

Chapter One

AND THE MATERIAL doesn't stain,' the salesgirl says.
'Doesn't stain?'

'It's the new fabric,' the salesgirl says. 'Specially treated. Won't mark. If you spill like a bit of ice-cream or a drop of coffee, like, down the front of this dress it won't hold the stain.'

The customer, a young woman, is suddenly tearing at the fastener at the neck, pulling at the zip of the dress. She is saying, 'Get this thing off me. Off me, at once.'

The salesgirl shouts at the customer who, up to now, has been delighted with the bright coloured dress. It is patterned with green and purple squares on a white background, with blue spots within the green squares, cyclamen spots within the purple. This dress has not been a successful line; other dresses in the new stainless fabric have sold, but this, of which three others, identical but for sizes, hang in the back storeroom awaiting the drastic reductions of next week's sale, has been too vivid for most customers' taste. But the customer who now steps speedily out of it, throwing it on the floor with the utmost irritation, had almost smiled with satisfaction when she had tried it on. She had said, 'That's my dress.' The salesgirl had said it needed taking up at the hem. 'All right,' the customer had said, 'but I need it for tomorrow.' 'We can't do it before Friday, I'm sorry,' the salesgirl had said. 'Oh, I'll do it myself, then,' the customer had said, and turned round to admire it sideways in the long mirror. 'It's a good fit. Lovely colours,' she said.

'And it doesn't stain,' the salesgirl had said, with her eye wandering to another unstainable and equally unsaleable

summer dress which evidently she hoped, now, to offer the satisfied customer.

'Doesn't stain?'

The customer has flung the dress aside.

The salesgirl shouts, as if to assist her explanation. 'Specially treated fabric ... If you spill like a drop of sherry you just wipe it off. Look, Miss, you're tearing the neck.'

'Do you think I spill things on my clothes?' the customer shrieks. 'Do I look, as if I don't eat properly?'

'Miss, I only remarked on the fabric, that when you tell me you're going abroad for your vacation, there is always the marks that you pick up on your journey. Don't treat our clothes like that if you please. Miss, I only said stain-resisting and then you carry on, after you liked it.'

'Who asked you for a stain-resisting dress?' the customer shouts, getting quickly, with absolute purpose, into her own blouse and skirt.

'You liked the colours, didn't you?' shouts the girl. 'What difference does it make, so it resists stains, if you liked the fabric before you knew?'

The customer picks up her bag and goes to the door almost at a run, while two other salesgirls and two other customers gasp and gape. At the door she turns to look back and says, with a look of satisfaction at her own dominance over the situation with an undoubtable excuse, 'I won't be insulted!'

