed by kamikaze bike messengers or the enormous potholes pitting the street like a bad case of acne. Even the yellow cabs coming at us out of intersections or from behind other cars didn't seem to concern him.

At that moment my phone rang again. It was a local number. *It must be Miriam's New York office*, I thought as I answered.

"Hi, Axelle, I'm Pat Washington," said a loud, energetic voice, "your booker here at Miriam's NY. I can't wait to

meet you. Miriam and Hervé have told me so much about you. I just wanted to be sure you've arrived safely, and are on your way in…" I'd barely said I was before she carried on talking. "Great, because you are going to be busy – very busy. I'm just waiting for *Chic: New York* to confirm you for a shoot tomorrow, which is fabulous. You've also got several show castings lined up."

Very busy? Fleetingly I wondered if she knew I was here to solve a crime or—

"Jared Moor," Pat continued, "should confirm for tomorrow – I'll let you know later today – and I'm still waiting to hear back from DKNY, Jorge Cruz, Diane von Fürstenberg, and The Isle – but don't worry there'll be others."

Great, I thought. And when was I supposed to solve the case?

"As for your *non-modelling* business," she continued pointedly, as if reading my mind, "we can discuss that in more detail when you're here."

Her brisk dismissal of my true reason for flying this far made me slightly nervous. Somehow I'd have to make it clear to her that I needed time to follow up on leads and clues – but surely Miriam had done that?

"Although," Pat continued, "if you've looked at your printed schedule – did Ira give it to you? Yes? Good. Well, then you'll know that you are going straight to *Chic* for a go-see before coming here. You'll be seeing Cazzie Kinlan

herself! She wants to meet you and maybe see you in some clothes before tomorrow's shoot."

As Pat continued talking about the coming week, I looked into the folder Ira had pointed out to me when I'd first climbed into the car. Pat was right, there was a printed schedule…but I noticed that behind the schedule there was also a slim envelope addressed to me. In it was a letter from Miriam. And according to the letter, the go-see at *Chic* that Pat was referring to was actually a briefing from their editor-in-chief about the case…so either Pat had no idea why I was *really* going to *Chic* – despite her earlier allusion to my "non-modelling business" – or she was being discreet. But before I could finish reading the letter, she cut through my jet lag with the following loud announcement:

"And, Axelle, I hope you look good, girl. *Chic* magazine is at the top of the fashion pyramid – you have to look your best going in there. Clean hair, some cute little outfit—"

"Yes, but I just got off an international flight! I hardly—"

"Girl, I don't care if you just came in from Mars. You better freshen up and get it together. A model has to look like a model – got it? I'll see you here after *Chic*. I'll introduce you to everyone and then we'll have lunch. Now get sharp, girl!"

Get sharp? I hung up and slumped back into the soft leather seat. Great. I'd only just arrived and already I had a fashionista breathing down my neck!

"Are we nearly there?" I asked Ira, picking up Miriam's letter again.

Ira nodded, his long, frizzy orange hair bobbing. He was wearing Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses and a gold-and-diamond pinky ring that glinted in the sunlight every time he moved his right hand. "Yup. Traffic hasn't been too bad this morning and I was able to avoid the construction work around the Chrysler Building, so I'd say we've made pretty good time." As he turned left onto 7th Avenue he continued with a sideways nod of his head, "That's the famous Times Square. And the *Chic* offices are a little further down on the left. The tall silver building, you see it?"

I nodded as, eyes glued to the window, I took it all in. So far on our drive through Manhattan, the loud, brash and bold attitude of the city was exactly as I'd remembered it. But on Times Square that attitude was amplified by, like, ten; plus there were those enormous billboards looming over everything. I couldn't think of an equivalent at home in London. Trafalgar Square? No way. Too grand and old-world. Piccadilly Circus? Yes, that came much closer – but without the darker, Batman-Gotham vibe.

I caught Ira smiling at me in the mirror as he parked. "You know, Axelle…" (Unlike Pat, Ira pronounced my name like the car part, instead of the *correct* way, which is to rhyme it with the verb "excel".) "I've been to Europe. I've seen a lot. London, Paris, Madrid. They got a lotta nice things, those cities, but not one of 'em has Times Square. You know what I'm saying?"

I sure did.

"Anyway, it's a quarter past twelve, Axelle. I was told to be sure you weren't late," he said with a nod towards the silver skyscraper. "Must be important."

"It might be," I answered with a shrug of my shoulders, as visions of the missing diamond sparkled in my mind. "Anyway, thank you, Ira, for getting me here on time."

"No problem, kiddo. I'll be out here waiting for you. Good luck."

"Thanks, Ira," I said. I quickly ran my hands through my hair and popped a mint in my mouth. *So much for looking sharp*, I thought. Then I grabbed my shoulder bag and stepped out onto the sidewalk.