

New York, 9 September 1997

RICHARD LIVED IN THE LOFT OF A BUILDING ON Bleecker Street, above a nightclub called The Bitter End. Rachel was stunned by the vast open-plan space, topped by a glass skylight roof. There was a sitting area in one corner, a double bed in another, a dining table and kitchen at the far end, a camp bed with a folding screen around it, which she assumed was for her, and acres of wooden floorboards in between.

‘This place would be great for skateboarding,’ she commented. ‘Is that why you bought it?’

‘I’m only renting,’ he said, ‘but isn’t it cool? I love this area.’

‘You look well.’ She smiled, taking in his Black Watch tartan trousers, which he’d teamed with a black T-shirt. He was tanned, his fair hair sun-bleached, and he had a trendy new pair of bright-blue-rimmed glasses. ‘It’s wonderful to see you.’

‘You too.’ He kissed her on both cheeks. ‘It’s been far too long.’

Richard made a pot of coffee while she freshened up in the tiny old-fashioned bathroom, where the plumbing looked as old as the century and the cistern gurgled as it refilled.

‘So what’s new?’ he asked when she emerged. ‘Tell all.’

She had already mentioned on the phone that she was engaged, but now she showed him her ring and he made admiring noises.

‘Gorgeous.’

‘Alex chose it himself,’ she said proudly, sitting down at the table.

‘He’s good at jewellery. I remember when you two had only been dating a couple of months he bought you those pearl earrings surrounded by tiny chips of diamanté. It was impressive that he noticed you wore clip-ons not pierced earrings, and he managed to choose a style that would suit you.’

‘He’s got an eye for it,’ Rachel admitted, ‘but I’ve trained him to keep receipts.’

‘I’m really happy for you both. Now, where’s my invitation?’

She laughed. ‘Mum’s organising the wedding, but don’t worry – you’re on the list.’

‘Tell me about the proposal. Did he get down on bended knee?’

‘Not quite.’ She shook her head. ‘We were in Paris for the weekend and it was all perfect – until later that night our cab screeched to a halt in the Alma Tunnel right behind Diana’s wrecked Mercedes, which put a dampener on things.’

‘Oh my God!’ He patted her hand across the table, concern in his eyes. ‘That must have been traumatic.’

‘It was horrible, with all the photographers milling around, snapping away . . .’ She paused. ‘I’ve been dreaming about it ever since; just general anxiety dreams in which I feel I should be doing something to help but don’t know what.’

As she spoke, an image came to her from a few nights earlier. ‘In one dream, I was pulling on Diana’s hand, trying to drag her out of the wreck, but her fingers kept slipping from my grip.’

Richard stirred his coffee. ‘I helped some survivors out of a fatal car wreck once and it haunted me for years. Don’t underestimate how much it affects you.’

He was the first person Rachel had told about it who hadn’t wanted all the gory details, and she appreciated that. ‘Anyway, Diana’s funeral is over and life in the UK is returning more or less to normal – apart from me having a half-empty shop. Tell me about this sale you’re organising.’

He rubbed his hands and grinned. ‘The Van der Heydens were one of *the* New York society families, up there with the Rockefellers, the Vanderbilts and the du Ponts. It was the Jazz Age, when Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton were playing dance music and the more daring white people slipped out to speakeasies to drink cocktails, or to the Cotton Club or the Savoy dance hall in Harlem. And their dresses . . .’ He kissed his fingertips. ‘Have I got a treat in store for you!’



They walked down shady, tree-lined Bleecker Street, with cafés spilling onto the sidewalks and metal fire escapes making the building frontages look like a giant game of snakes and ladders. After turning down a cross-street, they walked a couple of blocks north and skirted across the corner of Washington Square. Chess players were huddled around little tables, deep in concentration, and everywhere there were street performers: musicians, jugglers, mime artists and break-dancers. They looked incongruous amidst the historic buildings that ringed the park and the memorial arch at the north side but had clearly made this their home territory.

Richard had keys to a warehouse down a side street and he unlocked the door and led her into a hangar where rows of clothing hung under plastic sheets, with code numbers on each rail.

‘Let me get you the listing,’ he said, and disappeared into an office.

Rachel inhaled the musty, dusty scent, excited by the prospect of looking through this collection. Richard’s description sounded alluring.

‘Some of them are in lots, some for individual sale,’ he said. ‘You’ll see guide prices in the margin. Do you want to browse on your own for a while? I’ve got some admin to do.’

‘I can’t wait,’ she breathed.

She lifted the plastic from the first row to find some extraordinary dresses by well-known designers of the 1920s: a cerise satin gown by Piguet, draped in chiffon scarves decorated with silver leaves, and with matching harem pants to wear underneath; a Vionnet black crêpe gown with a black lace bodice; a coral velvet gown by Worth with pearl strands strung from the bodice over the arms, like fairy wings; a Chanel dancing frock in flouncy black and pink chiffon. She doubted she would be able to afford any of them, but made notes beside the ones she liked, estimating the price she could charge in her shop, then calculating how much she could afford to pay in dollars, allowing for the auctioneer’s fee, the exchange rate, plus shipping and import duties.

She had brought a calculator and went along each row doing the same sums, working out which garments might fall within her budget. Coats, skirt suits, hats and shoes, costume jewellery, even some early swimsuits and matching beach robes were in the collection. It was phenomenal.

When Richard emerged an hour later, he laughed at the sight of her price list, covered in pencil jottings. ‘Why not take it all?’ he suggested.

‘I’d love to. This is paradise on earth for me. I wish I could be reincarnated as a Van der Heyden and have this as my personal wardrobe.’

‘There’s one thing you won’t have seen yet,’ he said. ‘The *pièce de résistance*.’

Intrigued, she followed him to a separate rail where a full-length zip-up bag was hanging. He unzipped it and lifted out a dress that made her gasp: it was ivory crêpe georgette decorated with crystal beads, with a tight sash round the hips and a back that scooped to waist level.

‘It’s a 1928 Molyneux original that was worn by the actress Gertrude Lawrence. Isn’t it divine?’ He turned it around so she could see both sides.

Hundreds of tiny crystals had been painstakingly hand-sewn all over the silky fabric. Rachel took the dress and held it in front of her. Instinctively she knew it would fit.

‘Why did you show me this?’ she sighed. ‘It’s the ultimate wedding dress but I know without looking at your price list that I could never afford it.’

‘Give it a try,’ he urged. ‘You can change behind that curtain.’

She couldn’t resist. When she slipped the dress over her head, the weight of the fabric made it hang perfectly.

‘It looks as if it was made specially for you in Molyneux’s atelier,’ Richard said as he directed her to a full-length mirror.

She admired the snug fit around the hips, the cut of the neckline resting below her collarbones, and the deep swoop at the back, displaying her shoulder blades and spine.

‘That was cruel,’ she said, turning away with a wan smile. ‘You’ve spoiled me for any other dress.’ Whatever else she tried on now, it would never live up to this.

‘Sorry.’ He grinned. ‘I’d better buy you a cocktail to apologise.’

They went to a speakeasy bar on Bleecker Street, a cramped one-room place with brick walls that was entered along a passageway and up a back staircase. Richard ordered her a sidecar, a Prohibition-era cocktail made with Cointreau, cognac and lemon juice, and she sipped it appreciatively. First of all

they discussed the lots she was planning to bid for, and Richard offered to reduce her shipping costs by including her purchases in a shipment he was sending to London. Next they chatted about mutual friends, and finally the conversation returned to Diana, and the media obsession with her on both sides of the Atlantic.

‘I liked her,’ he said. ‘She had a lot of charm, but who would have thought she would be deified in death? You don’t dare criticise because people get very heated.’

‘Alex thinks the crash might have been caused deliberately by some secret-service operation,’ she told him. ‘He’s making a programme about it.’

‘I’ve heard the rumours.’ Richard looked thoughtful. ‘I suppose it’s possible. Wouldn’t that be awful?’

They ate dim sum in a Chinese restaurant across the street from his loft apartment, and Rachel was so exhausted by the time they got back that she fell onto the camp bed and was asleep within seconds.



At the auction next morning, Rachel was uncharacteristically nervous. She had decided to bid on twenty-four separate lots and had a budget of up to ten thousand dollars to spend from the overdraft her bank manager had arranged. Richard gave her a paddle to raise when she wanted to bid. She had never mastered the tiny twitches and raised pinkies some folk used to attract the auctioneer’s attention.

It started well when she bought an extensive lot of costume jewellery, including several strings of black, pink and cream pearls, for a hundred dollars. She was amazed to get the Chanel dance dress and the black Vionnet for their guide prices, and she picked up several lots of daywear, coats and jackets. All in

all, she won fourteen of the lots she had decided to bid on, for prices that were well below her self-imposed limits.

The Molyneux dress was up last and she decided to wait and watch, even though bidding started at eight hundred dollars, ruling her out straight away. Someone at the back of the room – bidder number 54 – secured it for \$2,500 and she sighed. She had to scrub the memory of it from her brain before she started hunting for her own wedding dress.

She signed all the necessary forms and arranged a money transfer, and Richard assured her the goods would be delivered to her shop in mid November, in plenty of time for the Christmas trade.

‘You’ll find a little something extra in there,’ he said. ‘But it’s just a loan. You can give it back in the New Year.’

‘What on earth are you talking about?’

He showed her his bidding paddle with the number 54 on it. ‘I won the Molyneux and you *shall* wear it to your wedding. Now you *really* have to invite me.’

She flung her arms round him, almost bursting into tears. ‘That is the best wedding present you could ever have given me. I can’t tell you how much it means.’

On the subway to the airport, Rachel couldn’t stop smiling as she imagined herself in the Molyneux on her wedding day. The trip had been a great success all round and she couldn’t wait for her purchases to arrive in Brighton. She took out her Filofax and began sketching ideas for a spectacular Van der Heyden shop window display to let the locals know about her glamorous new acquisitions.