

ONE SHOT

ALEX LR

They lodged at the best hotel in Otranto, where I worked, after school, to earn a little cash on the side, helping out my cousin Annamaria at reception, mainly running errands for guests. I was barely sixteen but nobody seemed to mind; we needed the money at home. My little part-time job had become a necessity ever since my dad's pizzeria had gone bust. From April to October, Otranto is filled with visitors, and I could receive many gratuities.

She was tall and leggy, walking around barefoot whenever she could. Her eyes were a deep blue, always wide open, as in a daze. Her hair was waist-length, straight, honey-coloured.

He had his heavy camera with him all the time, along with other equipment—things I wasn't even sure had names.

I had seen her face on the covers of countless magazines. Her name was Anoushka, and she was German. You could never forget a face like that.

There were others with them: Suzie, who always ran around carrying huge bags filled with clothes—she wouldn't let anyone touch them—and a young man, George. I couldn't quite fathom what he did.

Annamaria filled me in.

"Anoushka—you know her face, no? Isn't she beautiful? The long-haired guy is the photographer, Raoul. He's French-Moroccan. George, the English guy, is his assistant, and the girl in high heels is Suzie, the stylist. Then there's the make-up artist, Carmen, but she's staying with 'friends'—she's from Rome."

"They're doing a fashion shoot for *Vogue Italia*. But she, Anoushka, is constantly fighting with Raoul. Twice already she's disappeared for the whole day with a German guy on a motorbike."

Anna always had the latest gossip on the hotel guests. She had performed badly in her high school exams the year before, university was out of the question. She was earning good money at the hotel. She spoke fluent

English—her parents had migrated to the US, and she was born in New York. Then they all returned to Otranto by the time she was ten.

Suddenly, there was a commotion. Anoushka sprang up from her chaise longue, shouting, “F*** off! I am not doing this.” I didn’t speak much English, but I understood.

“No, listen, you can’t do this to me! It’s what Francesca sent us here for,” Raoul said, gesticulating wildly.

“I am not spending the day topless in the f*****g heat. I can’t go back to Milan with a sunburn. I have shows—I’m opening for Donatella. I’m leaving. I’m done.”

She strode across the room, furious, tapping on her mobile.

Five minutes later, a guy appeared. They spoke in German. He was much older than her and reeked of money. They left together, and Anna whispered, in case I hadn’t followed the exchange, “The German is a producer – and Anoushka’s lover”. She had her sights set on the big screen.

Raoul slumped in an armchair, then he saw me and motioned for me. He looked me up and down, assessing.

“Please, sit down,” he said. Then, unexpectedly: “Can I take a picture of you?”

Without waiting for a reply, he began giving instructions while he shot away.

“Stand there—no, further to the left. Yes, that’s great. Now look into the camera. Don’t look at me—only into the camera. Yesss, the camera loves you,” he murmured, checking the shots.

I felt oddly comfortable, not at all intimidated.

“Look up, look over my shoulder, lean forward, smile, don’t smile.”

He called Suzie, who had missed Anoushka’s tantrum.

"I've found a new model," he told her. "Bring the clothes. We'll make them fit—she's an inch shorter. Thick dark hair, olive skin. Call Carmen. We'll do a test shoot in the morning—Francesca will agree."

A new model? *Me?*

I blinked and swallowed.

"*Monsieur?*" He turned towards me.

"Oh, *daRling*," he said, with that strong, very un-English 'r.' "Call me Raoul."

"Raoul," I repeated, feeling odd about not saying *Monsieur Raoul*. "The thing is... my parents..."

He interrupted. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

He frowned. "Of course, your parents. Let me speak with them. You will be paid, obviously. It's for *Vogue*. Let's go to your house now. I'll ask Suzie and Carmen to join us."

What could I say? Anna was watching, her mouth wide open. She quickly stepped up.

"I'll come too," she said.

Oh no. Now everyone was getting involved.

"I'm *sooo* happy for you," she added.

No, you're not, I thought. I could tell from her sullen expression.

I could feel the excitement, the pull of something bigger than myself. But did I really want it?

Then I remembered Anoushka's words. *Topless. Oh my god.*

My parents *must not* know. I whispered as much into Raoul's ear.

“Good thinking,” he said, smiling.

At first, predictably, my parents said no, even seemed angry. Mine is a Catholic family. But when they heard how much money I would earn, my older brother decided there was no shame in posing for a magazine. On the contrary. “It’s a good job” he said. “You’re a lucky girl. We must celebrate”

They all smiled. My mother decided she’d cook for everyone, while Raoul discreetly slipped cash into my brother’s hand.

I *was* topless in some of the photos, covered in sand, but the images were stunning. Ethereal, untouchable. *Was that really me?*

I saw my own face staring back at me from magazine stands. Only it wasn’t really *mine*. It was a version of me created by someone else.

I became a sensation, bagging a *Vogue* cover on my very first—and only—photoshoot. I realised that modelling was not for me and quit. I graduated, the first in the family, and went on to be a bio lab technician.

From that shoot I learned an important truth, which has stood me in good stead: you can be who they think you should be. But never should you forget who you are, when no one’s looking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex LR (she/her) is a former university lecturer with a PhD in Art History and Archaeology from SOAS, University of London. A fashion activist committed to diversity and inclusion and greater visibility of older women, Alex has blogged, written for magazines and journals and is the author of books on fashion published by Bloomsbury and Rizzoli New York. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.