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The Fashion Orphans
By Randy Susan Meyers and M.J. Rose

Copyright 2022 Randy Susan Meyers and M.J. Rose
ISBN: 978-1-952457-69-2

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Published by Blue Box Press, an imprint of Evil Eye Concepts, Incorporated

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Book Description

The Fashion Orphans

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Two estranged sisters find that forgiveness never goes out of style when they inherit their mother's vintage jackets, purses... and pearls of wisdom

Estranged half-sisters Gabrielle Winslow and Lulu Quattro have only two things in common: mounds of debt and coils of unresolved enmity toward Bette Bradford, their controlling and imperious recently deceased mother.

Gabrielle, the firstborn, was raised in relative luxury on Manhattan's rarefied Upper East Side. Now, at fifty-five, her life as a Broadway costume designer married to a heralded Broadway producer has exploded in divorce.

Lulu, who spent half her childhood under the tutelage of her working-class Brooklyn grandparents, is a grieving widow at forty-eight. With her two sons grown, her life feels reduced to her work at the Ditmas Park bakery owned by her late husband's family.

The two sisters arrive for the reading of their mother's will, expecting to divide a sizable inheritance, pay off their debts, and then again turn their backs on each other.

But to their shock, what they have been left is their mother's secret walk-in closet jammed with high-end current and vintage designer clothes and accessories— most from Chanel.

Contemplating the scale of their mother's self-indulgence, the sisters can't help but wonder if Lauren Weisberger had it wrong: because it seems, in fact, that the devil wore Chanel. But as they begin to explore their mother's collection, meet and fall in love with her group of warm, wonderful friends, and magically find inspiring messages tucked away in her treasures — it seems as though their mother is advising Lulu and Gabrielle from the beyond — helping them rediscover themselves and restore their relationship with each other.

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“To achieve great things, we must first dream.”

— **Coco Chanel**

Dedication

From M.J.

To Liz Berry & Jillian Stein, who only see possibilities when others see problems.



From Randy
For Jeff,
Always

Preface 1976



Sad little girls in New York City were not an unusual sight. Put those girls alone on a subway platform, however, and people paid attention. Strangers approached Gabrielle and Lulu when they traveled, asking questions in concerned voices: “Are you lost? Do you need help?”

Kindly police officers often knelt before them with sympathetic eyes and asked about their mother’s whereabouts.

On the weekends, fewer people crowded the subway platform, giving the sisters far more breathing room as they waited for the train to Grand Central. Only one man paid much attention that Saturday; he stared at them with the sort of interest of which Gabrielle had learned to be wary. Thankfully, Grandpa had recently taught her how to scream her lungs out in dangerous situations.

With luck, the girls would arrive at their grandparents’ house in Poughkeepsie by noon. Then, finally—thankfully—Gabrielle would be off older-sister duty until their return trip on Sunday evening.

Gabrielle was twelve, and Lulu five. Though the girls appeared much younger, both possessed the wary antennae of experienced subway riders. Gabrielle, being older, one hundred percent took charge, and her rules were law. Under her guidance, Lulu stood with her back against the subway wall until the train came to a full and complete stop. They needed to hold hands—whether the thermometer read ninety-five degrees and they longed to unlock their sweaty palms, or a deep February freeze iced the city, and their hands, mittened or not, screamed to be jammed into pockets.

Today, with the weather holding a kiss of spring, their clasped hands comforted both girls.

Once the train pulled into the station, they ran, squeezing through crowds to get on before the doors slammed shut. Gabrielle always sussed out the best seats in seconds. Corners meant danger; a man could press so close you wanted to throw up. Hanging on the middle pole left you open on all sides. Both girls preferred sitting next to a mother-aged woman—grandmother-aged was better. Older seatmates were far more likely to stick up for the girls.

Flashers lurked everywhere. Even at five, Lulu understood the menace, keeping her eyes focused on people only at neck-level and above.

Once settled in the safest seats, Lulu studied her sister with a grave expression. “Who took you on the train when you were little?”

Answering Lulu’s question required finesse. Before her sister’s birth, Gabrielle rode only in town cars and always in the company of her mother. Gabrielle’s handsome, rich father had provided every possible protection, but he’d died when she was five.

The next father—Lulu’s dad—was perfectly okay, but their mother didn’t care much for him. At least, that’s how Grandma had explained it. He’d moved out when Lulu was three.

“I only remember one thing from when I was little,” Gabrielle fibbed.

“What?” Lulu wiggled closer on the two-person seat.

“You weren’t born yet, and being without you was really lonely.”

Little girls riding the subway without a parent in New York might be sad, but those traveling with sisters looking out for each other were luckier than those who rode alone. Even at twelve and five, Gabrielle and Lulu knew that particular truth.

Chapter One

Lulu



Lulu was sick to death of death.

As she dressed for her trip into New York City, she didn't know what made her more anxious—anticipating seeing her sister or hearing her mother's will read.

No.

She knew.

Seeing Gabrielle.

Her mother's will didn't portend any surprises—Bette had made it clear for years that both of her daughters would equally share her estate. But facing Gabrielle terrified her. Lulu had seen her sister just three times in the past two and a half years—twice for funerals and once at a wedding.

The meeting at the lawyer's office wasn't till ten o'clock, but Lulu was already worried about being late. A normal person wouldn't be stopping off at work on such a stressful day, except today was the massive goodbye party for Ditmas Junior High's beloved principal. Lulu couldn't trust Victoria, her sister-in-law and assistant, to manage both baking and decorating the gigantic cake in the shape of the principal's talismanic basketball.

And so here she was on a cold November day, at barely five-thirty a.m., rushing to dress and get to Quattros', hoping she could bake the cake, get it decorated, and make it to her mother's lawyer's office on time.

Ten minutes later, Lulu raced down Cortelyou Road toward the bakery, trying to avoid the ice patches from the previous night's freezing rain. Overstuffed ninety-nine-cent stores, windows crammed with dust mops, batteries, and cans of Spam, were wedged next to restaurants with glowing oak tables visible through immaculate smudge-free glass doors. Despite living in Brooklyn for her entire marriage, she still noticed the difference between the streets here and those of Manhattan, where she'd grown up with her mother and Gabrielle. No matter how much Brooklyn gentrified, there would always be mops positioned next to upscale coffee.

Quattros' echoed as Lulu closed the door behind her and hurried into the kitchen. After putting on her apron, she began pulling out ingredients. For the next two and a half hours, she measured, poured, mixed, rolled, and then cut fondant to create the basketball's shell.

Lulu's anxiety and sadness fought for first place as she worked, with sadness winning. She and her mother might have been oil and water, but Bette had still been her mom. Her death had made Lulu an orphan. That realization made her think about how much she still missed her father, who'd died four years ago.

And that thought almost made Lulu collapse, sure as she was that she would forever miss her husband.

The tears started to roll. But cake batter wasn't improved by saltwater, so Lulu forced her focus back to her mother's will. She had no idea how large Bette's estate might be, but based on how her mother had lived, Lulu assumed there'd be plenty to help lessen her financial woes.

What would she do first? Pay off her kids' college loans? Get rid of her second mortgage? Her fiscal grocery list could unfurl from here to the cash register in the front of the store.

Lulu checked the time. Ten after nine. Now, she had to rush like hell. She cleaned up and ran out. When she reached the nearby cottage-like subway station house, she took the stairs as fast as possible, praying she wouldn't miss the train as she heard it screeching to a stop.

She barely made it aboard when the doors closed behind her. Panting and sweating, she looked around. Of course, there was no place to sit. The best the packed train offered was a spot Lulu could grab hold of on the crowded metal pole.

When she was little, only Gabrielle stood between Lulu and the looming terrors of a subway ride. Now, everything was different. She had to navigate the trains fearlessly on her own, and her relationship with Gabrielle was all but nonexistent.

Their ties had begun fraying two and a half years ago when Lulu had lost Matt to a heart attack and became a widow at forty-five. And then the remnants of their connection altogether unraveled six months later at Lulu's son's wedding. She had barely held herself together through the ceremony—there was no sturdy Matt to lean on, no beaming Matt with whom she could share her parental pride. Nobody's hand to squeeze as they took pictures in Prospect Park, across from the Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture, the wedding site.

If Matt were there, he'd have made a snarky joke about the bride's uber-serious parents, who knelt before the altar of cultural respect as though convening directly with Jesus. If Matt were there, Lulu would have whispered how thrilled the mother-of-the-bride seemed by the diversity the Quattro family offered Bridget's purely Lutheran family.

But Matt wasn't there. And so at the reception, Lulu drank every glass of champagne offered—the first big mistake for Lulu-the-lightweight. The second was to forget to eat more than one of her mother-in-law's mini-meatballs.

Lulu finally lost her battle to hold it together alone in the bathroom when she dissolved into an orgy of self-pity and grief. As she hiccupped through her hundredth sob, Gabrielle opened the door and walked in.

"Oh my God, Lu. Are you okay?" Her sister, a vision of perfection in a shoulder-baring red silk gown, auburn waves cascading perfectly to frame her face, plucked a tissue out of a box on the vanity and handed it to her.

Lulu blew her nose in a series of not-so-elegant honks.

Gabrielle raised her eyebrows as if aggrieved by the noise. As if, Lulu thought, the sound was *déclassé* or something.

And that was all it took. With alcohol washing away Lulu's inhibitions, her resentment boiled up and rushed out like hot lava.

"Am I okay?" Lulu lifted her hands in a gesture of *what the hell*, the damp tissue clutched in her right hand. "What do you think?"

"I think you're missing Matt a whole lot today and are having a much-needed cry."

Lulu's chest heaved as a fresh stream of tears began. "I'm just missing him today?"

"My God. Of course, not."

"But you really wouldn't know, would you? You haven't exactly been checking in on me, have you?"

"Checking in on you?" Gabrielle took a deep breath. "I've done as much as I could. My life has been a series of—"

"Your life? My life stopped short six months ago," Lulu shouted. "It stopped dead. And since then, my sister hasn't been to see me once. Not once!"

“I called,” Gabrielle said.

“You called? The way a cousin calls. And a distant cousin, at that. Or the way a high school friend calls. But a sister?”

“I hear you, Lu, but—”

“You hear me? So where have you been? Our family is the size of a walnut. All this time, I had nobody.”

Gabrielle strode to the sink, turned the water on full force, and soaked a wad of paper towels under the faucet. “You had nobody? You had a mother and two sons and about five thousand Quattro in-laws around morning, noon, and night.”

“My mother? Our mother? Do you think she offered me solace? Or my sons, who were managing their own grief and their own lives? None of them could take the place of my sister.”

Gabrielle wrung out the paper towels and handed them to Lulu. “Here, so your eyes don’t get swollen.”

Lulu threw the towels into the trash. “I don’t care if my eyes swell to slits. I needed you. You, Gabi. You.”

“You needed me to take care of you? Honestly? Who the hell do you think was taking care of me? Huh? My life imploded, too. You weren’t the only one whose marriage ended.”

Tears streamed down both their faces now. Lulu’s chest tightened as Gabrielle walked over and loomed from her high-heeled advantage.

“Did you give one thought to what I was going through, Lu? The horrible humiliation of learning my whole life was a lie?”

“Your husband left. He didn’t die.” Lulu crossed her arms as she warded off the tiny tentacles of guilt winding through her.

“Yes, Cole left. Along with my self-respect. My reputation. My job. Our money. With our friends’ money and his backers’ money. And then added the cherry of making sure it looked as though I was as much to blame for the entire debacle as he was.”

Cole, a major theater producer, hadn’t just been accused of fraud and almost landed in jail, but, as Lulu had learned from their mother, he’d been cheating on Gabrielle for years.

“The play didn’t just bomb. Our *life* bombed. I’m sorry if there wasn’t enough of me left for you.” Gabrielle sank onto a small white stool in the corner.

“But Cole didn’t die. He didn’t die,” Lulu couldn’t shout that last word loud enough. *Die* echoed in the small room. “You left me alone when I needed you most.”

“And when *I* needed *you* the most. Why didn’t you tell me how you were feeling?” Gabrielle asked.

“Why didn’t you?”

“You don’t get to be the little sister forever, you know.” Gabrielle pushed her hair off her face. “At some point, you gotta grow up.”

“That’s what you are turning this into? Me needing to grow up?” Lulu shouted. “You’re gonna stand there and chastise me? Now? Today? You have some nerve.”

The bathroom door opened, and with her usual perfect timing, their mother entered. Bette looked from one daughter to the other. “I can hear you both above the music. Whatever is going on in here must stop right now.”

Bette reached into her bag, pulled out a small packet, and handed it to Lulu. “Take one and give it to your sister.”

“*La Fresh Makeup Remover Wipes.*” Lulu read out loud with some sarcasm. She looked at Gabrielle to share the *oh-my-God-this-is so-our-mother* moment but then, remembering how

angry she was, avoided the eye contact. Instead, she took a wipe and threw the packet at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle glanced at the packet and then into the mirror. "I guess my so-called waterproof Chanel mascara lied."

The subway train lurched.

Lights flickered as they entered the tunnel.

Lulu stumbled against the man behind her.

She and Gabrielle hadn't seen each other since the great bathroom battle, not until almost two years later, last month, at their mother's funeral.

Lulu reached out to get a better grip on the pole. As she did, her coat sleeve rode up. On her shirt cuff were two streaks of bright blue dried frosting from the piping she'd written on the coach's basketball: *Welcome to your new life, Mr. Marsh.*

Chapter Two

Gabrielle



Bette returned from the beyond each time Gabrielle studied her reflection. There was no escaping genetics.

Curse or blessing?

As she dressed for the lawyer's reading of her mother's will, it seemed as though the woman in the mirror was Bette-from-twenty-five-years-ago. Gabrielle shared most of her mother's features, starting with their dark green eyes—when Lulu was four, she'd called them spinach eyes.

Dabbing on foundation, thinking about Lulu, Gabrielle sighed. She dreaded today. She and her sister had survived their mother's funeral only because Bette had left such detailed instructions—including her burial outfit—with her lawyer. Lulu and Gabrielle had only needed to show up at Frank Campbell's, the brick and white-trimmed building two blocks away from where Bette had lived. Their mother considered it the Bergdorf Goodman of funeral homes; neither Gabrielle nor Lulu were surprised that Bette had arranged to say her last goodbye there.

The sisters had both sat in the first row but safely separated by Lulu's sons and their partners. They'd kept in that same formation at the gravesite. Also dictated by Bette's instructions, there had been no sitting shiva.

Gabrielle blended a smear of concealer under her eyes and into the corners, which Bette always insisted was critical after age fifty. Done, she uncapped the blackest liner Chanel made and, leaning forward, applied the soft pencil.

Use thin lines to build to the desired thickness, Bette had instructed. Seal with a slick of black eyeshadow. Finish with a light sweep of translucent powder.

Following Bette's cosmetic rules, Gabrielle then applied lipstick, followed by blotting and a dusting with translucent powder.

As she dabbed perfume, not her mother's Chanel No. 5, but Chanel's Coramandel, which Bette had gifted her, Gabrielle ached. She missed her mother. She was realistic about Bette's faults.

Demanding too much of her and often judging her harshly? Yes.

Screwing up plenty when she and Lulu were little? Yes.

But Bette never failed to answer the phone when Gabrielle called and was ever ready to meet for a quick lunch or leisurely dinner—often to offer advice whether asked for or not. Yes, she argued with Gabrielle and often found fault with her, but your mother lives in your blood. Who you are is who she was. And now, part of Gabrielle was gone. Forever. And today would be an even more brutal reminder of that.

She packed away her maudlin thoughts. Too emotional from the time she was a child, Bette always said, teaching Gabrielle to put a lid on her emotions. Careful to avoid her makeup, Gabrielle slipped a dark tweed dress over her head, zipped it up, and then examined herself. The ruching that ran up the left hip line was a detail that added interest and cut the dress's severity. She'd chosen today's outfit from her carefully preserved pre-divorce wardrobe of edgy high-end

fashion and jewelry that she could no longer afford. Today's dress came from her Isabel Marant phase. Gabrielle was a theatrical costume designer—or she had been until Cole cut her career off at the knees. She'd never lost the habit of seeing every day as a series of scenes and dressing for the part she'd be playing.

Today she played the grieving daughter. The reading of her mother's will called for moving down one notch from funeral wear. Tweed replaced black, and small diamond studs took the place of pearls. She slipped on high-heeled suede boots rather than stacked pumps. The weather looked threatening, so she'd allow herself the luxury of taking a cab both ways.

Well, at least she and Lulu wouldn't be fighting over their mother's estate. Bette had made a point to tell both her daughters that they would inherit equally. When Gabrielle's father died, his will had caused a family crisis. And Bette had said she'd never do that to her daughters. Gabrielle couldn't quite remember what that problem had been, but she thought it rested on family heirlooms. She'd only been five years old when her father died—three days past her birthday.

A sense of doom hung over all her birthday celebrations after that. And then, to make it worse, seven years later, four days before Gabrielle's birthday, Lulu came along. Sharing her special day felt unfair when Gabrielle was younger and annoying as she got older. Sibling rivalry complicated every birthday, though, oddly, Bette had managed to provide bright spots without fail. Her mother, whose self-absorption could sometimes rival Miranda Priestly's in *The Devil Wears Prada*, always rose to the occasion.

Perhaps over-the-top celebrations were Bette's way of avoiding the tragedy marking the day her beloved husband had passed. Each October twenty-third, smack in the middle of her and Lulu's birthdays, Bette would pull off something magical. One year, she'd orchestrated a birthday dinner at Windows on the World restaurant, ensuring that a cake with candles came out at sunset. The memory made 9-11 feel uniquely sadly personal for the sisters.

For Gabrielle's sixteenth birthday—Lulu's ninth—Bette had hosted their friends with front row seats for a matinee of *Cats* on Broadway and then organized an after-party attended by some of the cast. In costume. Arranged through someone Bette had been dating at the moment, of course. So many of her beaux had connections.

Bette was a special-occasion kind of mother—far better at big-bang moments than daily routine child management.

Gabrielle slipped on her wide Elsa Peretti silver cuff. The bracelet always made her feel fierce, and she anticipated she might need the extra support today. Not just because she'd be seeing Lulu, but because, knowing Bette, there would be some kind of fireworks.

Chapter Three

Lulu



Lulu arrived at Diana Hayes Esq.'s office as Gabrielle was hanging up her coat. Her urge to hug her sister battled with fear that their feud might rekindle with a single misspoken word. Gabrielle's wary expression suggested that her sister was just as nervous about being together without buffers. Or was she just anxious about what they were about to learn?

"Hey, Gabi." The childhood nickname slipped out. Lulu offered a tentative smile.

"Hey, Lu." Gabrielle returned an equally uncertain smile.

Was Gabrielle looking at her weirdly? Had she noticed the smear of frosting on her sleeve? And so what if she did? An honest day's work for an honest dollar.

Lulu examined her sister—she wasn't the picture of perfection, either. Yes, Gabi wore cutting-edge fashion, and her boots were unscuffed, but she looked drawn. Her hair didn't have its usual sheen. Her skin looked a tad slacker than it had even two weeks ago. Gabrielle was getting older.

Just like Lulu.

Damn, this was depressing. And with that, Ms. Hayes came out to greet them. They'd only met two weeks ago at the hospital the day Bette had died—a gloomy presence unexpected at their mother's bedside.

"Good morning, ladies. Thank you for being prompt." Ms. Hayes' steely expression matched the monochromatic gray tones of her outer office, ash-colored suit, and sharply razored short, silver hair. Only a strand of pink-toned pearls brightened the sea of drab gray, gray, gray. She offered her hand to Gabrielle first.

Of course. The eldest sister. Always treated with more respect. Next, the Gray Lady—as Lulu would now always think of her—turned and offered her the same hand.

"Let's go into my office. Would either of you care for coffee? I can also offer tea."

Gabrielle asked for water. Lulu said she'd have the same.

Once they were seated in a large and well-appointed room, done in more monochromatic gray, and each had a bottle of water—with a glass—Ms. Hayes lifted the file marked *Bette Bradford: Last Will & Testament*.

"Once again, I am so sorry for your loss. Your mother was a fine woman."

Lulu murmured a faint, "*Thank you.*" Gabrielle did the same.

"If neither of you has any outstanding questions, I'll begin. Are you both ready?"

Lulu nodded. Gabrielle said she was.

Ms. Hayes began. "I intend for my daughters—"

"Could you give us copies to read ourselves instead?" Gabrielle interrupted.

"I'm afraid not," Ms. Hayes said. "Your mother requested that the reading proceed this way."

"But she's not here," Gabrielle said. "And I hate people reading at me."

Lulu sent a silent *stop* towards her sister; she just wanted today to go smoothly.

Ms. Hayes picked up a silver pen, wrote a few words on her yellow legal pad, and half-smiled. “Duly noted.”

Lulu shook her head slightly at Gabrielle, hoping she’d let the issue go. Gabrielle’s responding eye roll signaled that Lulu should stop being such a wimp.

How could they, at what should be the most solemn of occasions, still manage to bring out the worst in each other? Lulu wanted to let go of everything from the past two years—just wish it away. Last month, she’d agonized over picking out Gabrielle’s birthday card, growing impatient when she read the treacly Hallmark cards filled with sisterly adoration. Where were the cards emblazoned with Emily Dickenson’s wisdom: *Sisters are brittle things*.

“If there are no other issues, I’ll resume?”

“Certainly,” Lulu said.

Gabrielle nodded.

The Gray Lady picked up where she’d left off, reading in her dry, dispassionate tone. “I intend for my daughters, Gabrielle Jeanne Bradford Winslow, and Loire Bonheur Gold Quattro, to preserve and value—”

Hearing her given name, *Loire*, startled Lulu.

“Did Bette think we’d be confused with another Gabrielle and Loire if she didn’t use all four parts of our names?” Gabrielle interrupted again.

Ms. Hayes cleared her throat and continued.

Gabrielle reached into her huge Prada bag and pulled out a small notebook and pen.

“No need to take notes. I’ll be giving you a copy of the will,” Ms. Hayes said.

“I just think better with paper and pen in my hand,” Gabrielle explained.

Lulu watched as her sister sketched an oval, followed by almond shapes, then a triangle, and started shading. In seconds, a likeness of Bette began to appear. Gabrielle, Bette, and Lulu all used doodling to manage anxiety, but Gabrielle was the most accomplished artist.

Ms. Hayes ignored Gabrielle’s sketching and began reading from the beginning again. “I intend for my daughters, Gabrielle Jeanne Bradford Winslow and Loire Bonheur Gold Quattro, to preserve and value, as I did, the items in my collection. Everything is carefully wrapped and particularized in a manner meant to bring forth their appreciation and understanding.”

“Appreciation of what?” Gabrielle asked.

“Collection of what?” Lulu asked at almost the same time. The only thing her mother might have collected that interested her right now was cash.

Come on, Mom. Rescue me.

Lulu twisted the handles of her black canvas tote. Unlike her sister’s bag, her worn carryall bore no label, though it was decorated with an image of Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s lace collar. Bette had hated the bag. Lulu didn’t know why she’d carried it today; she owned other perfectly acceptable handbags. Why did she still need to rebel against her mother by schlepping around frayed fabric with a political message?

The lawyer tapped her pen on the desktop.

“Sorry. Go on,” Lulu said.

The Gray Lady continued. “My possessions are to be divided equally between my daughters. The money I leave is also to be equally distributed.” Ms. Hayes looked up and spoke directly to them. “Which, after accounting for the funeral and other incidentals, should be in the range of fifty-one thousand dollars.”

Lulu heard Gabrielle’s sharp intake of breath, which matched her own. Bette had kept her net worth a life-long secret. When Lulu allowed herself moments of hope, she imagined her

mother might be worth multiple millions, although knowing how little Bette deprived herself, she could just as easily have much less.

But fifty-one thousand dollars?

Gabrielle and Lulu stared at each other. The lawyer must have misread the figure. Their mother's last husband was no Midas, but he hung out in the upper brackets. Bette had sold their oversized condo when he died and moved to a rental—alluding to wanting to stay liquid and be safe. By that, Lulu assumed Bette had bought treasury bonds and the stuffiest of stocks. Surely, there should be more left.

The lawyer returned to reading. “Said money is only to be distributed after the proper time and attention is given to decisions around my possessions. Rent must be paid on my apartment while Gabrielle and Loire decide how they want to divide or dispose of what is contained therein. They are to check in with my lawyer, Diana Hayes, Esquire, regularly until they have come to an agreed upon plan, which must then be presented to Ms. Hayes, who will be the sole and final arbiter in greenlighting their decision and allowing Gabrielle and Loire to move forward and release the apartment.”

Not only were they not getting a penny upfront, but what the heck was this collection? And what kind of twisted path had Bette concocted for them to go on? Together, no less.

“What the hell!” Gabrielle echoed Lulu's innermost thoughts. “She's gone, but she can still dictate to us?”

“She can, and she has.” Ms. Hayes plowed ahead. “Your mother had an excellent deal for her apartment, so this isn't as bad as it might be. I believe friendship with the building's owner determined the rent.”

Lulu knew what that meant.

Bette's first husband underwrote her life. The husband in the middle—Lulu's father—had forced Bette back to work. Her charming third husband—whom Bette had married when she was sixty-two and then lost shortly after—had restored her standard of living back to the level of comfort she appreciated. In widowhood, a *male friend* here and there provided additional support. Her daughters never met those friends, but they'd understood what was going on.

“How much is the rent?” Gabrielle asked.

“Twenty-five hundred dollars per month...”

Lulu added, subtracted, and multiplied in her head. Minus the money spent for the funeral, obituary, and other costs incurred by Bette's death—if they settled upon a decision agreeable to the Gray Lady within two months—about eighteen thousand dollars would remain for each sister. And that was if she and Gabrielle could agree that quickly—an unimaginable possibility.

Eighteen thousand dollars wouldn't make a dent in Lulu's overdue mortgage, home equity loans, and her son's never-ending college loan payments.

“And, of course, you need to include the cost of my going over your plans,” the lawyer added.

The dent in her mountain of debt became a dimple.

“Was Bette playing a joke?” Gabrielle asked the lawyer.

Lulu slumped in her chair. “If so, it's a cruel one. But given that our mother was hardly a master of comedy when she was alive, I doubt facing death improved her sense of humor. Her will isn't funny; it's a disaster.”

Gabrielle sighed and gave a what-can-we-do shrug. “I guess we just have to unearth this collection. Maybe while we're searching, we'll find a pair of Mom's shoes that will fit you.” Gabrielle eyed Lulu's scuffed boots.

“Again. Just to be clear, the collection is to remain intact until I approve of how you want to disperse it. Let me get you the keys.” Rising, the Gray Lady walked over to the file cabinet in the corner, unlocked it, and rifled through the top drawer.

“What kind of damn collection could she have that warranted practically writing a constitution?” Gabrielle asked. “And kept a secret?”

“And is using to control us,” Lulu added.

“From the great beyond.” Gabrielle looked up as though Bette might be hovering above.

Lulu never shared Gabrielle’s woo-woo spiritual interests. Still, this time she had a point—beginning with how Bette had left instructions barring them from her apartment after her death until the reading of the will today. Everything needed for the funeral—clothes, makeup, hair instruction, and picture choices for the funeral brochure—Bette had left in the lawyer’s possession. Lulu had wondered why. Now, maybe they’d find out.

Ms. Hayes turned, holding a padded envelope. Reaching in, she brought out their mother’s treasured keychain. Lulu felt a warm surge of recognition upon seeing the iconic golden Chanel bottle shining in the gray-toned office.

The lawyer swung the keychain slightly as she held it aloft. “Remember. All plans must meet with my approval. No borrowing for personal use, and nothing leaves the apartment.”

After their final goodbyes, Lulu trudged out of the office—Gabrielle followed, seeming similarly flattened. Neither spoke as they went down the elevator and through the lobby. The November chill hit them the moment they opened the front door.

Gabrielle raised her arm to hail a cab.

“Let’s walk. We’re only ten blocks from Bette’s. We’re not made of sugar.” Lulu frowned after the words had popped out. In what world did it make sense to be goading her sister now?

“Oh, God. Are you quoting your Flatbush grandmother? Fine. We’ll walk,” Gabrielle said and hoisted her shoulder bag higher.

“My grandparents might have been provincial, but your father’s parents were snobs. So, we’re equal,” Lulu said.

Except they were never equal. How did one make equals of sisters who’d grown up in virtually opposite families? Any childhood weekend that she and Gabrielle didn’t visit Bette’s parents in Poughkeepsie, Lulu was in Brooklyn with her father and grandparents, eating Grandma’s roast chicken, ice skating in Prospect Park, and bowling at Leader Lanes. Meanwhile, Gabrielle remained in Manhattan, swanning around Bergdorf’s with Bette.

“My toes are frozen.” Gabrielle pulled her collar tighter.

“This isn’t cold,” Lulu lied.

Gabrielle extracted her phone from her bag, hit the weather icon, and held the phone just inches from Lulu’s face. “Look! Thirty-seven degrees. Only five degrees above freezing. It’s cold!”

“If you wore an actual winter coat instead of that—” Lulu started.

“By actual winter coat, you mean a feathered marshmallow that makes you look like the Michelin man about to ski?”

Lulu eyed her sister’s expensive-looking coat, her—cashmere, doubtless—scarf, and the fancy boots. Jealousy rose, along with regret. Lulu wanted to offload the feelings clogging her chest. She noticed her sister falling behind, struggling to keep up.

“You could walk better without stilts, you know.” Damn, that wasn’t what Lulu wanted to say at all.

Gabrielle stopped and put her hands on her hips. “You know why I wanted to take a cab? These are my last pair of decent boots. I didn’t want to ruin them.”

Shame rushed through Lulu. She didn’t own the patent on misery. Gabrielle had lost so much in her divorce—and now, she’d lost Bette. She’d always been closer to their mother than Lulu was. Gabrielle had never had kids, never left Manhattan, and never rejected Bergdorf’s.

“Sorry,” Lulu said.

Gabrielle shrugged. “That’s okay.”

They stopped at the next corner for the light.

“Why did Bette saddle us with that ridiculous will? What was she thinking?” Gabrielle asked.

“Just more of the Bette show.” Lulu blinked against sudden guilty tears. Being Bette’s daughter wasn’t easy, but she was still her mother. And now, she was gone. “She always had such a commanding presence. Except at the end. She seemed incredibly sad the last time I saw her.”

“Well, she was in the hospital,” Gabrielle said.

“This was different. As if Bette were looking back...” Lulu tried to find the words to describe their mother’s mood in those last days. “As though she longed for something. She seemed bereft. Always staring at your father’s picture.”

“She thought she and my father did it all perfectly. But screwing up a marriage is hard when your husband dies only four years and five months after saying *I do*.”

Lulu hugged herself through her puffy coat. Matt’s death had provided Lulu with more understanding of Bette’s life-long mourning, though she’d trade her insight for her former ignorance. She missed her husband so much that the enormity of wanting him frightened her. The day Matt died, her world had dimmed to a hazy gray, and everything good stopped.

Two and a half years later, Lulu still waited to spot a single bit of color.

“Bette talked about seeing Oliver again—it was the only thing that made her smile,” Lulu said. “But about other things, she seemed as if... I’m not sure. Maybe she had regrets.”

“Was your father like that before he died?” Gabrielle asked.

Lulu laughed. “Not him. Even his bad decisions satisfied him.”

“I envy people like that.” Gabrielle wrapped her scarf tighter as the wind picked up. “Sometimes, I wonder what it’s like to be satisfied with who you are and your accomplishments. What a miracle for your father.”

Lulu turned and stared. Gabrielle’s appearance would lead anyone to believe she lived every moment in the comfort of confidence. Though not quite as beautiful as Bette, Gabrielle resembled her to an extraordinary degree: tall and leggy with a model’s stride, high cheekbones, and slanted, olive-green eyes that promised rumpled sheets. Bette and Gabrielle were knockouts who attracted male attention like magnets.

Lulu didn’t, though the difference didn’t bring self-pity. Lulu recognized her qualities and deficits. Glossy deep brown hair was the only asset she shared with her mother and sister. Other than that, while her mother and sister smoldered, Lulu only sparkled, even on her best days. The rest of the time, she counted on cheery and wholesome, grateful that, despite working in a bakery and not walking into a gym since college, her clothing size stayed the same.

Bette and Gabrielle’s undercurrent of dissatisfaction frustrated her. What a waste of glamour and beauty. Most of the female world spent their lives chasing what God had gifted her mother and sister.

“You should never be anything but thrilled with yourself,” Lulu said.

Gabrielle appeared taken aback by Lulu's praise. "Thanks. I'll spare you an enumeration of my regrets. So that's what you think Bette was feeling? Regret?"

"Learning Sanskrit would be easier than deciphering our mother." Lulu stuck her hands deep into her pockets. "Let's hope this mystery collection—whatever it might be—holds a few clues."

Chapter Four

Lulu



Lulu stopped at the corner for the next red light.

Gabrielle glanced to the left. “There’s no traffic, c’mon; I can’t wait in this cold.”

Lulu fell into younger-sister mode and blindly followed her sister’s jaywalking.

Gabrielle stepped up to the curb. “I never noticed any so-called collection. For the life of me, I can’t think of what it is. Was it something right out in the open that I missed?”

“If you did, so did I,” Lulu said.

“Maybe it’s something odd and unexpected—like snow globes from every country in the world.”

Lulu laughed. “Maybe we’ll find a trunk filled with first-edition Wonder Woman comics. Or twenty boxes of Victorian postcards.”

“That’s such a random and weird idea. I kind of love it. Now I’ll be disappointed by anything else.” Gabrielle gave Lulu one of those approving grins that Lulu used to wait for when they were together. Feeling this warmth after so long, she never wanted to lose it again.

“I keep thinking about those last days at the hospital,” Lulu said. “She never hinted about a damn collection.”

“She didn’t say anything to me, either.”

Lulu shook her head. “I kept trying to find ways to make her smile, like reading gossipy bits from *Vogue*. Maybe I didn’t try hard enough,” Lulu said.

“At least you tried. I didn’t have any idea what to do,” Gabrielle said.

It was true; Lulu had tried repeatedly. Trying to please Bette had been Lulu’s hobby since kindergarten. In her first effort to consciously collect one of her smiles, Lulu had memorized her mother’s favorite Sarah Vaughan song, *Come Rain or Come Shine*. Bette listened to the album so often that spots of Vaughan’s iridescent halter top had worn away.

Once Lulu deemed her memorization suitable, she sat her mother in the living room and performed for her, swaying as she sang. Bette’s lips turned up as she listened, even as her eyes shimmered. Seeing her mother’s reaction, Lulu became ever more energetic as she belted out the song.

Years later, she’d learned that she’d been serenading Bette with her and Oliver’s song.

“Those last days, did she ever ask you for anything?” Gabrielle asked.

“She asked me to hold her hand a few times.”

“I think I’m jealous.”

“She only did that at the very end.” Lulu wanted to mitigate Gabrielle’s pain. Once a pleaser, always a pleaser. “One night, she asked me to tell her what I thought she’d done right. As a mother. Be glad you didn’t get that.”

“Oh, God, Lu. What did you say?”

“I could only think of the wrong things she did. I want to die thinking about it. What a horrible moment. Finally, I choked out that she always made sure we were well-dressed.”

“You didn’t!” Gabrielle laughed.

Lulu joined her in the intimate sick humor that only sisters could share. “I felt like shit after I said it. So, I added that I admired the way she kept her apartment immaculate.”

“So, we were well-dressed, and she was a clean freak.”

“Gabrielle. Please. Don’t make me feel worse. I froze. I’d do anything for a do-over.”

“Worst Bette; best Bette. Don’t think! Just say,” Gabrielle said.

How long since they played the familiar game that Gabrielle introduced when Lulu was in junior high? As instructed, Lulu blurted out the first memories that came to mind. “Best: The first time Bette saw Nicholas. My baby! He was only three days old. I thought my life was over. Hell, I was only eighteen years old. Can you imagine? Bette came into the bedroom—we were still living with Matt’s parents—and found me crying.

“She took Nicholas, and she held him so naturally, as though she knew what she was doing—which amazed me. I never forgot what she said. ‘You never fall in love harder than when you see your baby for the first time. Realizing their life depends on you is terrifying.’ She was right.”

“She said that?” Gabrielle said. “Wow. She fell in love with me? Why do I find that a surprise?”

“Bette didn’t exactly ooze emotions.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Quick worst?”

“Oh, God! When she took me shopping for a wedding dress. I wanted something flowing and comfortable. Something suitable for a three-months-pregnant bride. I came out of the dressing room in a cotton dress, inset with lace bands on the long sleeves and embroidered with flowers. I probably looked like I flew in from the Swiss Alps, but I thought I encompassed Mother Earth. I loved it. Bette took one look, handed me her credit card, shook her head, and walked out without a word.”

They arrived at Bette’s building before Gabrielle could share her best/worst. The pre-war building might not be as elegant as those lining Fifth Avenue, but it carried the coveted 10021 zip code that Bette had worshipped. Bette and Oliver had begun their marriage living in that rarefied section of the Upper East Side, in an apartment she described as only a bit less sumptuous than Windsor Castle. Bette held on as long as possible after Oliver died, but her money ran out. Her next home was a bleak apartment on Second Avenue, far from the fairyland where she’d been so happy.

Lulu’s father had turned out to have less money than Bette thought, but pregnancy had forced their marriage. Divorce soon followed. Lulu attended a mediocre Manhattan public school, while Gabrielle studied at the prestigious and private Dalton, paid for by her father’s trust.

“Good afternoon, Miss Gabrielle. Miss Lulu.” Bette’s elderly liveried doorman doffed his cap and opened the door. Harry’s gloves were never really white. His uniform was far less starched than his counterparts guarding the entrances around the corner in the expensive co-ops on Fifth. Bette pretended not to see his shortcomings; a doorman was a doorman, and their mother needed a doorman.

When the elevator opened on the tenth floor, Lulu and Gabrielle walked down the familiar hallway. Bette lived there for the past fifteen years, long enough for Lulu and her sister to build arrival rituals. Lulu always walked ahead and rang the bell, while Gabrielle hung back a bit to freshen up her lipstick and check her hair. If Gabrielle didn’t walk in looking *done*, Bette’s frown appeared. Their mother didn’t even step out of the apartment to get the mail without being *done*.

Bette had long before given up expecting much from Lulu in the appearances department.

Lulu inhaled as she stepped over the apartment's threshold. The scent of Chanel No. 5 lingered in the apartment entry. Smelling the perfume saddened her more than the morning's melancholic event. Bette never wore any other fragrance, and just one whiff brought sharp details of Bette to mind.

The sisters stood in the foyer as if awaiting instructions. Bright noon sun lit the pale cream walls of the living room visible ahead. Louis-something-style chairs flanked a long couch—Bette had drummed style nomenclature into her daughters since infancy, but only Gabrielle had cared to learn it enough for the words to stick. Now, though, Lulu saw the apartment with different eyes. How carefully her mother had taken care of her things. The black and gold upholstery, broken up by vivid red cushions, appeared as plump as the day they had been delivered. But despite its pristine condition, an ineffable air of neglect hung over the apartment.

Gabrielle had turned to study the French, early-twentieth-century posters covering the walls. One advertised Dubonnet, one a theater, and two featured, as Bette had taught them, the famous chanteuse, Mistinguette.

“You think those are valuable?” Lulu asked.

“A bit. If they're originals.” Gabrielle moved closer to the lithograph showing the singer's face surrounded by roses.

“Paying-off-college valuable, or going-away-for-a-weekend valuable?”

“If they aren't reproductions, they could be worth anywhere from \$1,000 to \$5,000 each, depending on the quality and the condition.”

“Do you think the posters are the collection?” Lulu asked.

“Four posters do not a collection make. You know my father bought these, Lu. God, I love them. The bold colors. The graphics. They're my childhood framed.” She hugged herself as she stared.

Lulu didn't feel like talking about Gabrielle's childhood or Gabrielle's father. She hoped her sister didn't think the posters should be hers because Oliver had purchased them. By those standards, Gabrielle might as well get everything.

“I never expected her to die,” Gabrielle said, breaking the melancholic silence. “I miss her. I keep expecting her to walk in.”

“Me, too,” Lulu said.

Their mother had rarely spoken of her end-of-life planning and then only in very general terms—the opposite of Lulu's mother-in-law. Once Annette hit seventy-five, her mother-in-law would regularly invite her children and their spouses for what Lulu and Matt called the death pre-shows. Matt's mom would spread her few *real* jewels, as she called them, across her spotless satin bedspread and then give them the background of each piece.

“This bracelet is gold. Real gold. Eighteen carats,” Annette would emphasize, as though describing the Hope Diamond. “From Italy. None of the junk they sell here. My father bought it for my mother in Florence. This bowl.” Annette would pick it up as though handling a newborn. “Murano glass. From Venice. *Never let the children play with this!*”

Perhaps it was Lulu's imagination, but she swore her mother-in-law narrowed her eyes at her in particular, as though left unwarned, Lulu might encourage her sons to use the bowl to play soccer.

With every piece, Matt's mother asked, “Now who wants this?” Annette held up the same treasures at each viewing, never acknowledging past shows or previous hands raised to claim the bowl, the rosy gold chains, or the pearl earrings. The bedroom spectacles were as regular a part of the Quattro tradition as Sunday lasagna.

Bette never invited her daughters into her bedroom to drag out possessions from hidden recesses and discuss who would inherit. Gabrielle's and Lulu's visits to their mother's apartment were limited to company areas: the kitchen, living and dining room, and the small powder room off the foyer.

Lulu walked the living room's perimeter, laying a light finger first on a shining silver nut bowl and then on a Lalique vase.

After a few moments, Lulu realized she was holding her breath while hunching her shoulders. "I keep thinking of how Mom would warn us away when we got too near her precious stuff. She made me feel like a worm sprinkled with salt."

"I swear she copyrighted the way she could say, '*Girls! Freeze!*'" Gabrielle said.

Lulu held up her hands as though halting the memories. "Today, we're under instructions to poke around. Let's figure out what's here, what we want to do with it, and then present our plan to the Gray Lady."

"The Gray Lady?"

Lulu explained the nickname and made her sister laugh. "Do you think she'd shrivel if we waved some color at her?"

"No doubt."

They inspected tabletops and shelves in the living room, then the kitchen, and finally, the dining room, opening every drawer and cabinet. On the way out, Gabrielle picked up a jeweled and feathered bowl off the table. "This is Jay Strongwater."

All Lulu saw was a gaudy multi-colored bowl resembling peacock feathers. "And that's meaningful because?"

"Because it's magnificent," Gabrielle said.

"Expensive?"

"Bette probably paid about a thousand dollars for this."

"Seriously?" The piece looked no different from the kind of overwrought design cluttering Annette's house. She only hoped Strongwater pieces held their value on the secondary market.

"But it's not part of a collection," Lulu said.

"No, one piece does not a collection make," Gabrielle said.

"What if all of it is the collection?" Lulu asked.

"As far as I can tell, even all added up, it's not worthy of what she suggested in the will." Gabrielle looked around, baffled. "Nice things, sure, but nothing rates the attention Bette wanted us to give it. Nothing matches the words"—she affected the lawyer's voice—"*carefully wrapped and particularized in a manner meant to bring forth their appreciation and understanding.*"

"There's still her bedroom." Lulu pointed to the hallway.

"Sure," Gabrielle said. "But what could be there? Bette lost her serious jewelry."

Lulu nodded. Once upon a time, Bette had owned a king's ransom of gold, gemstone, and diamond jewelry. All gifts from Oliver. All stolen during a rash of inside robberies in the Second Avenue building.

As the sisters walked down the short hall and approached the bedroom, Lulu said, "I don't think I went in her bedroom very often. Now that I think of it, maybe never in all the time that Bette lived here. How weird is that?"

"Very weird. And now that you mention it, I never went in either. Bette wasn't exactly the cuddle-on-the-bed-and-watch-old-movies type."

"But you'd think we'd have gone in there occasionally," Lulu insisted. "That's only normal. What was she hiding? The dead bodies of her old beaus? A chest of handcuffs and feather boas?"

“Ugh. Don’t put those images in my head. Privacy. That’s what Bette wanted. It was her comfort zone. She never liked us in her bedroom when we lived on Second Avenue, either, remember? Not at six, not at sixteen,” Gabrielle said.

They opened the bedroom door, almost tiptoeing as they entered. At first glance, all Lulu noticed was the repetitive monochromatic color scheme. As soon as Lulu had been able to choose her décor at her Binghamton University dorm room, bright explosions of color became her mainstay.

“Does it strike you that this room is tiny?” Gabrielle asked. “Master bedrooms are never this small in pre-war buildings. The whole configuration is odd.”

The two sisters stood for another moment, inspecting the space. The paint and wall-to-wall carpet were cream-colored, just like the rest of the apartment. Only the living room’s vibrant red accents were missing. Ivory surrounded them. Not practical, but lush. Lushly boring.

Lulu wondered if her mother had ever worn shoes in this room.

A queen-sized bed, covered with a rich cream and gold bedspread, took up too much of the available space. Opposite, a delicate gold and black velvet chair was tucked beneath a vanity table topped by a large, round mirror.

Lulu almost laughed as she compared it to her shabby not-so-chic bedroom at home. Her piles of books. The worn but precious wedding ring patchwork quilt made by Matt’s aunts. One of Matt’s sweaters that Lulu clung to, hanging over the back of the chair by the desk.

“Well, let’s get started.” Lulu entered the en suite bathroom outfitted with fluffy black and cream-colored towels. Didn’t Bette ever yearn for something bright? She went straight to her mother’s medicine cabinet. The top shelf held typical sundries but all in identical black-capped bottles and jars. “They match. Every single one.”

Gabrielle joined her. “Chanel. All of them. Serum. Moisturizer. Foundation. Toner. She never bought any other brand.”

Lulu opened a drawer, uncovering a portioned lipstick storage unit. “There must be every single lipstick color Chanel has ever made. I knew she bought a lot of cosmetics, but this is crazy.”

“You know, this color…” Gabrielle plucked a tube, uncapped it, and twisted the black plastic until a muted red emerged. “Would look great on you.” She moved towards Lulu, who swatted the lipstick away.

“I hate the feel of lipstick.”

“Of course, you do.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.” Gabrielle returned the lipstick to the drawer. “Bette probably changed her mind about how to dispose of her so-called collection and did something else with whatever it was.”

“Like selling it to get more lipstick,” Lulu said.

“Let’s finish up and get out of here. Go get something to eat,” Gabrielle said as she stepped out of the bathroom.

How long had it been since she and Gabrielle had shared a meal? Even before the great battle, their lives had diverged. “Why don’t we splurge on as much lobster and wine and something chocolate that fifty-one thousand dollars minus burial costs can buy?” Lulu followed her sister back into the bedroom.

Gabrielle had stopped and was just standing by the window, looking around. “This room is just too small,” she said. “And the proportion is out of sync with the other rooms in the apartment.”

“Let’s not get all caught up in the failings of some 1940-era architect. Think lobster. Chocolate. Wine.”

“You’re right.” Gabrielle walked toward the closet. “We’re almost done.”

“Maybe Bette was losing it?” Lulu lifted the cover of a small china box on the vanity, praying to see a diamond wink. Instead, she found a small tortoise hair clip. “Could dementia have been starting? Maybe she became delusional and thought the lipstick collection in the bathroom was worth something and—”

Gabrielle opened the closet doors. There was a beat. And then her voice rang out with a new urgency. “Lulu! Come here.”

Lulu put down the clip, turned, and joined Gabrielle.

“Holy mother of God,” she whispered, all talk of mental capacity and lipstick abandoned.

Chapter Five

Gabrielle



Gabrielle froze, unable to move beyond the closet entrance. Nobody beyond the wealthiest possessed walk-ins this large or magnificently appointed—certainly not in Manhattan, where residents coveted every square foot.

Automatically triggered lights spread a warm glow over an astonishing array of what must undoubtedly be Bette’s mysterious collection. Gabrielle and her sister might as well have discovered the Alhambra.

Without realizing it, Gabrielle reached for Lulu’s hand, unaware she was reprising her childhood role and led her sister inside as though entering the Emerald City. “I guess we found the other half of the bedroom.”

“What the hell?” Lulu asked.

Gabrielle let go of her sister’s hand and held prayerful fingers to her lips. “Dear God. I think we found the hidden mother lode of Chanel.”

Lulu crossed her arms and hugged herself. “Did you have any idea?”

“That our mother wore Chanel or that she hid an entire private boutique in her closet?”

Masses of suits, dresses, and jackets hung in one area, blouses in another, and finally, a smaller section devoted to pants, all coded by color, and then fabric within the colors.

The closet spoke to acquisitive compulsion and extreme tidiness. Multiple shelves for handbags, racks for rows and rows of shoes, and built-in drawers surrounded them.

Mesmerized, Gabrielle stepped forward, opened the top drawer, and gasped. Black suede dividers separated masses of earrings and brooches into small squares, bracelets and bangles glinted from their wells, and necklaces coiled like gleaming snakes in perfect nests.

“Is all that real? I thought she lost—?” Lulu said.

“It’s costume—but Chanel costume. An entirely separate category.” Gabrielle inspected a black lacquer cuff with the CC logo drawn in pearls. Piece by glittering piece she went, touching a dark green stone in a cocktail ring, squinting at a dangling pair of chandelier earrings, and running a finger over a variety of bangle bracelets.

“The only thing that’s eighteen-carat in here is this.” Gabrielle held up her father’s watch: a wafer-thin Vacheron Constantin. Bette never wore any other timepiece.

“If only half of this were real.” Lulu wore a dreamy expression.

“Wake up, Lulu. Everything here is real—real Chanel. This stuff is expensive,” Gabrielle said. “Incredibly expensive. You don’t have a clue.”

Lulu frowned. “Right. I only know brands carried at T.J. Maxx.”

“I only meant that you’d never dream of spending this kind of money on so-called costume jewelry. Each of these necklaces goes for at least two thousand dollars.”

Gabrielle wondered if her mother had hidden any fine Chanel jewelry in the recesses. Chances were slim, considering the prices, but Chanel’s foray into luxury jewelry in the early nineties had fascinated Bette. She’d dragged Gabrielle to the 57th Street Chanel shop within the first few days the collection appeared. Every piece held the history of Coco’s designs from

decades earlier. Her mother displayed naked longing as she stared at one particular bracelet. The shooting star design made of diamonds and platinum looked exquisite on Bette; the price had been as stratospheric as the celestial design. Despite the cost, her mother had lingered long enough to make Gabrielle think she was going to splurge, but her mother had left empty-handed.

“How much are the earrings worth?” Lulu asked, holding up a pair of golden hoops embossed with the same quilting that Chanel bags were famous for.

“I’m not positive, but they usually start at around five hundred dollars.”

“What about this pin?” She pointed to a black lacquer brooch in the shape of a camellia, Coco Chanel’s favorite flower.

“I’m not a catalog, Lu. Everything here is expensive. Anything that was runway is lots more.”

“Runway?”

“Did you grow up with our mother?”

“I tuned her out half the time,” Lulu said. “Especially when she went on and on about fashion.”

Gabrielle struggled for patience against her sister’s victim stance. “Certain pieces are made just for the runway shows. Being less available makes them more expensive.”

“Ah,” Lulu said. “The built-in demand game. No different from what Beanie Babies once did, right?”

Gabrielle glowered at Lulu’s reverse snobbism and then went back to her examination of the fantastic collection. “There must be fifty handbags or more. And every one of them Chanel.”

“How much are *they* worth?” Lulu asked.

Of course, Gabrielle wondered about the value of the closet’s contents, too, but Lulu seemed laser-focused on the money and nothing else. Her sister shared her artistic bent—why wasn’t she curious about Bette’s passion or appreciative of any of the pieces?

“I haven’t looked lately, but they probably start at around twenty-five hundred dollars and go up from there.”

“Up?” Lulu’s eyes widened.

Gabrielle reached for a classic, quilted, black calfskin bag with the ubiquitous gold and leather chain. She touched the gold double CC hiding the clasp. “This one is basic but still worth plenty.”

“How plenty?”

“New, it would be around five thousand dollars. Vintage? In perfect shape like this? It looks almost unused. Half of that?” Gabrielle slid out a smaller shining ruby-colored bag. “This one is made of lizard. The value is much higher.”

“How much higher?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “There’s more to this than cash equivalence. We have a treasure chest here.”

“We have insanity,” Lulu said. “Do you know what all this translates into for the boys’ college loan payments?”

“Sis, aren’t the kids a hundred years past college?” Her oldest nephew, Nicholas, had closed in on thirty, which made his brother, Seth, twenty-seven. She loved both of them, but sometimes Lulu doted on them as though they were still boys. And saints. But she heard what Lulu would say next if Gabrielle gave her opinion: *If you had children, you’d understand.*

She’d give a Chanel bag never to hear that phrase again.

“You have no idea what people spend for college, do you?” Lulu pursed her lips, making her resemble her Brooklyn grandmother. The one Gabrielle, thankfully, didn’t share with her sister. Bette had called the woman *that selfish crone* for a reason. “Matt and I took out parent loans that I’ll be paying off until I’m dead. But I’m not complaining. Those are the things you do for your kids.”

Please, not another recitation of the hardships of parenting. Gabrielle took a calming breath and turned her attention to a stack of scarves.

Lulu examined the red lizard bag. “My daughter-in-law would call this a construct of extravagance.”

Gabrielle bit her lip. Hard. Bridget, Nicholas’ wife—Lulu’s daughter-in-law—traveled the road between being admirably dedicated to all things environmental and being a self-righteous pain.

“Aha!” Gabrielle opened a black, gold, and white silk square. “Diversification. Behold, a Hermès scarf!”

Lulu laughed. “Bette expanded, did she?”

After counting a dozen Hermès scarves, Gabrielle reached for a cashmere Chanel stole, black, edged in cream, and finished with a band of familiar interlocking Cs. She wrapped it around her neck, where the feather-soft material settled, caressing her.

“How did we not know?” Lulu slumped on the floor. “I saw her wearing some of this stuff, but she was just Bette. Dressed the same as always. I don’t understand the scope or the depth of this obsession.” She spread her arms wide, trying to encompass the enormity. “Was she losing her mind?”

“I knew she favored Chanel—she virtually never wore anything else when we went out. But—” Gabrielle stopped. She could find no explanation that made sense. “But a fixation like this? I’m baffled, too. I never—”

“You went shopping with her,” Lulu interrupted. Attitude seeped into the benign-seeming words. “You and Bette had that special consumer connection, yes? How could you not notice anything?”

“Bette would have loved having you ask her for fashion advice or been more open to trying—”

Lulu’s eyebrows shot up. Gabrielle stopped, knowing all too well how much Lulu resented Bette harping on her fashion choices. A dressed-up Lulu, their mother swore, resembled an eccentric bohemian who shopped in thrift stores.

Look at your curious little outfit! Who else would think of pairing a cardigan with a farm dress as dinner attire? Bette would ask, embarrassing Lulu. Their mother had no bandwidth for those who didn’t exhibit a certain level of taste—which meant *her* taste.

Gabrielle didn’t wear Chanel, but Bette approved the avant-garde fashion she favored. “*After all,*” her mother had said, “*you’re young. You can be experimental.*” When Gabrielle had still been able to afford it, and the store had still been there, she’d been a Barney’s habitué, and Flying Solo, downtown, when she wanted to discover new designers. Though, as Bette’s daughter, she’d always kept her soft spot for Bergdorf’s.

Their mother never appreciated how Lulu, though she might deny it, actually had inherited Bette’s sense of style—she just showed it in her way. Lulu’s look typically included Levi jeans and Gap T-shirts mixed with vintage scarves and belts, put together with an eye for outrageous color. While in high school, her sister had dyed white men’s T-shirts until the deep indigo or citrine blinded you.

Gabrielle used to appreciate Lulu's flair for putting together pleasing outfits. Like today—Lulu looked cool, despite the tote bag affectation, pairing chunky boots, navy jeans, and an amethyst mohair sweater. The choices fit her small, trim build.

Gabrielle couldn't remember the last time she'd complimented Lulu on one of her ensembles. Or when Lulu had mentioned Gabrielle's outfits, except today to make fun of her excessively high-heeled boots and wearing a coat that didn't insulate Gabrielle like a sleeping bag. Certainly, it had been before the wedding bathroom fight, but how long before?

Lulu shrugged. "Regardless of what Bette would have appreciated from me, the fact is, you're the one who went shopping with her. You didn't see anything getting out of hand?"

"Truly, I didn't. Our shopping days always began at Bergdorf's restaurant for lunch. Then we'd check out our favorite designers and look at the sales. Of course, we included Chanel. Bette's preoccupation wasn't a secret. The salespeople knew her by name and treated her like a queen. But I chalked that up to how often she visited, not how much she spent. Occasionally, she'd get something, but only sometimes. At least, in front of me."

"Perhaps you didn't pay attention to what she was spending because you were so busy spending yourself?"

"You're going there now?" Gabrielle crossed her arms. "I was an evil consumer while you saved the planet?"

"I'm just trying to understand how our mother threw away a small fortune on clothes and shoes and bags and fake jewelry, and you didn't pick up on it."

"It's my fault? Seriously? How often did we go out all dressed up? She and I had dinner twice a month or so, and yes, she wore Chanel, but I didn't inspect her to see if things were new or not. Was I supposed to remind her to start saving to protect our inheritance? How often did you see Bette, other than at family dinners?"

"Probably once a month for lunch."

"Where?"

"Usually at Nectar, for her precious tuna salad and iced tea. She wouldn't exactly put on a suit and heels to go to a coffee shop. You were the one who saw her dressed up; you should have paid more attention."

"Jesus. Chanel is classic. The clothes don't shout at you the way Moschino or Gucci can. She was probably wearing Chanel at Nectar. You wouldn't have known. And I wouldn't have been aware of a new piece the way you—"

"Spare me." Lulu turned from Gabrielle as she pushed hangers along the rod. "Look at how many suits are here. Fifteen? Twenty? More? Dare I ask?"

"Yes, we're standing in the reason Bette only left us fifty-one thousand dollars."

"Eighteen thousand after we pay her bills," Lulu said. "I need wine."

"Perfect idea," Gabrielle agreed. "Get a sense of how many shoes she 'collected' while I get a bottle."

Reeling from their discovery more than she'd let on, Gabrielle headed to the kitchen where her mother had kept a decent wine selection. She chose a full-bodied Malbec, uncorked it, and then carefully pulled two crystal goblets from the cabinet.

There was nothing extraneous in her mother's apartment. Other than the closet, there was no excess. Sure, she owned lovely fine china, but she didn't have three sets. How could she have been so self-indulgent with that crazy wardrobe?

Anyone who knew Bette knew she adored Coco Chanel to distraction, viewing Chanel as the uber-heroine of her life—even choosing her children’s names from Chanel’s given name of Gabrielle and the Loire Valley where Coco was born.

Their mother fancied herself connected to the French designer in some mystical way. Bette had also been born to a family at the edges of respectability, though nowhere near as destitute. Gabrielle Chanel, who had been put in an orphanage by her father, grew up to become the reigning queen of fashion, changing how women dressed for all time. Chanel liberated female style, killing the custom of constricting corsets and putting women into freeing jersey pieces that flowed around the body.

Blah, blah, blah, her sister would say.

Bette had recited all this lore since Gabrielle’s childhood. Teenage Lulu accused Chanel of being a Nazi, screaming across the dinner table so loudly that Bette rose from her seat, stood, and towered over her daughter, lecturing Lulu for the next hour. She described what Paris was like under occupation, insisting that Chanel had only consorted with the enemy and taken a German lover to rescue her beloved nephew from a prisoner of war camp.

As recently as a few years ago, the topic remained a source of sourness. To put an end to the argument, Gabrielle had spent some time researching the issue. As Snopes put it, World War II wasn’t the best period for Chanel to have a love story with a German, even one English by his mother, who Chanel knew before the war. While the evidence appeared to skew strongly in favor of Chanel at least doing some information gathering for the National Socialists, nothing had ever been officially confirmed.

So, was there anything wrong with Bette admiring Chanel? Gabrielle adored Edith Head and had fashioned her career after hers. The difference was that she never squandered hundreds of thousands of dollars, collecting Head’s drawings or original designs.

Gabrielle could only guess the depth of Lulu’s reaction to the gobs of Chanel. Her sister refused to use her given name of Loire, holding on instead to the childhood nickname her father had given her.

After fortifying herself by drinking half a glass of wine in the kitchen, Gabrielle returned to the fashion closet with the bottle of wine, a glass for her sister, and her own, refilled.

“What should we toast?” Lulu asked.

Gabrielle thought. “To the wire monkey mother.”

In high school, Gabrielle had read about Harry Harlow’s studies with Rhesus monkeys. Facing maternal deprivation, baby monkeys would hug, find comfort, and become attached to a faux monkey mother made of terrycloth-covered wire. Even when the scientist removed the fabric, the monkeys clung to the pure wire mamas.

While Bette didn’t lack all maternal devotion, the sisters used their pet name for her during her coldest and most demanding moments.

Lulu winced and then tipped her glass. “To the wire monkey mother.”

They sipped and then sipped again.

Lulu drained her glass a bit too quickly in Gabrielle’s view. She raised her eyebrows, signaling her sister to slow down.

“I’m not interested in judgments today.” Lulu ostentatiously poured more.

Gabrielle raised her hands to ward off Lulu’s displeasure. “I didn’t say a word.”

“You gave me the famous Bette Bradford eyebrow,” Lulu said.

“I didn’t.” She had.

“You’re always looking for ways to accuse me of something.”

“You do the eyebrow thing, too,” Gabrielle shot back and then shifted the subject. “You know, Bette would be ready to kill us right about now.”

“Why?”

“We’re drinking red wine, sitting on her cream-colored carpet, surrounded by her exquisite clothes. Listen. Do you hear her shrieking at us from up above?”

“I bet she didn’t speak above a whisper in this closet. She’d be afraid of bruising the suits. Disturbing the bracelets.”

“Upsetting the handbags. Depressing the scarves,” Gabrielle said. “Wait. Why would Bette be talking in the closet?”

“Communing. People sing to their plants. Bette could have prayed to her suits.” Lulu sipped. “I have a bizarre urge to spill some of this wine.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“We can’t sell the carpet, right?” Lulu waggled her eyebrows. “I didn’t see it on the balance sheet.”

“Stop, Lulu! This closet is pristine—don’t ruin it. Bette loved this space. You can’t.”

Lulu stuck her finger in the goblet, dipped it in, pulled it out, and held it up. A fat drop of blood-red wine slowly made its way down her finger.



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Randy Susan Meyers' bestselling novels of domestic drama are informed by her work tending bar, teaching criminals, and her journeys from bad boy obsessions to loving a good man. Her novels were thrice chosen as "Must Read Books" by the Massachusetts Council of the Book, writing "The clear and distinctive voice of Randy Susan Meyers will have you enraptured and wanting more."

Meyers knows many things saved her—family who warmed her heart, the love of a good man, a circle of extraordinary friends, and the Brooklyn Public Library. She teaches writing at Grub Street in Boston, where she strives to live by the words of Gustav Flaubert: "Be regular and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work."

To find out more about her work, visit <https://www.randysusanmeyers.com>

About M.J. Rose

New York Times, *USAToday*, and *Wall St. Journal* bestseller, M.J. Rose grew up in New York City mostly in the labyrinthine galleries of the Metropolitan Museum, the dark tunnels and lush gardens of Central Park and reading her mother's favorite books before she was allowed. She believes mystery and magic are all around us but we are too often too busy to notice... books that exaggerate mystery and magic draw attention to it and remind us to look for it and revel in it.

Rose's work has appeared in many magazines including *Oprah Magazine* and *The Adventurine* and she has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *WSJ*, *Time*, *USA Today* and on the *Today Show*, and *NPR* radio.

Rose graduated from Syracuse University, has a commercial in the Museum of Modern Art in NYC and since 2005 has run the first marketing company for authors - Authorbuzz.com. Rose is also the co-founder of 1001DarkNights.com and TheBlueBoxPress.com

The television series PAST LIFE, was based on Rose's novels in the Reincarnationist series.

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