

M T W T F S S

MONDAY'S CHILD

# Fair of Face



**POLLY BECKS**   
*The Extraordinary Days Series*

# **MONDAY'S CHILD**

**Fair of Face**

Polly Becks

**Book 2 in the EXTRAORDINARY DAYS series**

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An original work by Polly Becks

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## FLOWER IMAGERY

The flower featured on the cover is the blossom of the Black Bryony vine, said to mean “Be My Strength”  
long a symbol of romantic love, deep and true

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Monday's child is fair of face,  
Tuesday's child is full of grace,  
Wednesday's child is full of woe,  
Thursday's child has far to go,  
Friday's child is loving and giving,  
Saturday's child works hard for a living,  
But the child who is born on the Sabbath Day  
Is bonny and blithe and good and gay.

This rhyme was first recorded in A. E. Bray's *Traditions of Devonshire*  
(Volume II, pp. 287–288) in 1838

*To  
My Mom and My Dad  
On Earth and In Heaven  
with love*



In the late spring of 1991, a flood and fire of historic proportions tore through the pretty resort town of Obergrande, New York, in the central region of the Adirondack mountains.

The twin disasters destroyed a large part of the east side of the town that bordered the Hudson River and Lake Obergrande.

In the aftermath, a new dam was built, and that damaged part of the town “drowned,” covered by the new, larger lake.

During that terrible flood, five kindergarten girls were trapped in their drowning school, huddled together as the water rose higher, rescued just in the nick of time. The nightmare bonded them to each other for life.

These are their stories.

# Chapter 1



DAY 1, Monday

*Madison Avenue, New York City*

The street traffic was whining behind him, making Erik Bryson's head hurt just slightly less than the sight in front of him did.

He was staring up at the Sesqui-Centurion building, a ten-story Arts-and-Crafts-style monstrosity, home of the offices of *In-2-It* magazine, the second most influential fashion periodical in the world.

Erik was looking at his personal vision of hell.

Bryson, a stringer for the *New York Times*, had been convinced when he got the text from his boss earlier that morning ordering him to come here that the message had been misdirected. Surely a man whose entire adult life had been spent doing investigative journalism in war zones and the twin cesspools of corporate corruption and international politics could not possibly have business here, the frou-frou capital of the world.

And yet here he was, being greeted by a beautiful Latina in a trim red suit who ushered him into the building of his nightmares.

"You know, I believe *you* invited *me* here," Bryson protested at the security screening facility, where a uniformed African-American guard was silently holding out a hand, demanding to check his camera case and cell phone.

"Not me, sir," said the guard as Bryson grudgingly handed his equipment over. "That would be Ms. Bruce, and you can take it up with her when you get upstairs. I'm just doing my job."

"I hear ya," Bryson muttered. "So am I."

Another young woman, this one a winsome blonde in a stylish black suit, looked up from her desk across from the security table.

"Excuse me," she said, rising and making her way across the lobby, "but are you Erik Bryson?"

Erik turned away from the security guard. "Who's asking?"

The woman blushed. "My name's Zoe. I'm a big fan of your work."

One of Bryson's eyebrows rose suspiciously. "Really?"

She nodded. “*Postcards from Zabul*, series one through three,” she said. “Brilliant stuff. The photos are utterly haunting.”

Erik’s second eyebrow joined the first at his hairline.

“Oh—sorry, I’m a journalism student,” she hurried to add.

“I see. Well, thanks. Glad you liked the series.”

A grumbling cough came from behind him. The security guard was holding his camera case and phone out to him, looking unimpressed. Erik quickly took them back and nodded goodbye to Zoe as the woman in the red suit escorted him past the security checkpoint into a lobby where the *In-2-It* name was boldly emblazoned on an ebony wall, the only thing in the place that wasn’t off-white. He followed her to the elevators and sighed miserably as she punched the button for the penthouse. The car arrived silently, and they stepped inside.

“Why am I here?” he asked the young woman, who stared straight ahead at the elevator door as it closed in front of them.

“Why are any of us here?” she answered, not turning her head. “Ms. Bruce wants you to be here. So you are.”

The door opened onto a lobby so full of spectacularly arched windows that Erik had to shade his eyes. Those eyes were intensely Norwegian blue, the color of glacial ice, staring out from beneath a crown of soft black curls that needed a trim. The sun blazing through the glass stung them. He mumbled an inaudible curse and followed the red suit out into the sunny penthouse lobby.

He was ushered almost immediately into the corner office.

There, sitting behind a surprisingly simple wooden desk in an opulent chair was a middle-aged woman of elegant bearing, her coal-black hair tied back in a chignon at her neck. Bryson, had he been asked, would not have had a clue what the word *chignon* meant.

But he did recognize Katherine Bruce, the world-famous fashion publishing magnate, without hesitation.

“Sit,” she commanded as he approached her desk.

“I’m sorry,” Erik mumbled. “I believe there has been a mistake—”

“You’re Erik Bryson, by way of the *Times*?”

“Yes.”

“Then there’s no mistake. Sit.”

Awkwardly, Erik sat down on the severe, high-backed swivel chair in front of the simple desk. “Next, are you going to tell me to roll over?”

The woman smiled slightly. “Wrong command. I want you to fetch.”

“Excuse me?”

Katherine Bruce picked up a crisp sheet of photographic paper and dropped it on his side of the desk in front of him.

“Briony. I want you to bring me Briony.”

For the first time since he had entered the Sesqui-Centurion, Erik did not need a fashion-speak dictionary.

The face in the color photo staring back at him was one he had known since high school, when he secretly kept a folded magazine cover with a close-up of it under his bed.

The international supermodel Briony, the one-named goddess of magazine covers.

The face of the enormously successful fragrance Dulce Cheiro, and of its similarly successful high-end cosmetic line.

And the body that most of the top designers in the fashion world used to display their designs.

For a long moment Bryson stared at the face in the photo: the smoldering gray eyes on either side of a thin, smooth nose, the sensuous mouth with a top lip shaped like a long bow, the rest of it curling into a famously crooked smile that seemed at once humorous and sad, as if hiding a secret. Luminous skin that covered perfect cheekbones, glowing with light. Erik shook his head and looked at the publisher once more.

“Why do you want *me* to fetch her? Can’t you send a limousine for her? I drive a crummy old Corolla that gets parked on the street in Brooklyn.”

“No, I can’t—we don’t know where she is.”

“Can’t you just call Dulce Cheiro and *ask* where she is?”

Katherine Bruce shook her head. “They just launched a contest to find the new face of Dulce Cheiro.”

Erik took a deep breath, then exhaled. “What happened to the old one?”

“No one knows. Briony has disappeared.”

“Have you contacted her management?”

“Daily.”

“What do they say?”

“That she’s retired, and they have no other comment.”

Erik exhaled again, this time with a little more annoyance.

“Well, that’s your answer, then,” he said testily. “She’s retired. End of story. Thanks for a fun morning. I’ll be going now.” He began to rise.

“*Sit,*” said Katherine Bruce again in a voice that sounded like it came from a military commander. “That is most certainly *not* the end of the story.”

Erik was struggling to keep from exploding. “What in the world do you want from me? I’m an investigative journalist—my specialties are political corruption and war zones. I cannot imagine something I’m less qualified to cover—and less interested in—than high fashion.”

“That doesn’t matter. I pulled some strings at the *Times*, asking for their best investigative reporter who was on stringer status. They recommended you.”

“That’s very nice, but—”

“*Sit.*”

Reluctantly Bryson sat down again, glowering, feeling four years old and hating it.

“For a relatively famous young hot-shot journalist, you have an appalling lack of curiosity,” Katherine Bruce said. “I want Briony back, but I’m not getting anywhere with the search. There’s got to be a story here, and, whatever it is, I want it first.”

“I think you got the story,” said Erik. “Headline: *Supermodel Retires*. Ta da. End of story.” He looked out the arched window. “I can’t believe I’m still here.”

“The rumor mill is rife with other suggestions. Maybe she’s pregnant. Maybe she is hidden away with a married man, carrying on a sordid affair. She was spotted a while back in the company of an eastern European prince—”

“Maybe she’s pregnant with a married eastern European prince’s octuplets?” Bryson suggested snidely. “Can’t you just make up something more interesting than that? Isn’t that what you scandal sheets do anyway? The sheep you write for can’t tell the difference anyway.”

Katherine Bruce drew herself up taller, and her face took on a hard expression.

“We don’t write for the sheep, Mr. Bryson,” she said seriously. “We write for the shepherds. *In-2-It* is a serious fashion magazine.”

“Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

“No. We are not the tabloid you pick up in the beauty salon. We are the magazine for the buyers, the producers, not the consumer. That’s not to say consumers don’t pick us up and get a secret thrill that they’re learning insider information—and frankly, that’s a large percentage of our circulation. We are the innovators, the leaders. We tell the fashion industry—especially the buyers and the stores—what’s hot. And Briony is hot. I want the story before the private dicks hired by the other fashion rags get it.”

“Private *dicks*?” Bryson said, trying to keep from laughing. “Where do you think you are, Ms. Bruce, in a 1940s Raymond Chandler movie? Those were made long before we were born.” His captivating eyes took on an evil gleam. “Well, at least before *I* was born.” He struggled to keep from laughing at the ugly look that came over the elegant woman’s face. “Come into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Ms. Bruce. Why don’t *you* just hire a private investigator?”

“Those bastards would sell me out to the highest bidder once they locate her,” Katherine Bruce said bitterly. “And they have no respect for the integrity of the story. There is undoubtedly a story here, and I want that story, unembellished. You can find the story, Mr. Bryson.”

“Why me? Why in the world did you hire *me* for this nonsense? This is a waste of my time *and* yours. A private eye—”

“The *Times* hired you,” Katherine Bruce corrected. “You aren’t a private eye, you’re an investigative *reporter*; you can ferret out the truth *and* understand the value of the story.”

The fashion maven sighed wearily, looking suddenly older.

“You and I, Mr. Bryson, we are both in the same profession, we want to sell magazines, or newspapers, or whatever’s left of the print world—even if that world is about to go solely digital. A shame—great photography and the beauty it captures will be lost with the death of the last fashion magazine, the last coffee table book. Whether it’s beautiful women and men in beautiful clothes, or African vistas, high-end couture or endangered animals, we, Erik, we are the last protectors of a dying art form. When you and I are gone, everything we have worked for will vanish into digital glare full of typos and harsh fonts. You have kids?”

“Not that I know of.”

The publisher opened her mouth to continue, then lapsed into silence. Erik exhaled.

“Sorry for being a smartass. The correct answer would be no.”

“Well, your children, assuming you have some one day, may never even know what a magazine was, let alone a newspaper.”

Erik Bryson rose again slowly, hoping if he took his time she wouldn't notice.

“I admire your commitment to the art of the printed word, Ms. Bruce, to your shepherds and your sheep. But I know absolutely nothing about the fashion world—*nothing*. Even if I wanted to help you—and even in the very smallest of ways, I don't think I do—I am unqualified to do so. I am a war correspondent. The runways that are part of my world have planes full of bullet holes landing on them. I'm very sorry for you if Briony has decided to get out of the fashion world and have a normal life, but I can't say I blame her for that. Thank you for a most entertaining conversation, but I think I will take my leave now. Good luck with your story.”

He turned and started toward the door.

The ice in the words that came next almost froze the pleats in the back of his shirt.

“So, Mr. War Correspondent, you don't cover damsels in distress? Because no one knows if Briony disappeared on purpose or not—or even if she is still alive.”

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