

*the*  
second chance  
boutique

*a novel*

L O U I S A   L E A M A N

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# chapter 1

THE WHISPERING DRESS IS NO ORDINARY WEDDING DRESS SHOP. There are no oversized *Pay Here* signs. No mass changing rooms crammed with seminaked brides, all eyeing the same white satin fishtail while stealthily noting the merits and pitfalls of one another's body types. No pitiless sales assistant pressuring for a stretch of the budget or a buy before it's gone. Above all, there are no rails of white upon white, all dresses squished together, flopping off their hangers, same but different, a monotonous rack of matrimonial sardines. At this shop, every gown sits apart. Every gown is different. Every gown has its story. After all, the most important dress of a woman's life should surely have something distinct to say.

Outside, a new customer lingers. She stares through the glass panels of the quaint Victorian bay, her eyes wide at the sight of the window display—antique lace, satin slippers, and old leather suitcases signifying honeymoons of old: a drive along the Amalfi Coast in a 1950s Aston Martin or the duplex suite of a 1920s ocean liner. Her thoughts soar, finally hopeful that she might find a dress of character, one that feels special, personal, particular to her. The One.

The interior of the shop convinces her. Everywhere she looks, there is something to admire, an Aladdin's cave of wedding paraphernalia: veils, tiaras, silk slippers, and jewels. They hang from the walls, drip from the shelves, or sparkle on dressers, each item carefully displayed to announce its full splendor. The wooden floors are crowned with a faded Afghan rug, aping the atmosphere of a bohemian country retreat. The beamed ceiling appears to sway with strings of dried white roses and orange blossom flowers, while an enormous art deco chandelier illuminates the central space, its geometric crystal swirl conjuring images of palm courts and jazz quartets. The light bounces from wall to wall, aided by several floor-length mirrors, each one draped with pearls and ribbons and bows. The main stars, however, are the dresses themselves. They occupy their space with such intensity, it's as if, at any moment, they could spring to life and dance across the floor.

The customer is no expert, but immediately she recognizes a few tropes of twentieth-century fashion. There is the ballerina cut of the '50s, its nipped waist and white tulle puff promising fairy-tale femininity, then something tall and slinky behind it—she'd like to say ivory satin—echoing the glamour of those Golden Age cinema stars whose names all end in *a*: Rita, Ava, Mara, Maria. Her eyes fall next on an extravagant '80s princess gown, an old-fashioned corset-and-bustle affair, then a feathered number in red (which, to her mind, looks barely qualified to be a wedding dress), and finally, within the glow of a lava lamp, she spots something distinctly '60s, a tiny mini dress with a silver plastic collar...for a wedding? Her mind cartwheels, thrown by the sight of all these twists of wedding dress

history, somehow forgotten within the ceaseless full-length-and-strapless-big-gown obsession.

“Welcome,” says a voice, “to the Whispering Dress.”

The shop’s owner, Francesca Delaney, red hair sculpted into an immaculate chignon, ivory skin, floral tea dress, plum lips, and a certain sparkle in her sea-green eyes, steps out from behind a tray of tiaras and smiles warmly.

“I may be making assumptions here, but my guess is you’re looking for a wedding dress?”

The new customer sighs, almost melts with relief. “Oh yes,” she says. “You don’t know what I’ve been through. Street after street. Shop after shop. Meringue after meringue. I thought I’d never... Oh, this is wonderful.” She moves through the room, mesmerized, stroking each dress in turn.

Fran watches and smiles. “The horrors of mass-produced tulle?” she says sympathetically.

The customer nods. “Don’t get me wrong. Some of those dresses were lovely, but they weren’t for my figure...or my budget. The good ones were extortionate. The average ones were, well, average. The sizes never seemed to be accurate. And then there were the sales assistants, with their judgy eyes and good manicures, who said we could only have a free glass of bubbles if we registered online. In one shop, the assistant insisted I try on this monstrous froufrou thing with an encrusted bust that I barely had the bones to fill, let alone the flesh, then tried to tell me it was perfect. She was so desperate for her commission, when I told her I didn’t like the style, she lost the plot and told me I’d never get the dress I wanted because I was too picky!”

She sighs, defeated.

“I hated it...the whole thing of it. Then a friend told me about your shop and something clicked: The Whispering Dress, Vintage Bespoke Wedding Gowns. The thing is, I liked the idea that, with your way of doing things, you’d pick the dress and I’d just have to go along with it. I had this feeling that you’d know what I need better than me, like that’s what you do.”

“Yes,” says Fran, delighted. “That’s exactly what I do!”

The customer smiles. “To be honest, I’ve never bought vintage before. I get my clothes cheap on the high street like everyone else. Nothing lasts, but it doesn’t matter when a T-shirt costs a few quid, does it?”

Fran frowns, masks her annoyance with a nod.

“I was a bit nervous you wouldn’t want to help me. With your reputation...I don’t imagine I’m your typical customer.”

“My shop is for everyone,” says Fran, eyes twinkling. “Call me Fran. What’s your name?”

“Ella.”

“Okay, Ella, tell me about yourself. Anything you think might help me decide what you need in a dress.”

Ella looks down at her legs. “Well,” she says, somewhat self-consciously, “I’m a size 8, flat chested. I take a size 4 shoe.”

“No, no. I mean *you*, tell me about *you*—what you like to do, why you’re getting married, the things you hope for, the things you dread.”

“Um...”

Fran sees it in her face, her body language—Ella is unsure of herself. A shy one. Shy with a twist.

“Your fiancé,” adds Fran, helping the flow. “Where did you meet him?”

“Work...which is boring, I know. Appleby Electronics. We’re in different departments. I do finance. He’s in quality control.”

“So an office romance? A bit of playful eye contact across the watercooler? Stealing a kiss at the Christmas party?”

“It was a team-building day. I twisted my ankle on the assault course and he helped me to first aid. Now look at us, two years on and we’re getting married! The only thing is”—Ella shrugs, looks down at her feet again—“I’m dreading the attention. My work colleagues are ultra-catty. The thought of walking up the aisle with them all staring at me... Every time I picture it, I break out in hives.”

“Oh dear, no,” says Fran. “There’s no need for hives.” She takes Ella by the arm and leads her through the shop. “So what is it about the staring that bothers you?”

“That none of them think I’m good enough for their Alex. That I’m boring. That I’m dull.”

“One wonders, then, why they’re invited to your wedding.”

“Alex is friends with everyone. He’s super kind. He wants everyone in the office to celebrate with us. They don’t have a problem with him. Only me.”

“And should you tolerate their opinions? *Are* you boring?”

“Well...no, I don’t think so. I might come across as a bit shy because I don’t take part in the office pranks and all the tiresome conversations about reality TV and hangovers.”

“Because you have other interests—”

“Exactly,” says Ella appreciatively. “I love dancing. Latin and

ballroom. In fact, that's how Alex and I got together. When I twisted my ankle, I started to cry and Alex thought it was because I was in pain, but actually, it was because I knew I'd miss my competition that weekend. A few weeks later, he turned up at one of my classes. We've been together ever since. He now loves dancing as much as I do. He knows the real me."

"And so should the rest of the world," says Fran, brightening. "What better time than your wedding day to show them your inner dazzle? I've got just the dress."

"I like the look of this one," says Ella, reaching toward a demure crepe '70s maxi with full-length leg-of-mutton sleeves.

"That one's lovely," says Fran, "but it's too quiet for you. For you, I have something...extraordinary." Her eyes flash with excitement. "I've been waiting for a bride who has the right kind of spirit to carry off this little number—"

Ella nods, smiles nervously.

"If you don't like it—although I think you will once you've tried it on—then we can consider other options, but personally, I believe it's the one for you, the dress you need."

She steps forward, full of all she has seen and experienced, takes Ella's hands in hers, leads her toward a powder-pink chaise longue, and asks her to sit while she prepares the dress in question.

"Just a minute," she says, diving behind a damask curtain. "I only finished the repairs yesterday. Merely a bit of bead rethreading. Nearly ninety years old and it's in amazing condition."

"Ninety years!" says Ella.

"Ready?"

“I guess.”

Fran throws back the curtain, revealing an ivory 1920s flapper dress, knee length with a scalloped hem and drop waist, its front bodice shimmering with glass beads, sequins, and silver threads. Even on the mannequin, its dancing energy pulses, every thread eager to shimmer and shake in the quake of a leg flick, a hip twist, or a hand flutter. A dress for moving in. A dress with zest.

Ella gasps, clasps her hands to her mouth, the sparkle of sequins dazzling her eyes. “You—you actually think I could wear *that*?”

“I think you’re the perfect person to wear it. In my world,” says Fran, “a wedding dress that brought joy to a bride of the ’20s can transfer its pleasure to a bride of today and maybe, just maybe, it can impart something of its wisdom too. A whispering dress isn’t just a yard of trimmed and stitched fabric, you see. It’s a story, a legacy, a lesson from history. You might even call it a talisman. The woman who first wore this incredible gown was a dancer like you. Here.”

Fran goes to a bulletin board and returns with a faded sepia photo of a woman and man, smiling as their bodies lean together in a dance embrace.

“Looks like a fox-trot,” says Ella, curious.

“Meet Phyllis Noble and her husband, Harry.”

“You mean—?”

“The dress’s original bride. She and Harry married in 1926. A very lively occasion, I believe. There were more than three conga lines and an awful lot of Charleston. The guests drank juleps and Manhattans, ate turbot and peaches, and everyone got a slice of the five-tiered wedding cake. The honeymoon was in Majorca, in a

newly built villa overlooking the sea. Phyllis and Harry were dance partners, pretty well-known I gather. Once married, they toured all around Europe.”

Ella shivers, visibly amazed. “Are they still alive?”

“No, but the important thing is they had a long, full, and happy life together, doing what they loved. Phyllis’s granddaughter donated the dress. She knew how much happiness it had brought her grandmother and thought it might do the same for another bride.”

“Can I...can I try it on?”

“Of course.”

Barely able to undress fast enough and with no thought for who else might be in the shop, Ella strips down to her underwear and, with Fran’s help, climbs into the dress. The weight of it shocks her, but as soon as Fran fastens the back and adjusts the straps, it feels right for her skin. Fran turns Ella toward a large gilt-framed mirror, where she meets her wedding-day self for the first time. The result is instant tears, studded with rounds of delirious, delighted laughter.

“Oh my goodness! I can’t believe it! After all those awful, disappointing, swamping, great big meringues, I can hardly believe this is it! And to think it’s been right here all along—”

“Waiting for you,” says Fran as she hands Ella a veil, a swathe of tulle attached to a simple cloche-style headdress. “This will set it off perfectly. Did you know it became customary in the ’20s for the bride to throw back her veil at the end of the ceremony, then walk out unveiled, a proud married woman?”

Ella ponders this, then takes the edges of the veil and flings it away from her face.

“You show them,” says Fran. “Show them who you really are.”

“Hey, are you married?” says Ella, catching her eye. “I bet your wedding dress was *amazing*.”

Fran startles. “No,” she says hastily, smiling to mask her inner panic. “No, I’m not. I—I guess I haven’t met the right person yet.”

*Please*, she thinks, her thoughts drifting to places she doesn’t like to go, *change the subject*. She looks out through the bay window, feels a sudden urge to flee, to leap out and fly away into the clouds... With a blink and a sigh, she snaps herself back to Ella.

“Just let the dress speak for itself,” she whispers, “and I promise you’ll have your own wonderful, dance-filled marriage.”

“I will,” says Ella.

*And she will*, thinks Fran. *Phyllis Noble will make sure of it.*



Brides aren’t hard to find. Throw a bouquet into a crowd, and they’ll be there, clinging to one matrimonial ideal or another. Finding dresses, however—brilliant dresses, *whispering* dresses—now that’s the challenge. There are dresses around if you know where to look, on internet buy-and-swap sites, charity shops, and flea markets, sometimes donated, sometimes sourced from vintage dealers, but Fran has to choose with care. One great dress, hard-won, is better than ten average ones. Her work is bespoke, her mission to sweeten the trial of modern romance with the careful matching of dress to bride. She sees it as her duty to take her time and get to know both, then find a pairing that fuels the fire of love.

Each of her gowns is painstakingly researched, its backstory

teased from the shadows of the past. “Field work” she calls it. And this, she believes, is what makes her service so unique: the forensics of vintage clothing. Some gowns come primed with stories, their donors only too eager to relay memories and share photos, videos, and wedding day keepsakes. Others are more mysterious, but as long as Fran has the original bride’s name, with a little research, she can usually uncover its truths. Dresses tend to fall into one of four categories: the “family” dress, handed down through generations, usually offered up when the latest daughter rejects it for something fresh and contemporary; the “joy” dress, from the woman who likes the idea of her beloved gown bringing happiness to others instead of gathering dust in a suitcase; the “basic” dress, from the unsentimental woman who is on a mission to declutter; and the “dead” dress, the venomous outcast of doom, disillusionment, or divorce. Fran meticulously steers clear of this latter category—its energy is rarely conducive to happiness. After all, she’s in the business of improving brides’ lives, not saddling them with the echoes of past disasters.

She has three simple rules:

1. Never covet your own stock.
2. Never sell a “dead” dress.
3. Never say no to a wedding invite.

The Phyllis Noble flapper was one of the finest she’d had in a long time, the perfect combination of style, condition, and story. She knew it was special the moment it arrived on her doorstep, wrapped in brown parcel paper with a bundle of photos and a charming

letter from Phyl's granddaughter, who'd learned of the Whispering Dress after her best friend had found nuptial joy with a wonderful Norman Hartnell brocade two-piece rescued from a junk shop in Muswell Hill.

Every now and then, a dress of true distinction comes Fran's way. There was the 1970s wedding kaftan that had belonged to a well-known folk singer; the fairy-tale French couture gown that had been worn by three generations of brides from the same family; and then the wine-stained Lacroix sheath dress—Fran had managed to remove the stain and had consequently received interest from scores of brides, but had eventually sold it for half her usual fee to an impoverished, pregnant fashion student. Not the best price, but the match was compelling: the ensembles' original bride had also been pregnant and had rushed a marriage to avoid public shame, yet through hard work, patience, and the invaluable art of compromise, she nevertheless created a happy, lasting union, resulting in four children and a thriving wallpaper business. Good energy to pass down the line. Integrity is everything. Fran has no qualms about turning away business if she cannot find the right gown for a bride. There is nothing to be gained from sending a woman down the aisle in an offering that doesn't speak from the heart—that's what the high street is for.

Today, however, Fran feels under pressure, distracted from her capacity to cherish old fabric and fire Cupid's arrows. Success has overwhelmed her. Her remaining good gowns are earmarked for sale, and she hasn't had time to hunt for new stock. Whispering dresses take time to evolve. They cannot be rushed on a conveyor belt. There are a few '80s romantic numbers waiting in the wings,

but synthetic taffeta isn't great for the soul, and she fears the world isn't ready for a puff-sleeve revival. It is a relief therefore that her assistant and long-time friend, Mick Haigh, has suggested the gift of a house clearance:

“Says here: ‘Dryad’s Hall, six-bedroom country retreat in Epping Forest, needs prompt and discreet clearing. No valuables remaining. Mattresses, some furniture, general waste, and clothing. Contact Rafael Colt 07972472678.’ Some rich old girl probably croaked it and now her kids want a quick sale, take the money and run, buy a new yacht, pay for little Farquharson’s school fees and what have you. So how about it? Try our luck? Epping Forest isn’t far. We could have the van there in a half hour and if there’s nothing vaguely bridal in sight, I’ll at least find a few bits I can upcycle and stick on eBay. And at the very least it’s a trip to the countryside.”

Mick, a one-time Camden Market stallholder with an eye for restorable bric-a-brac, an obsession with Victorian gentleman’s tailoring, and a hand-drawn calligraphy font to his name, waves the newspaper advertisement under Fran’s nose. Fran eyes it suspiciously, bothered by memories of all those dispiriting probate clear-outs, the 1930s houses with their smoke-stained walls, moldering food in semi-warm fridges, smelly carpets, mottled net curtains, and garbage bags of unwashed clothes.

“Oh, I don’t know, Mick. So often these clearances turn out to be a waste of time. Auctioneers will have claimed the best stuff.”

Mick twiddles the extremities of his well-groomed handlebar mustache (inspired by a favorite portrait of Lord Frederic Leighton). A long-standing companion/substitute for a boyfriend, he knows

Fran well. He can tell that, even in protest, her curiosity is crackling. The thrill of finding a dress, even just the slimmest chance, among the detritus of other people's unwanted junk, is impossible for her to resist.

"I guess if it's a six-bed country retreat," she says ponderously, her gaze shifting around the shop, "even the leftovers could be interesting."

"Excellent," says Mick. "I'll buy you a full Englishman's breakfast on the way."



Epping Forest, a slim but stately strip of wilderness on the outskirts of Northeast London, offers greenery, peace, and birdsong to those wishing to escape their urbanized environs. The woodland is ancient, dense with the gnarled trunks of beeches, hornbeams, silver birches, and oaks. Fran is surprised by how quickly she feels immersed, the cocoon of nature concealing all trace of grime and traffic and city noise. She likes the sensation, the getaway feeling. Mick has lots of stories about secret pond-side raves and trees he's climbed and smoked in. He also claims he was confronted by a stag on the same stretch of road they are driving on.

"Regal, it was. Right there. Stared at me, then walked on."

Fran isn't paying attention however. She is lost in an idyll of woodland wedding bohemia with moss on the tables, tea lights in jam jars, an arch woven from twigs and a gorgeous empire maxi dress in soft gray lace, paired with bare feet and bluebells. In her reverie, she nearly misses the entrance to Dryad's Hall. The sign is all but

consumed by flora. Mick reverses, then shunts his minivan between two ivy-clad gateposts and continues up a meandering willow tunnel drive. The house emerges in a glade ahead, an arts-and-crafts masterpiece, its hive of nooks and corners rising out of the earth, surrounded by flower-studded rhododendrons. It is picture-book perfect, twee old England with a deep russet roof, three tall chimneys, leaded windows, and wooden beams.

“It’s everything I love,” says Fran, delighted. “Heart, history, and that tantalizing hint of untold stories.”

“Told you,” says Mick. “Not all house clearances are alike.”

“But it’s so hidden away,” says Fran, gazing in wonder at the rising chimneys. “You’d never know it was there from the road.”

Another van is already on the drive, a clean one, with a burgundy spray job and gold signage: *Luckmore’s*. Mick scowls, recognizing the name of one of the established London auction houses. He once applied for a job there as a trainee valuation clerk but failed the interview on account of being too “excitable.” *No matter*, he thinks. Now he has Fran and the Whispering Dress and exquisitely tailored frock coats. They watch as two men in matching burgundy dust jackets load a baroque dresser into the back.

“Careful, boys,” says Mick, glaring from his window. “Don’t drop that corner now.”

“Bring on the leftovers,” says Fran. “Although, are you quite sure this is bona fide?”

“A hundred percent. I spoke to the chap earlier. Rafael. Posh boy. Says he wants the whole house cleared by midday. No dawdling.”

“I guess we better get on with it then.”



In the distance, she sees him, his back to her and the sun behind him, straining through the window dust. He doesn't belong here. Judging by his crisp suit and neat, pale shirt, his world is a million miles from the arcane quirks of this crumbling forest retreat. Tall and slim, his stature is elegant, but his shoulders bunch. His neck bows in an uncomfortable arc, straining toward the phone in his hands, fingers furiously typing, messaging, actioning.

Mick coughs. "You must be Rafael." He bows forward to offer a handshake. "Mick D. Haigh, secondhand furniture restorer, professional dandy, and part-time assistant at the Whispering Dress, at your service. And this, the delectable vintage dress expert and all-around good egg, Ms. Francesca Delaney."

Mick grins, clearly pleased with the pomposity of his introduction. The man—Rafael—stares at Mick's homburg and waistcoat, slightly raises one eyebrow, then shifts his focus to Fran. For a moment he gazes at her, then he blinks, sighs, gives an emotionless nod.

"Take it all," he says. "There's a dumpster at the side for whatever you don't want."

No hello. No welcome. And definitely no handshake.

"Is there anything we shoul—"

"I'd like you out by midday."

"Right you are," says Mick, backing away.

He and Fran burrow into the rest of the house, through wood-paneled hallways and interconnecting receptions rooms, inglenook fireplaces, carved doorframes, and hammered pewter handles and

rails—the handcrafted hardware of a long-gone era. Such a trove of past treasure would normally set Fran’s vintage instincts alight, but she is distracted, locked into a small infuriation of etiquette.

“Never mind ‘take it all,’” she mutters. “What about *take the hint*? Evidently we’re not wanted nor worthy of basic courtesies such as ‘hello’ and ‘thank you.’”

“Ah, suck it up, girl,” says Mick. “We’re not here to make friends. I’ll forgive him his lack of manners if I can make my fortune from his family castoffs. Talking of which, what have we here—”

They come to a large, high-ceilinged kitchen. Save for the main units, the butler’s sink, and the cooking range, the contents have been stripped. Fragments of a broken dinner plate are strewn across the terra-cotta floor. Fran bends to pick one up.

“Delft blue. Pretty old by the looks of it.”

“Better be the only plate those Luckmore’s fools have smashed,” grumbles Mick. “Check the cupboards.”

They begin opening doors. Luckmore’s have been thorough. Most of the cupboards are empty apart from a few items here and there: tea towels, jam jars, wooden spoons, jelly molds, and a dusty mug tree. There is nothing of worth, yet Fran feels eerily tense about these utilitarian leftovers and all the emotion that lives in them. *Everyday objects*, she thinks, handling the box from a 1980s blender, *say so much more about a person than their ostentatious showpieces, their grand pianos, antique sofas, and glorious artwork*. There is honesty in the mundane. She likes honesty. And manners. She really likes manners. As she and Mick begin boxing up the scraps, she is compelled to keep venting about the rude and abrupt Rafael Colt.

“I mean, the basics take no effort, Mick. And what about glancing up from your phone screen for more than a heartbeat? It doesn’t hurt to make eye contact.” She opens a shopping bag of folded cotton tablecloths. “Anyway, they say we’ve evolved from Neanderthal, but I say we’re evolving back. David Passemore would never have been so rude. Or Harry Noble. Or James Andrew Percy. In fact, Percy would have charmed the pants off us. According to Meryl’s journal, on their tenth wedding anniversary, he surprised her entire family with a hot air balloon flight over the Serengeti.”

“A bunch of dead grooms, Fran. Not really a fair comparison, is it?”

“Maybe not, but I’ll stick with my dead grooms if modern man has to be so unpleasant. At least dead grooms aren’t permanently attached to their smartphones. I mean, who did he think he was? *Take it all...out by midday*. Miserable, modern sod—”

“Ahem.”

Fran looks up. The subject of her mockery is standing in the doorway.

“Ah, hi,” she says, flustered. “Um...we’re just...um...you know...sorting...”

He has heard her, no doubt, but his face is devoid of reaction. He stands motionless, watching as she tries, through embarrassment, to shovel a pair of soiled red gardening gloves into a slippery bin liner.

“She loved to garden,” he says wistfully.

“Oh, then you should have these.” Fran offers up the gloves.

“No.”

“Keepsake?”

“No,” he presses, and then, as though to prove his manners, adds, “no *thank you*.”

She pulls the gloves back, hugs them to her chest, feels they should at least have love from someone. “If you don’t mind,” she ventures, “who was she?”

“My mother, Alessandra, the woman whose mortal possessions you’re currently rifling through”—he catches Fran’s eye, gives a small, wry smile—“not quite a dead groom, but...she was a bride once.”

“Yes, um, sorry about that,” says Fran. “I didn’t mean...”

But her words are wasted. He has already walked away.

