



Left: Metallic leather jacket, Ralph Lauren Collection, \$3,398, at select Ralph Lauren stores nationwide. Striped jersey tank top, Proenza Schouler, \$375. White jersey tank top, Helmut Lang, \$80. Pleated ramie shorts, DKNY, \$145. **Right:** Silk-and-patent-leather dress, Narciso Rodriguez, \$1,195, at Outfit at Wynn Las Vegas, Las Vegas. Yellow-gold-and-diamond pendant necklaces, Chopard, \$3,995-\$4,630. For details, see Shopping Guide. Creative director: Joe Zee; hair by Jimmy Paul for Bumble and Bumble; makeup by Jeannia Robinette for Givenchy; manicure by Sheril Bailey for Jed Root.



THE DREAM BEL

ONE LOOK AND YOU KNOW WHY **JESSICA BIEL** HAS PLAYED HER SHARE OF BUTT-KICKING SIRENS. BUT WITH UPCOMING FILMS OPPOSITE NICHOLAS CAGE, JULIANNE MOORE, AND ADAM SANDLER, YOU CAN BET SHE'LL HAVE NO PROBLEMS PLAYING A NEW ROLE: BONA FIDE MOVIE STAR. BY TOM ROSTON. PHOTOGRAPHED BY GILLES BENSIMON

From the moment she appears, Jessica Biel is gracefully deflecting the attention of men. Wearing Roger Vivier white pumps and snug True Religion jeans, her hair tightly pulled back in a ponytail, she walks out of the elevator in the Hotel Gansevoort in New York City's Meatpacking District at a rapid clip, shedding two young men with the incredible good luck to have ridden down with her. She nods them off nicely as they walk away grinning, no doubt mentally compiling lists of buddies who'll be receiving the following text message: "DUDE! I JUST RODE AN ELEVATOR WITH THE SEXIEST WOMAN ALIVE!"

Next in the gauntlet is a Moby-looking scenester with a paunch who descends upon her in Ono, the Gansevoort's bustling, dimly lit Japanese restaurant, introducing himself as if he's an old friend. The fact that he's wielding a Treo device like a video camera goes unnoticed by Biel, who later refers to said implication as "creepy." She dispatches him into the darkness with a tight smile and walks through the large restaurant to a back booth, causing a ripple of chopsticks to go still as heads turn.

If the rhythms and rotations of the mass entertainment media complex are to be trusted, we are currently living in Jessica Biel's Big Moment. After getting her foot in the door in 1996 on the show *7th Heaven*, the now-25-year-old actress won the hearts and minds of the boys with her badass ability to wield a meat cleaver in the 2003 remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and a bow and arrow in 2004's *Blade: Trinity*. Her turn in 2005's *Stealth*, which bombed (literally), may have gone largely unnoticed, but the trailer highlighting Biel under a waterfall certainly didn't. Then, in the fall of 2005, *Esquire* bestowed on her the magazine's annual "Sexiest Woman" honorific. Last summer, she deftly skipped over the threshold from hottie to respectable actor with her supple performance as an early-twentieth-century duchess opposite Edward Norton and Paul Giamatti in *The Illusionist*, and since then has become a red-carpet flashbulb magnet, wearing Valentino to the Golden Globes and, to present at the Oscars, a fuchsia halter-top Oscar de la Renta dress that strikingly revealed her toned shoulders.

And yet "it's still a struggle," Biel says, sitting up straight with the alertness of a ninja. Her kelly-green sleeveless Preen cowlneck highlights her muscular arms. "I thought the *Esquire* cover was going to be really positive for my career," she says. "But it wasn't, really." Biel recalls being told by one director, "I'm not looking for the sexiest woman; I'm looking for the girl next door."

"Parts that I really want aren't going to me," Biel says. "Like *The Other Boleyn Girl* with Scarlett Johansson and Natalie Portman." But she stops herself. "I don't want to say that there's nothing I love that I can have. But there's still the occasional script that the director doesn't want to see you for. They want that top tier of girls."

So—how does she go from Big Moment to top tier? Gauging from her acting heroes—Meryl Streep, Cate Blanchett, and Annette Bening (with whom she will co-star, along with Sean Bean, in a screen adaptation of Oscar

Wilde's play *A Woman of No Importance*)—it seems she has good taste. And in addition to working with Nicolas Cage and Julianne Moore in the thriller *Next*, Biel is finally getting a turn at comedy—something she's been longing for—opposite Adam Sandler and Kevin James in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, due out this July. "Jessica is a great actress who also happens to be smart, sweet, and funny," Sandler says. "But the best part of working with her was watching her beat Kevin James at arm wrestling." Not that the movie, about two firefighters who pretend to be gay in order to claim domestic-partner benefits (Biel plays their lawyer), refrains from reveling in her sexiness—she sheds her clothes for a gawking Sandler, and when his character first sees her, his world goes into super slow-mo.

"She's capable of attaining the Julia Roberts crown," says *Chuck and Larry* director Dennis Dugan, referring to Biel's healthy-American-girl vibe and comic timing. The actress herself is wary of such pronouncements.

"The scary thing about having this opportunity is that if it's your moment, the moment eventually disappears," she says. "I think about reaching for 'the moment' but never really achieving it. That way, I'm always striving."

BIEL CARRIES HERSELF WITH THE CONFIDENCE OF A DANCER OR AN ACCOMPLISHED JOCK—BOTH OF WHICH SHE HAS BEEN.

When Biel walked onto the set of *The Illusionist*, director Neil Burger was impressed with her athlete's readiness and resolve. She carries herself with the confidence of a dancer or an accomplished jock—both of which she has been. "She completely gave as good as she got" with her Oscar-nominated costars Norton and Giamatti, Burger says. "That's a testament to her poise and her talent."

Early in the production, Biel had a scene with Norton that put the two of them in a stream in the Czech Republic in March. "It was essentially liquid ice. It was like an electric shock, and it knocked the breath out of both of us and Jess turned blue," Norton says. "When we watched it back on the monitor, you could see it hadn't played out exactly right. Neil and I both wanted to do it again but sometimes you have to give up perfect for safety, and we were hesitant to ask her to get back in that water. But she said, 'It wasn't right, was it? Let's do it again.' And I thought, All right, she's a pro."

"She doesn't take herself too seriously," says her friend and producing partner Michelle Purple.

Stephen Collins, who played Biel's minister father on *7th Heaven*, agrees: "She has an incredible goof-off, tomboy streak," he says.



Silk-tweed jacket, price upon request, jersey-tweed swimsuit, \$500, both, Chanel. Jacket at Neiman Marcus. Heart pendant necklace, \$3,995, rose-gold watch, price upon request, both, Chopard. Hoop earrings, \$700, tag pendant necklace, \$1,200, both, Tiffany & Co. Yellow-gold bangle, \$4,000, yellow-gold-and-diamond bangle, price upon request, both, Bulgari. For details, see Shopping Guide.





“THE SCARY THING IS THAT IF IT’S YOUR MOMENT, THE MOMENT EVENTUALLY DISAPPEARS. I THINK ABOUT REACHING FOR ‘THE MOMENT’ BUT NEVER REALLY ACHIEVING IT. THAT WAY, I’M ALWAYS STRIVING.”

Knit dress, Marciano, \$128, at Marciano stores nationwide. Chronograph watch, Timex, \$425. Leather sandals, Gucci. \$850. For details, see Shopping Guide.



Silk-jersey dress, Dior by John Galliano, \$3,585, at Dior Boutique nationwide. Yellow-gold hoop earrings, Tiffany & Co., \$700. Sandals, Lanvin, \$945. For details, see Shopping Guide.

So what was a tomboy doing in the front rows at fashion week in Paris last February? (“An intimidating and overwhelming environment,” Biel says.) Scoring some clothing, including the Preen number she’s wearing now, and also celebrating her twenty-fifth birthday. “Someone said, ‘You have five years till 30.’ I started to think, Wow, over the next five years, my life could really change personally,” Biel says smiling, with a slight squint of her catlike eyes.

When the tabloids started spotting Biel with Justin Timberlake in January shortly after his breakup with Cameron Diaz—the two were seen snowboarding together in Park City, Utah, during the Sundance Film Festival; sharing a glass of champagne at Prince’s Golden Globes party; and backstage at Timberlake’s concert in San Diego—her personal life suddenly became of great interest to the public. She dodges a probe about her relationship with Timberlake while knocking back shrimp tempura with aplomb, saying that she was in Park City with girlfriends and to hold meetings for her production company, Iron Ocean

“WE DIDN’T LOCK OUR DOORS,” BIEL SAYS OF HER COLORADO CHILDHOOD. “WE SNOWBOARDED, HIKED, CLIMBED, RAFTED. WE GREW UP WITHOUT A FEAR OF THE WORLD.”

Films. Nor does she want to discuss her past relationships with actors Ryan Reynolds and Chris Evans, or Yankee star Derek Jeter, “for no other reason than I can’t even go to the dry cleaner by myself anymore,” she says. “You’re seen in public with anybody that you might not even know, and you’re speculated about.”

Asked if the constant attention makes dating hard, she says, “It makes everything hard because you can’t even go to pick up a prescription without somebody trying to snap a photo of what you have in your Longs Drugs bag. Thank goodness I’m a nice person,” she says. “Thank you, Mom, for teaching me that.”

The day after Biel was born, in Ely, Minnesota, her parents took her to a dogsled race; it was 30 degrees below zero. By age one she was in a canoe. Her mother, who is “New Age,” grew up in Colorado, hunting for arrowheads as a child; her father was a “mountain man” who ran an Outward Bound school and worked as an international business consultant. His career took the family (her brother, Justin, is three years younger) from Texas to Connecticut and, finally, to Boulder. “We didn’t lock our doors,” she

says. “We snowboarded, hiked, climbed, rafted. We grew up without a fear of the world.”

Although Biel thrived at athletics, she doesn’t remember a time when she wasn’t dancing or singing. At age 11, she signed up with a talent agency in Denver, which got her to the International Modeling and Talent Association convention in Los Angeles, which in turn got her into meetings with managers and agencies.

“I wanted to be Whitney Houston for a long time. I would be onstage and I would just come alive,” Biel recalls. “I begged my parents to let me go out for pilot season.”

When she was 14, she landed her central role in *7th Heaven*, playing the oldest daughter of seven kids in a wholesome Christian family. But after a few years, she wanted to change things up personally and professionally. At 17, Biel posed seductively for a *Gear* magazine photo shoot, topless with scant bottoms. It was a clear sign that she wanted to be off the show. “I was all over the place,” she says now. “I was being a rebellious teenager.” She feels that she was exploited by the magazine, but *7th Heaven*’s producers cut her out of the series. (She eventually returned in a more limited role.)

“The *Gear* thing, while embarrassing, wasn’t exactly bad for her career,” Collins says. True enough, in that between *Gear* and *Esquire* Biel worked on seven major films. But none of those movies had anywhere near the impact that taking off her clothes did.

Julianne Moore says that Biel’s “extraordinary” beauty appears as if “she were carved from marble,” but she also has a body that you’d think only a comic book artist could draw—curvy in just the right places—and yet still healthy. Biel works out three times a week, primarily heart-rate training, doing fast-speed soccer exercises, squats, and running. She also does yoga regularly. Still, she feigns dismay at the suggestion that she looks buff.

“What do you mean? This is the thinnest and the least muscular I’ve been in a long time,” she protests. “I’m so lean and feminine!”

As we order tea after dinner, the large party of 20 at the banquet table perpendicular to us has mostly disbanded, allowing four of the men left at the table to reshuffle themselves so that eventually they sit on one side, facing her. It’s as if they’re at dinner theater. Biel may feel she has yet to land the role that breaks her out, but until that time, she has no shortage of fans who will be happy to watch her along the way.

When asked to go bowling two days later, after her ELLE photo shoot, Biel scarcely raises an eyebrow. She throws on a black ensemble and arrives ready to roll at the Chelsea Piers between two lanes of bouncy seven-year-old girls. Despite doing pretty poorly, losing for eight frames, she pulls a spare, a strike, and two nines at the very end to win the contest. “I was really sucking, but I’m a closer,” she says gamely. “You should see me at beer pong.” □