

Chapter 1

Hidden Gems, Lady Lawyers, & Bombazine



A mirror was no longer a necessity. The ritual had taken on a life of its own almost from its inception. Of course, mirrors are no fun if what one sees in them is predictable. Witness funhouse mirrors.

The dying light of late evening caught the diamond in the center of the onyx oval as she reached for the cufflink on the cherrywood dressing table. It had taken some doing to learn their use, but now it had become second nature.

She inhaled, appreciating the implicit warmth of real starch carefully ironed into the brilliant white shirtfront lying flat on her chest and, of course, into the warp and woof of the French cuffs. The bay rum she wore laid an enticing, tenor scent over the starch basso. She'd borrowed both scents from me, or perhaps now I ought to say, inherited.

Extend the pin on its swivel. Fold the cuff to perfection in its resting position. Thrust the pin through the four, really twelve, layers of fabric. Flip the pin. Adjust the cuff to settle in its proper home atop the wrist bone. Punctuation to clarify an essay of identity.

A long reach for an emerald green, velvet cutaway coat let her swing it across her broad shoulders, another legacy from me, and shrug into it with a practiced gesture. Like watching myself. Fasten the custom-molded brass buttons. Align jacket lapel, shirt, collar, cravat, jawbone.

A slow smile into the always reliable mirror.

A harsh exhale. A proud inhale.

At home in her own skin once again.

Ready.

I could burst with pride.

A quick turn about the subtly appointed sitting room of her dark-paneled suite yielded replete cigarette case—she really ought to give her invisible valet a raise (that occasioned a half-smile)—cape, hat, gloves, walking stick, topped with her signature sterling silver jackal, a long-ago gift from me. The full-length looking glass on the back of the door confirmed what she already knew.

Ready. Oh yes, so very ready.

A quick listen at the rosewood door. Crack the lock, another listen. As expected, golden silence met her ear. She tiptoed into the richly carpeted hallway of the second-floor family wing. The subdued rose plush encircling the faded riot of dusky pink, white, and yellow roses that her mother had chosen so many years ago made me smile.

She cocked an ear. Down. The anticipated fugue of designer glassware, expensive seafood, and rising and falling women's voices warmed her, tingeing her angular cheekbones with red. Our Gem had it all under control, I had no doubt.

An eye-flick left. The corridor deserted, she turned smartly to the right, pushed open a wall-papered, nearly invisible, swinging door, and slipped silently down the spiral of the barely lit servants' stairwell.

Prepared to exit the kitchen, skim the slender alleyway frequented only by herself and the feral cats, she intended to make her usual entrance through the magnificent carved front door of our Upper West Side estate at the fashionably late hour of nine.

Hidden Gems, a ladies' salon known only to its most secret and select invitation list, was in its possibly last full swing, and the eldest of my four daughters enjoyed herself immensely every week. Less than an hour ago, she'd excused herself, allegedly to help her sister hostess welcome some new arrivals.

Exit Jacqueline, and by feats of now-practiced prestidigitation, enter Jaq.

She was most welcome, and I watched with her to savor the shiver of sensory anticipation shimmer through the room as the assembly recognized her distinctive silhouette in the doorway. These were her kind of ladies. Every single one of them.

Only I noticed her inner sigh. She worried that this would be their last salon, as impossible as that felt. They'd know tomorrow, after the reading of my Last Will and Testament.

I cracked a smile. Leave it to my girls to decide that their weekly salon must go on, despite the ravages society's matriarchs might deign to visit upon their reputations. Mourning, whose

acquaintance I have made intimately, or, really, mourning customs, I've always felt, are over-rated.

She adjusted her attitude. She intended to enjoy herself to the fullest degree, something I also taught her, at least until that enjoyment was no longer available. No time like the present.

I chuckled to myself.

She handed her walking stick, cape, gloves, and hat to an attendant, winked at him, and assayed the room.

“Jaq!” A petite gloved hand grasped her sturdy forearm and with it, her attention.

“Aurora,” Jaq purred, bending down to kiss her blonde temple, and receive the soft condolences that beautiful, petite dolly of a woman offered.

Let the deluge begin.

If I knew my first-born, and I did, she was wondering if she could kiss her way through the delectably feminine alphabet stretching fetchingly all the way across the salon, and filling it with tinkling laughter, scintillating banter, not to mention stimulating brilliance, oh, and of course, sex.

I was betting that she could.

The dry throat of the equally dry barrister and estate manager came to a slow drone of a halt, allowing the gold nautical mantle clock's relentless tick to rise and be heard once again. Rheumy eyes slowly raised themselves through smudged bifocals to the pristine beauty of my youngest, and now, most bounteously endowed daughter, Jezebel. Financially speaking.

She, like the attorney, was dry-eyed. Her tears for me had been shed long ago.

“Mr. Root,” she began in her crispest tone, tightening the fingers into her gloves, “if your firm wishes to retain the honor of our custom, and I suspect, based on annual fees alone, that it does, it is my fondest desire that, as women, we have a woman attorney.”

She stood.

“Sisters?” She began to thread her way through black, calfskin and calf-high boots, bustles, and parasols to the resplendent, polished mahogany exit door. Halfway there, she turned, and paused.

“Mr. Root, to clarify. Tomorrow.”

The inestimable, mutton-chopped gentleman—son of the great Elihu, who had been my legal counsel as well as quasi-friend for nigh on forty years, sputtered. “But—”

“I am well aware, Mr. Root, that women are not admitted to the Bar, ergo, not permitted to practice law.”

He made a sound that seemed to indicate that the defense rested.

“Nevertheless,” Jez continued, as she retraced her steps in the understated, forest green, burgundy, and cream Aubusson wool, to drop her calling card on his desk, “my sisters and I will have a woman attorney. How you make that a reality, sir, is up to you. We’ll expect her to break her fast with us at nine o’clock tomorrow. Do request that she not be late, if you please. We in the Bailey household like to be prompt.”

A soft voice from the rows of orderly files behind the august lawmaker might have whispered, “Yes!”

“Now, really, it’s long past our teatime. Ladies, shall we?”

Jezebel, the baby of the family, now one of the richest women in Gotham, sailed out the front door of the firm and onto Wall Street like she owned it. If she wanted to, she could.

The four of them, veiled and draped in the dreadful, itchy black bombazine of full mourning, got decorously into my dark, stuffy, roomy, old-fashioned—I might add, stunningly refitted—mail coach for the journey uptown. That had been a gift from one of my venue managers out West.

When they were all seated, Jez nodded at Jaq. She rapped the roof, and spoke through the tube to the driver, “Home, Ali, please. Home.”

Jezebel eyed each one in turn, sparkling like the Fourth of July.

She spoke, “Nary a word, girls.”

Gem got one syllable of protest out of her mouth.

Jez shut it down. “Not one. Until we’re safe, sound, and sequestered.”

They had one hundred and six, give or take, blocks to go—in anticipatory silence.

Jezebel allowed herself a sigh. Oh, not audibly, but within. That could mean as much as two hours, depending upon when and where they encountered the inevitable carriage snarls along their path up Broadway, over to Death Avenue, a.k.a. Tenth or Eleventh Avenue, depending upon your pleasure, and up the hopelessly snarled, frankly dangerous route that traced the Hudson River Railway and led to my realty monstrosity.

The home itself, on the northwest corner of West End Avenue and 80th Street held great happiness and equally great sorrow. The loss of their beloved mother to influenza was a variously open and closed, but never yet fully healed, blight in all their hearts.

Never one to stay with what she didn't want for long, Jezebel turned her mind to other pursuits. Her jumbled olio of pithy sayings for one, which she intended to publish as a book, now sooner rather than later. She'd thought of another one in the attorney's lair.

Never give anyone or anything you love or intend to love a name with an umlaut—it forces one to take a lifetime appointment to the punctuation police.

Now, lest you think this valuable piece of advice came out of nowhere, let me assure you that it arose because of a chance conversation overheard at Hidden Gems just last evening.

Jezebel has a long-time friend, Xanthippe, who, her gender notwithstanding—which most of the males in her field ignore—is a linguist of no mean repute. She is, after all, named after the wife of Socrates. It is to her that credit must go for this saying.

Always fascinating, Xanthippe had reported to other language-inclined friends that umlaut was a word coined in 1819 by Jacob Grimm—yes, of those Grimm Brothers—which changed the course of the German language in perpetuity.

Jezebel snorted. She sounded like a solicitor to herself. Then she began to giggle.

Her three sisters turned inquiring faces to her.

They made good time across 23rd Street.

“The woman lawyer,” she explained in sister glossolalia.

Three distinct versions of amusement harmonized with her own.

Mr. Grimm had coined the word himself in two parts: *um-* means around; *-laut* means sound, and this is, of course, what an umlaut does to the vowels it caps ... it *rounds the sound*. Clever man. Aside from collecting all those fairy tales.

Yellow brick caught Jezebel's eye out of the crack in the window curtain. Yellow brick as far as the eye could see. As they turned onto a surprisingly, suspiciously if delightfully, and temporarily empty Tenth Avenue, she kept her eyes trained on the yellow brick until, at the corner of 24th Street, she noted a discreet sign volunteering that the entire block was For Sale.

Oh no, it was not, she thought with a jolt and a vengeance, sitting taller, and slightly forward.

Jaq tilted her head at Jez.

Then Jezebel smiled.

A first task for their lady lawyer. Let us see how well her mettle plays out in the public square of the marketplace.

She sat back, content to woolgather until they reached home, and could get out of their dreadful mourning get-ups.

Jacqueline, usually the unreadable one of the quartet, remained her solid, oldest child, self. My death had been particularly hard on her, because, as the eldest, she was treated as all first-born sons are treated. That never varied from the moment of her birth. I hadn't cared a whit that she was born female. That was moot. She was raised male.

Jezebel let her focus on Jaq soften, wondering what she might do to ease her sister's heartache, likely an ache that would not leave her soon, or soon enough.

Never really at a loss for ideas, for Jezebel was most definitely the family visionary, at just that second, she caught a glimpse of her future older sister and the role she might like to play in their future, just one, and that, fleeting as it was, was enough for now.

Jez was the youngest, the most savvy in some ways, and not at all in others. Much more temperamentally like Jaq than the others. Jaq was knowing in the outer ways of men and the worlds of men—I'd raised her at my knee over the years—but not at all at ease or knowledgeable in the ways of women and their powers, or the workings of the business world.

Jezebel was the reverse—knowing in the inner ways of men in the world of business—including how business was conducted in these dubiously-moral days of ours. She was also versed and wise in some of the ways of women.

Her sisters called her Mary behind her back. They meant Mary, as in Mary and Martha, the two sisters of Lazarus, late of New Testament notoriety.

Of note, Jaq knew every bit of the outward-facing aspects of show business. Jez, every bit of the inward-facing ones.

Mary's counterpart, Martha, was the hostess with the mostest, Jemima, daughter number three, she whom the world knew as Gem or Gemma. No one then alive really knew how or when the J transmuted into a G, but at some point, early on, it had, and it had never wavered thereafter.

I did know, as I was the ersatz unwitting coiner. Soon after she was born, I called her my little Gem. It stuck. Truth is, she was named after the kidnapped daughter of Daniel Boone.

Gemma would be itching to do the proper, public bits of mourning. The crepe, the covered mirrors, the sackcloth and ashes.

Jez knew her sister very well. Gem would do the outer bits as theatre, as pomp, as circumstance, not because she needed them to mourn, but because she loved the rituals of life—with their attendant props, costumes, wigs, make-up, lighting, choreography, et al.

Our Martha, Jez thought fondly, so busy entertaining all of us.

Forty-Second Street was its usual, abysmal tangle of humanity and horseflesh. Getting out of the *melée* always felt to Jez like having been squeezed into a slightly-too-small, definitely laced-too-tight corset, to its merciful loosening, only to be able to breathe freely again when they were spit out of the maelstrom.

Jasmine, sister number two, sat quietly in her corner of the carriage, occasionally dabbing at the violet eyes she inherited from an exotic grand or great-grand, her heart, as it so often was, broken at the poverty, the anguish, the pain she always noticed on the streets of their beloved City. If I had to name Jasmine's gift, it would be to call her Help Personified. If Jas could help a situation, no matter how big or how small, she did it, never thinking of its cost to herself.

Jez reached for Jas' hand, limp in her lap, and tightened her own around it. Jas squeezed back, words unnecessary. The most remarkable thing about Jasmine was that, despite the universally undisputed fact that her heart broke repeatedly at unfairness, prejudice, loathing, and the just plain anguish of human existence, she never, ever lost hope.

In Jasmine's world, there was always something to do to make it—whatever it was—better. It was inarguable fact, according to Jasmine, and that's all that mattered. She'd gotten that directly from her mother.

Jez extracted her hand, adjusted her slightly-too-tight hat and stifling veil, leaned back in the carriage, and closed her eyes to meditate. She had the distinct sensation that her progenitor had meant to send a message to his *lovelies*, as I'd so often called my four precious daughters, a message that she had to decipher and be able to communicate to her sisters by the time they reached home.



At the clop of the first horse hoof on the flat, inlaid, redbrick *cum* granite checkerboard circle in front of the house, from which we took a slight detour, the front door, as it always did, opened magically. I'd never been able to figure out how our butler managed this, but he did. Every time. I'd never had the courage to ask him how.

The usual two displays of ordinarily riotous, colorful flowers—one of Gemma's specialties—were instead mere greenery draped in black crepe in the solid stone urns. She'd chosen a chalky, pale, sparsely-leaved, English ivy, perhaps a springier, more exuberant version than quite strictly proper. Typical Gemma. Ours was a house of mourning for the foreseeable future—or so it would at least need to appear from the outside.

Jaq, as was her wont, helped each one of us out of the carriage and onto the patterned brick walkway to the majestic, white marble steps of the *port-cochère* beside the house. We moved as a practiced quartet, a landed water ballet corps, around the porch to the front door. Jaq first, then Jas, then Gemma. I, as usual, brought up the rear. A perfect parallelogram of femininity.

"Terwilliger," I said with a private smile to the avuncular presence that the butler had been since before the October day I was born. "It's past teatime, and we are," I coughed genteelly, "in need of some restorative refreshment after that sojourn."

I handed him my hat with its odious veil, gloves, parasol, and coat, as my three predecessors had done. He looked like a particularly juicy, option-overloaded hat stand.

"I wonder if I could trouble you to ask Mrs. Goodness if we might combine tea, pre-dinner libation, and supper into one, to be served in the Billiard Room?"

"Very good, Miss," said the markedly well-spoken hat stand.

"In three-quarters of an hour?" we spoke together.

"Perfect," I added.

I turned to follow my sisters up the sweeping spiral of the front staircase.

"Miss?"

"Hmm?" I returned to Terwilliger, now at eye level with his august height. He was even taller than our tallest Jaq, who just brushed past six feet.

"Did it go as you'd expected?"

I grinned at this man who had kissed scraped knees, allowed dollies to use his neckties and handkerchiefs ad infinitum, and attended more little girl tea parties than any man his age was

obligated to do in one lifetime. “It did,” I assured him. “Perhaps you would join us after staff supper for a sherry?”

“It would be my pleasure, Miss Jezebel,” replied the gentle man, listing starboard as he went toward the kitchen at the back of the house to hand off our morose finery, such as it was, to our various ladies’ maids and gentleman’s gentleman.

I’d just made another one of more decisions than I ever knew I’d have to make in this lifetime.

Terwilliger needed to be in on the matter from day dot. He’d always been a stellar, solid presence in our lives. He didn’t seem to be desirous of going anywhere but where he already was, and we would need all the help we could get to pull off my possibly impossible, wildly replicating, burgeoning idea.

Terwilliger was an excellent planner besides. Gemma might look like she pulled off her parties and tableaux and salons and theatricals with effortless grace and ease, but it was because Terwilliger was in on their structure and timing from their conception. He did, if you will, and supervised, the hard labor.

I ascended the stairs in the elegant glide Mama had taught all of us. The goal was to keep our skirts completely still—much easier during her day of bell skirts, and far more challenging in our day of narrow skirts and bustles. The secret, skirt girth notwithstanding, is tiny steps.

I scabbled to untie, unpin, undo every bit of mourning garb I could reach on my own as I entered my bedroom suite in the front of the house. Its casement windows, now draped in black and pulled shut, gave me a slightly displeased pause, but I put it bravely to one side. Usually, they welcomed me into sunny blue and yellow rooms with tart, apple green accents. I loved these rooms.

I had myself out of every stitch of clothing as fast as I could. Bombazine, while perfect for the external flouting of mourning, was deucedly uncomfortable. It was hot, and between us, it itched wherever it touched skin, and mine, already very fair, was very sensitive. I poured cool rosewater over every patch of red fire. Bombazine gives me hives.

I would wear it in public. If I went into public. But the rest of the time, our dressmaker was already upstairs on the fourth floor with a fleet of seamstresses making our so-called mourning clothes out of soft, easy fabrics. We might have to mourn, but we did not have to be uncomfortable about it.

We'd put it about socially—really, we'd told our staff to tell their friends up and down West End Avenue—that we girls were thoroughly distraught at Papa's death and were not at home. Which, as I think on it, is utterly absurd, because where else would we be but at home?

But the custom of the day, borrowed from the hoity-toity titled Anglophiles in our midst, went that saying we were not at home wasn't a literal statement of affairs. No, it meant we were not at home *to* anyone else other than those already at home.

I smiled in the mirror, so much happier in a two seasons old, blue day dress that matched my dark blue eyes. As far as I was concerned, and I knew I spoke for my sisters as well, that meant we could get up to whatever we damn well pleased—as long as it was at home, and not witnessed by anyone who might be moved to offer a decidedly unwelcome opinion.