CHAPTER ONE

"[The presidency] was like a film and I had the opportunity to dress the female star."

—Oleg Cassini

September 1961

In the newspaper, next to the photo of the First Lady in Palm Beach, there was a story about the Greyhound bus that had been firebombed on Mother's Day. The Attorney General, whom everyone in Inwood just called Bobby, had finished his investigation and now blamed "extremists on both sides." It was such a shame that the story was next to the photo of the Wife, who was looking so very happy after spending the weekend poolside with her in-laws and children and an assorted tangle of dogs. It just made it all seem sadder. Kate hated to read that this sort of thing was still going on, especially on Mother's Day. If Patrick Harris's mother, *God rest her soul,* hadn't sponsored her at Chez Ninon, Kate had no idea what she would have done. A magnificent seamstress Peg Harris was. Her son, the butcher, could truss a lovely roast, too.

Kate gave the man at the newsstand a dime for two newspapers because she liked the photo of the First Lady so very much, and then put her subway token into the turnstile. While she waited for the A train, she said a prayer for all those people who had been on the Greyhound bus, and their mothers, and her own mother, who had died young, and Patrick Harris's mother, Peg, who had recently passed, and Mother Church, just to put a good word in. All the way downtown, from Inwood to Columbus Circle, Kate could not stop staring at the photo of that dress. It was quite flattering. The Wife was leaving Florida on Air Force One—smiling, fit, and tan. She was wearing a white scarf and gloves. The neckline of her dress ran right below her collarbone, right where it should be.

Kate had lost track of how many times that neckline had needed adjusting so that it would hit just so. It had been worth it, though. The cut of the dress was remarkable. It hid every flaw—and there were many. Kate thought of the First Lady as "Slight Spinal Sway." Patrick Harris, the butcher, told her that kind of thinking was an occupational hazard. "I always think of people by what they buy. Mrs. Leary is 'Pork Loin Joint with Rind.' "

Kate, fine boned and pink skinned, always wondered what part of the pig Patrick thought of her as but certainly understood the sentiment—entire families were known to her only by what they wore: fathers and sons in matching suits with the cut of Savile Row, or mothers and daughters with their identical rabbit-trimmed bathrobes. Unless they were extremely famous, appearing in newspapers or magazines, Kate had no idea what they looked like. Chez Ninon had strict rules about mixing. Kate never left the back room. Maeve did the fitting. Kate just followed the marks. She knew everyone's tucks and pleats but not their faces.

Still. She knew them. More important, she knew who they thought themselves to be. It was Kate's job to know. As soon as those people were out of diapers, there was a constant need for various wardrobes for skiing, horseback riding, private school, and spring holiday in Paris—along with Having Lunch with Mummy at the Four Seasons dresses and Meeting Other Children in Central Park Harris tweeds.

Stitch by stitch, hour by hour, Kate imagined every formal dinner, every exotic holiday, and every debutante ball as if she lived them herself. It was the only way to get the clothes right. She needed to understand how long a cape could be without being too long and thereby unfashionable, or what type of lining a Belgian-lace suit needed so it would stay cool and yet not wrinkle in the Caribbean sun. Kate was just thirty-two, and yet so many years of her life had already been spent hunched over one fabric or another, her focus unwavering. A simple dress could take a hundred hours to make. A beaded gown could run over a thousand, sometimes two. But she never met the clients.

Outside the Columbus Circle station, the morning seemed vain and preening. The endless green of Central Park was edged with the gilt of fall. Swarms of fat yellow cabs circled. As Kate passed the long row of livery carriages getting ready for the day, the drivers placed garlands of plastic flowers over the horse's heads. The beasts were stoic, as if resigned to their lot in life. Every now and then, there'd be a shake of the head or a snort. But they never bayed or bucked. The blinders they wore narrowed their world.

Kate loved horses ever since she was a child. On the Great Island, in Cobh, on the coastline of County Cork, wild horses lived along

the beach. If you were gentle, and had an apple in your hand, sometimes they'd let you get close enough to lasso them. If you were careful, you could slip onto their backs and they would gallop full bore along the brilliant sapphire sea and you could lean into them, listening to the beat of their untamed hearts. But you had to be gentle and very careful. And Kate was both.

City horses were very different. They wore hats and walked round and round all day. Of course, so did Kate.

Clip, clop, she thought.

From the street, Chez Ninon was nondescript at best. The dress shop was a series of second-floor windows in a Park Avenue office building that could be easily overlooked—and that was the point. Discretion was essential to their business. Most of Chez Ninon's clients were part of the Blue Book society, the old-money crowd. The owners, Sophie Shonnard and Nona Park, were Blue Book, too. They were also glorious crooks.

Kate had been told that Miss Sophie and Miss Nona's evolution into the life of artistic larceny was a gradual process, a matter of supply and demand. For nearly forty years, "the Ladies," as they called themselves, had run a custom shop in Bonwit Teller that produced only original designs. But as time went on, more of their fellow Blue Book friends wanted French fashions without the French price tag. And so, in the spirit of friendship and a healthy bottom line, every season Miss Sophie and Miss Nona flew to Paris to pilfer the very best designs from the finest runway shows.

Chanel, Lanvin, Nina Ricci, Cardin, Givenchy, and Balenci-

aga—the Ladies would carefully watch each collection and then run to the nearest sidewalk café to sketch the garments from memory. Once back in New York, they would create fifty designs or more but make only four copies of each. For special clients, like the First Lady, they would offer exclusive copies of the pieces they knew would be of interest, with exclusive price tags to match. No matter what couture house the Ladies had stolen their designs from, they would put their own label on the finished clothes. *Chez Ninon. New York, Paris.* When a collection was ready, the Ladies would pop champagne and open their doors at precisely three p.m., from Tuesday to Thursday. Everything was sold on a first-come, first-served basis. By invitation only.

Every season, the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture et du Prêt-à-Porter forced Chez Ninon to pay a "caution fee" to the French designers. The Ladies always pronounced it *cow-see-on*—the fee was so exorbitant, they could pronounce it any way they pleased. If they didn't pay, they couldn't attend the runway shows. But they always paid. There was no way to ban them.

Miss Nona was more than seventy years old, but how much more was difficult to determine. She was always red-carpet ready, dressed in the originals that she so shamelessly copied, and demanding front row seats at all the best runway shows. Macy's, Marshall Field's, Ohrbach's, even Bonwit Teller—if Nona wanted a buyer's seat she'd take it. She had sharp elbows and the air of a deposed duchess; no one dared refuse her. Her partner, Sophie, only slightly younger, tagged along behind her, apologizing and wielding her Southern charm with the precision of a surgeon. The Ladies would not tolerate being ignored or silenced. They were always exacting and always in the way.

"Wonderful and pixilated," an editor at *Vogue* once called them. Carmel Snow, the editor in chief of *Harper's Bazaar,* considered them the most "discerning American buyers of Parisian fashion." Miss Nona was even featured in a nail polish ad. They were charming pirates, but they were pirates nonetheless.

Luckily for Kate, they never came in until after ten.

Morning light streamed in through the large windows. It was early. The sewing machines in the Ready-to-Wear Department were, thankfully, quiet. Black-and-gold enameled beasts—they still had treadles. The machines were noisy and burned the girls' arms and hands if they overheated—and they always overheated. The Ready-to-Wear girls were the mice of the back room, pumping the treadles of their machines like the pedals on a pipe organ. Laughing and gossiping, they hummed with life. Most wore their hair in curlers or shaped into spit curls that were taped into place. They were young and always ready for a night out. Their quick eyes and even quicker hands stitched without care. Kate never understood why a seamstress with as much talent as Peg Harris had spent her days running off dozens of dresses on a machine, but Peg clearly had loved doing it. "Clothing the masses is noble work," she'd tell anyone who asked. Kate agreed, but she would certainly rather dress the First Lady.

She tossed the newspapers on her desk and put the kettle on for tea. She could hear Mr. Charles on the telephone behind the closed door of his office. Noel Charles was the in-house designer at Chez Ninon and Kate's direct supervisor. Silver haired and impeccable,

he was manicured down to his buffed fingernails. He had an accent that was somewhat European. He always spoke of Belgian roots, but to Kate he sounded neither French nor Dutch. He had a vague Continental air; his accent was chameleon-like and shifted depending on whom he was speaking to.

He hoped to open his own shop soon and talked of taking Kate with him, as a partner. It was such a grand scheme—it didn't matter if it was truly possible or not. Kate just liked sitting in the quiet workroom with Mr. Charles early in the morning. They would have tea and talk about important things, like current events. It was civilized.

The kettle whistle blew. There was some Barry's Gold Blend in the cupboard, which Kate had found in a specialty shop downtown. She'd paid a dear price for it, and it was stale, but stale Barry's was better than A&P tea anytime.

She carefully trimmed the photos of the First Lady from the newspapers that she'd bought at the subway station. One copy was for her scrapbook and the other she tucked into her weekly letter to her father, along with half of her salary, twenty-six dollars. The Old Man never mentioned the clippings at all, and so she never did, but it was interesting to Kate to see if the gossip columnists recognized that the Dior gown was not really a Dior at all. And there was something so wonderful about seeing the way a gown was worn—the way the shoulders turned, the head tilted, or the iridescent beads caught the light. Even after all this time, seeing her own work worn still thrilled her.

Fashion is the art of the possible—Kate was quite fond of saying that, but it was true. With a needle and thread in her hand, anything was possible, especially when it came to the First Lady,

because Kate's sister, Maggie Quinn, and the Wife were exactly the same size. Kate couldn't help herself. On a rather regular basis, she turned her own sister into a "Little J," as everybody in the neighborhood called her. There was no harm done. The muslin patterns were often tossed away, so Kate just plucked them out of the trash. Her sister was a little younger than the Wife, but their coloring was very similar. And they were both Sunday-china beautiful. Kate always tried to be respectful about it. She never made the exact same outfit if she could help it. She'd usually try a different fabric entirely, although sometimes it would be a similar color. And she never had the hats made up—even though Schwinn, one of the boys at the shop, who always rode a bike to work, was a very fine milliner.

"It's like waving a flag," Kate told Maggie. "Without the flag. It's patriotic."

It was Kate's way to honor Inwood, tucked away in the northern part of Manhattan and her adopted home. Irish, mostly. In Inwood, the President was a local boy made good. He took his first Holy Communion at St. Margaret of Cortona in Riverdale, right next door, and that made him one of their own.

And even though Kate thought of the Wife as having a bit of a swayback from all that horseback riding—and she had that French last name—the First Lady was still a Lee from County Cork. Her mother was the granddaughter of Irish immigrants who came across during the potato famine in the 1840s. And Kate was from County Cork too—Cobh, specifically. "Cove," in English. The village was the last place the *Titanic* laid anchor before beginning its voyage across the Atlantic, the last place the Lees saw before they left Ireland forever. And, although the Lees were actually from the country, according to her father, their people knew

each other—although the Old Man was always a bit sketchy about the details. So Kate liked the Wife, no matter what anyone said. And Kate had to believe that, even with all those French mannerisms, she must long for the Island. Kate did.

The day she left, her father was in the garden, going at the red roses with the kitchen knife and then his teeth. He was like a mad dog. The thorns left a thin trail of blood. Kate knew the boat would not wait. He knew that, too. Rose after rose—so much went unsaid. Finally, she picked up her suitcase and walked to the gate. "You can press them into a book for luck," he shouted after her.

Kate stopped and turned.

That helpless grin. The fistful of ragged red roses. The Old Man had refused to take her to the docks. It wasn't that far, just around the hill and then along the unfurling edge of the deep-water port—just a couple of miles or so. But he wouldn't do it. *Or couldn't,* Kate thought.

He'd already lost Maggie and her husband to the promise of America—and now Kate. He had no more children to lose.

The Old Man pressed the battered roses into her hands. Behind him, a thick fog hid the lush green all around them. There was some mercy in that.

"Keep one," Kate said. "We'll match the dozen when I get back."

"When you get back," he said, "we'll plant a few more. Your mam would have liked that. You and me, digging around." Then he turned and went inside. He had never left the Island in his life; he had no words for such a thing.

Kate picked up her suitcase again. A rose petal fell at the gate. Then another. And another. She was late. She didn't stop to pick them up.

Petal by petal, Kate ran down the long, winding road, dragging her suitcase behind her. She ran along the water's edge where lovers often lingered and then down the high street, past the pubs with their doors thrown open wide and the rusting cars careening this way and that, then onto the tangle of docks filled with suitcases and the sorrow of leaving, and, finally, onto the boat waiting in the harbor, a harbor whose motto was *Statio bene fide carinis,* "A safe place for ships," and, aboard that boat, into the vast sea itself. Petal by petal, Kate left a trail, just like a young girl with bread who does not think of rabbits and foxes, but only of home.

It was just six years ago when she left, but it felt like a lifetime.

Kate was nearly finished with her tea when Mr. Charles finally emerged from his office. She'd rearranged her desk at least twice, moving the series of framed pictures of her nephew, Little Mike, from the left to the right and then back again, waiting for him to finish his call.

"I thought I would grow old on that telephone," Mr. Charles said. "Miss Sophie can certainly talk a blue streak." He was wearing his best suit: dove-gray waistcoat, black pinstriped jacket, and the gray trousers with knife pleats. He was also holding a large envelope with a presidential seal. "And what do you think this is?"

"I can't imagine."

But she could. Kate could imagine all manner of wonderful things in that envelope—from an emerald full-length ball gown completely covered with Austrian crystals to a pure-white silk cocktail dress with a black satin bow. When it came to the Wife and Maison Blanche (as everyone called the White House), the possibilities, and budget, were limitless.

"It's a love letter," Mr. Charles said, and opened the envelope. Inside, there was a watercolor sketch, a clipping from *Life* magazine

with four women modeling the same Chanel suit in different colors and variations, and a letter from a secretary on the embossed stationery of Maison Blanche. The entire room was suddenly filled with the scent of Chanel No. 5. The clipping from *Life* was about Chanel's comeback. The French designer, who was now about Miss Nona's age, had come out of retirement to create the "must have" suit for every proper country-club lady. And the Wife wanted one.

As with nearly all of the First Lady's custom orders, she'd sketched out her version of how the suit should look. She was quite a talented designer and painter, too. The watercolor was exceedingly cheerful. The Wife was holding one hand out as if a tray balanced on it had just been whisked away. The other hand was firmly on her waist. Maison Blanche was set in the background, but it loomed over everything. The Wife looked like a society girl soon to be trapped in a tornado of history. Her smile was mischievous; her eyes were wickedly playful. She was wearing a pink pillbox hat that sat back on her head—it didn't hide her beautiful face, as hats sometimes can. A note on the drawing read*, If it is another godforsaken pillbox, please make sure that it does not appear to have been stolen from an organ grinder's monkey. It should be a non-hat hat.*

Kate knew that there was a new man at Bergdorf Goodman's assigned to create hats for the Washington crowd. Mr. Charles said that Halston—one name only—was very meticulous. He'd come from Lilly Daché and had the same head size as the Wife and would try her hats on and look at them with two mirrors so that every angle was right and the fit was perfect. Kate couldn't imagine how silly he looked in some of those hats, especially a summer straw he'd recently made with a large green polka-dot bow. But he got the job done, and that was all that mattered.

While the sketch was playful, the Wife's instructions for construction were quite precise. She was mad for fashion and had been designing her own clothes since she was a young girl. As a college senior, she'd won *Vogue*'s Prix de Paris contest with an essay that began with a sense of whimsy—*If I could be a sort of Overall Art Director of the Twentieth Century, watching everything from a chair hanging in space*... She was all about the details.

"Why is this a love letter?" Kate asked.

"The President wants her to have this. He wants Chez Ninon to make it happen."

The back door suddenly opened. Schwinn saw the envelope immediately. "Is it Christmas?"

"It is Christmas," Mr. Charles said.

It was always Christmas when an order came in from Maison Blanche.

Schwinn was slight and freckle faced, with sun-washed blond hair that seemed to be styled by a series of cowlicks. He always wore the same clothes: a neatly pressed white cotton shirt, black trousers, and a black tie. He worked in the front, with the Ladies, but instead of wearing a suit jacket, he wore a windbreaker that made him appear as if he were just stopping by for a moment on his way somewhere else. Kate had never met anyone like him. He seemed to be about her age, about thirty years old, but he could have been older or younger. Unlike most men, he liked bicycles, not cars. He knew so much about them that some of the Ready-to-Wear girls thought he might have been part of the Schwinn bicycle family, perhaps a son. But Kate thought that Schwinn was just a nickname. She asked him about it once, and he said, "Schwinn is good enough for a bike, so it's good enough

for me." Kate wasn't sure what he meant by that, but that was just his way.

Schwinn was a salesperson, but his formal title was "stylist," which seemed to mean that he helped women accessorize clothes but he was also a designer himself. He had a nice business on the side, making hats for some of the clients. Kate thought that the Ladies probably knew but looked the other way. Everyone liked Schwinn, especially the clients. He was funny and enthusiastic about everything. And he was Catholic, which Kate liked, too.

But there was also something about him that seemed deeply wounded. His eyes were gray with bits of green, and he never looked at you directly. He was secretive, too. In six years, Kate had only learned two things about his past—he'd been an art major, and he'd dropped out of college to serve in the Korean War. He'd told her that those were the only two things worth knowing.

Schwinn picked up the drawing from the Wife and studied it carefully.

"He wants her to have a new outfit," Mr. Charles said. "That's a first."

"Even the President can be a man in love. It's probably a peace offering for the way the press savaged her during the election for wearing all those French clothes."

Everyone was still trying to figure out who told *Women's Wear Daily,* a small industry newspaper, that the Wife had spent $30,000 during the campaign on clothes in Paris. "Smart and charming," they wrote about the future president and his wife, "and running for election on the Paris Couture Fashion ticket."

The average American salary was $5,600 a year, and so when the story broke, Mrs. Nixon began harping on the Wife's un-American

clothes. She went on at great length about how she only bought her clothes off the sales racks in moderately priced department stores.

The Wife had planned to ignore it, but when the Associated Press ran the piece, suddenly everyone wanted to read *Women's Wear Daily,* and the scandal grew. She was then forced to counter the speculations with an exclusive quote in the fashion section of the *New York Times*—"I couldn't spend that much unless I wore sable underwear"—which was followed by a statement from the campaign office stating that the Wife was "distressed by the implications of extravagance, of over-emphasis of fashion in relation to her life." The situation spiraled out of control, and newspapers around the country began to run unflattering articles about the Wife's "balloon hair," and worse. Finally *Women's Wear Daily* apologized to the family and dubbed the First Lady "Her Elegance." After seeing what pain they'd caused, they vowed never to criticize her again. But the damage had been done to the Wife's image. Even eight months after the election, the press still hovered like vultures, waiting for her to make the same mistake again.

"This pink suit could be a very bad idea," Mr. Charles said. "It's clearly French. Maison Blanche wants us to pay Chanel for the right to make a line-by-line replica. If that gets out—"

"It won't matter all that much," Schwinn said. "The suit is American if we make it. The reporters can't touch her for that. If we make it, she's not taking jobs away from anyone. She can wear French without the criticism—it's the gift that keeps on giving."

If Schwinn was correct, it was a very clever gift indeed.

The rest of the back room arrived, squawking like geese. Then came Maeve, late as always. Maeve was the fitter. She was an Inwood girl, like Kate. Somewhere in her late fifties, she was un-

married. Irish, of course. Her hair was the color of iron. She was broad shouldered, nearly square.

"Christmas?"

"Christmas," Mr. Charles said.

She looked at the sketch Schwinn was holding. "That woman is a fine doodler," she said. "But Chanel is not going to like this at all—it's exceedingly pink."

CHAPTER TWO

"Pink is the navy blue of India."

—Diana Vreeland

The suit was not actually pink, but raspberry. That was what Coco Chanel had named the color, and so the Wife had taken to calling it that too. Chez Ninon, however, referred to it as "pink." Pink. Pink.

That vexed Chanel. Everything about their request vexed Chanel, especially the Wife's tinkering. Now they want it licensed as if it is original.

It was late in the day when the telegram arrived in Paris at the offices of 31 rue Cambon. The designer was six floors up, in her private atelier, on her knees with her small gold scissors hanging around her neck on a black velvet ribbon. She was basting a length of wool crepe onto a malnourished model. Her assistant, who was dressed in far too much black cashmere for such a warm day in such a warm room, read the telegram from Chez Ninon to Chanel again. Chanel sighed. She shook her head but said nothing.

"Raise your arms," Chanel said to the model. "Good. Lower your arms. Good. And again?"

The workroom walls were banks of mirrors so that Chanel could watch the way the black wool responded to movement and how it looked in the light. The model had been flapping her arms up and down for at least an hour, maybe more. Chanel was trying to get the armhole of the dress absolutely perfect.

"And again?"

The model was on the verge of tears.

Seventy-eight years old and still working, Chanel seemed relevant and ancient at the same time. She was dressed as she often was—in a hat and suit. The hat was black and Spanish, inspired by the cowboys of Seville. Its crown looked like a layer of a cake. The suit she was wearing, which she wore nearly every day, had lost its buttons and was held together with safety pins. It was thinning under the arms, but she loved it. Made from her own signature fabric—number H1804, from Linton Tweeds—it was an ecru wool-and-mohair blend. It appeared as if it were dyed two slightly different shades of the same color, but it was not. It was like a magic trick. The yarns took the color differently, and so the mohair seemed to be a darker shade of white than the virgin wool, giving the suit a white-on-white checkered look. It was that sort of subtlety that Chanel adored. She was wearing pearls, as always. There were so many ropes wrapped around her neck, they seemed to elongate it, making her look a bit like an ostrich.

The dress was driving Chanel mad. "And once more," she said to the model. The girl raised her trembling arms over her head again. The room was overheated. Chanel's assistant looked appropriately bored as he stared at himself in the banks of mirrors. He wore a gold

pince-nez, which set off the sharp angles of his face but served no practical use. No matter how warm he was, he would have to stand there, sweating, waiting for Mademoiselle's response—no matter how long it took. The man held the telegram with two fingers, away from his body, as if the paper were dripping wet.

The fitter, who was also dressed completely in black, handed Chanel pin after pin. He too was sweating and pale. Chanel didn't seem to notice anyone's discomfort. She was always cold, so the heat of the room suited her. The enormous length of black wool overwhelmed the model, blended with her black hair, and served as an alarming counterpoint to her shocking green eyes. Chanel draped the heavy wool around the girl's frail body and over her head, creating a monklike cowl. The wool intensified the heat of the room, but no one offered the pale model a glass of water or a moment to collect herself. The cowl would not sit properly, and the armholes still would just not lie flat. Chanel's hands shook slightly as she reset the pins again.

"Once more. Arms straight up. Hold."

The dress was meant to be that year's Little Black Dress—the "LBD," as Chanel called it, as everyone had called it since 1926, when Chanel declared that black should not be for clerics, maids, and nuns alone. But after dozens of fittings over the course of four days, the dress was still far from complete.

Chanel was intent on fixing the armhole, no matter how long it took. With the gold scissors hanging around her neck, she snipped away at the basting she had just laid in.

"The telegram. Once more," she said to her assistant. The man read in a neutral voice: URGENT NEED OF LICENSE FOR MAISON BLANCHE STOP EXACT LINE BY LINE REPLICA OF LIFE MAGAZINE SUIT

STOP PINK STOP SEND TOILE STOP NEED PINK FABRIC AND FINDINGS STOP MUST BE PINK STOP HOW MUCH STOP.

To which Chanel said, "Stop."

She was usually quite flattered when her work was copied. Chanel reveled in the irony when suits she'd designed for champagne lunches at La Grenouille were mass-produced for office girls who ate from brown bags in badly lit rooms. However, because of politics, always politics, this "Chanel" was to be American made, a licensed "line-by-line" using Chanel's own fabric and trim. In pink. It was to be pink. Pink. Pink. Pink. Not raspberry, as the color was actually named.

"These people are annoying," she told her assistant. The man, in his ironic pince-nez, nodded.

Chanel had never worked with the Ladies before, but she certainly knew them. She was still angry that Chez Ninon told everyone that their copies of her clothes were better than the Chanel originals. They were total fakes, never authorized, but they made this claim to all of her best customers. "Their clients in New York receive four fittings and Chez Ninon thinks that makes them superior. We only need one; we do it properly the first time."

This suit was not just a personal favorite of Chanel's, but groundbreaking. The *Life* photo spread honored it as a "crisply tailored figure-fitting shape." And yet, it was forgiving. You could be fat as a fig and still look wonderful. The double pockets on each side drew the eye in and made the jacket look fitted, although it was not. It was modern and timeless.

One can always design fashion, but to design beauty is another thing entirely. Chanel had closed her shops in 1939 and had been in retirement for years; the rumors of her collusion with the Nazis

were difficult for her public to understand. But now, with this suit, Chanel had returned. She was forgiven. She was relevant again. Revered. With this suit, she could not be denied her place in history.

Chanel walked around the model. Looking. Measuring. Considering. She was like a scientist at work.

"Why do these Americans always want to know how much?" she said. The model held her arms steady over her head, but the heat was quickly becoming too much for her. Chanel pulled at the fabric hard. The girl tried to stay steady, but she leaned forward a bit. Chanel roughly moved her back into place.

The model moved her head slightly, as if to attempt to straighten her spine.

"Am I boring you?" Chanel said.

"No, mademoiselle."

"Good. That's good to know. Straighten up."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Yes?"

"Oui."

"*Oui.* Very good." Chanel was not being unkind but instructive. "French is the language of diplomats. You will never be in demand if you do not learn it properly. Now put your hands down—but slowly."

"Merci."

"And now put them up again. Slowly. And down again. And again."

Despite her great discomfort, the model never showed any emotion. She stared straight ahead. The assistant adjusted his pince-nez glasses—he did that quite frequently, as if to draw attention to

them—and then cleared his throat. "Mademoiselle, what should our telegram say in return?"

Chanel closed her eyes for a moment, as if to shift her thoughts. Then lit a cigarette. The Wife was a very good customer, and so very lovely, but things had become ridiculous after the election. For a time, Chanel went along with the ruse of selling dresses to the Wife's sister for a "friend's cousin," some unnamed "Sicilian noblewoman" who had the same exact build as the First Lady—a five-foot-eight boy's body with broad shoulders, big hands, and size 10 feet. The two also had the same taste. "We must pretend her husband is the president of France," the sister would say.

Of France?

It was positively insulting. Once the clothes were finished, they were sent by special diplomatic courier to Washington—as were frequent shipments of Chanel No. 5. Not only the parfum, with its rich bourbon vanilla and bougainvillea overtones, but also the eau de parfum, with its forward notes of may rose and ylang-ylang, and even the eau de toilette, which was heavy with sandalwood. The supposed Sicilian noblewoman bought Chanel No. 5 in all its variations and complications for morning, noon, and evening—and the bill was mailed to the First Lady's father-in-law in Hyannis Port. It was laughable, at best.

This request from Chez Ninon for a muslin toile, a test garment, was tiresome. While it was not unusual to create line-by-line replicas of designs—they were even regulated by the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture et du Prêt-à-Porter as a way to appease the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union—Chanel was always reluctant. To make a copy was one thing—it would always be inferior—but to give the ability to replicate exactly her work,

her vision, and her art was completely another. Why should she allow another name to be put on her work? She'd resigned from the Chambre Syndicale in 1957. They had no jurisdiction over her. She could do what she wanted, and she simply did not want to.

Although it was interesting that the request did not come from Oleg Cassini, who was now ordained her official "dressmaker," as he had said. *That is good,* Chanel thought. *Maybe there is a falling-out.*

Everyone was shocked when the editor at *Harper's Bazaar,* Mrs. Vreeland, championed Cassini to the First Lady. Why Vreeland promoted a man with such a playboy reputation was beyond understanding. His first press conference was held in New York and made headlines. At the Pierre Hotel, with a cocktail in hand and a crooked, debonair smirk, he announced that there would be two press showings a year featuring the First Lady's wardrobe, but the press would not be invited. The events would be held exclusively for the New York Couture Group, the garment manufacturers in the city.

"Press knows nothing about fashion," he announced. Everyone gasped.

His cologne was overwhelming, too.

It was the first, and also the last, press conference Mr. Cassini ever gave. How could the First Lady, a woman who was such a devotee of Chanel and French couture and, more important, the chemise—which Cassini openly ridiculed in a fashion show by making a version in burlap and having the model litter the runway with potatoes—how could this particular woman have chosen such a man as her designer?

Inexplicable. A falling-out would be very good, indeed.

"We are done," Chanel said to the model, and then smiled, charmingly. "See you tomorrow, then?"

"*Oui,* mademoiselle. *Merci.*"

"Good."

"The telegram?" the assistant asked again. "And what shall I answer, mademoiselle?"

"I am going home to think."

Hôtel Ritz had been Chanel's home on and off for decades, since the beginning of World War II. It was right across the alley from her shop. Her room was unlike any other. It was not opulent but small and tucked out of the way, in the attic. It was just a bed with white sheets in a room with white walls. The only decoration was a spray of wheat, which her father once told her was a talisman that would bring her luck. The room was profoundly quiet, much like the convent school where she spent her youth. It was a good place to think.

Chanel washed her hands and face with lye soap; she hated the scent of skin. She lit another cigarette and went out onto the rooftop with a glass of red wine and looked out over Paris. From that height, the city seemed to be made of buttercream—but yellowed and dusty, as if sculpted for a cake that would not be eaten, just remembered in one's dreams. It was no longer the city of her youth. There were so many people; there was so much noise.

"Americans," she sighed.

When the moon rose pink over Paris—at least, that was the way the Ladies would later tell the story—Chanel finally decided that they could have the suit. However, if this particular Chanel was to go to America, to be made by American hands, there would have

to be restrictions and agreements set in place. Especially if Cassini was to be anywhere near it. The man's aesthetic was vulgar, or, as he called it, "sexy": all high slits, low necklines, and high drama. No subtlety. No sensuousness.

As for the question of how much, Chanel wrote down a very large figure, indeed.

When Chanel's telegram arrived the next day, Sophie showed the ransom note, as she called it, to Nona, and they laughed. Their reply went out an hour later: *Sharpen your pencil and recalculate.*

While Chanel, the person, was not easily copied, the same could not be said for the suit. It was a very simple design. The finished product might not have all the Chanel touches, nor the exact fit or feel, but it would be similar and could be made in half the time and at a fraction of the cost. A copy of the blouse alone would cost only $3 to make, but the Ladies could charge $300 for it—and everyone would be happy to pay. Purchasing the toile and license was ridiculous and impractical, but Maison Blanche insisted. Chez Ninon would also be forced to pay Chanel for the right to use the material, the signature gold chain that would be sewn into the hem to help the jacket hang properly, and the gold "CC" buttons. The buttons alone would be $250.

Chez Ninon usually charged $3,500 for one of their "Chanel" suits, which were made from similar-looking fabric and buttons but run off on machines with a very limited amount of hand finishing. Unfortunately, Maison Blanche had made it quite clear that the entire suit couldn't cost more than $1,000, preferably $850 or less. There wasn't even a way to take a shortcut or two. The pink suit was to be a line-by-line copy and so must be entirely sewn by hand. It would be impossible to make a profit or break even—perhaps that

was why Maison Blanche did not ask Cassini—but the Ladies could not turn it down. To dress a socialite was one thing, but to dress that same socialite when she became the First Lady was an honor they could not easily pass up.

Miss Nona marked the suit in on the production schedule.

"That's just eight weeks to delivery," Sophie said.

"Chanel will give it up in the end," Miss Nona said, but she didn't sound sure.

When a week passed without a telegram or phone call, without any response at all, Miss Nona's confidence waned. She began to wonder if asking for a discount from an icon might be perceived as—she couldn't think of the right word.

"Unseemly?" Sophie said. "Insulting?"

Miss Nona was hoping for "amusing."

She knew that this could be a very expensive miscalculation. Miss Sophie had already ordered the fabric from Chanel's supplier Linton Tweeds, in Cumbria—the price of the yardage nearly made her heart stop. They should have waited for Chanel to agree. They couldn't use the fabric at all without her consent, but they were running out of time. The suit was to be worn the first week in November, just seven weeks away. The President was planning a family weekend. It would be the first time they would visit Camp David—and there was a very good chance that it would be the last. The Wife had already rented a place in the country near Washington, where she kept horses. It was quite clear to the Ladies that the Wife needed this pink suit to convey a strong sense of cheerful fem-

ininity—and an unflagging reasonable nature—so that when the First Lady announced that this camp of David was too backwater, she would be photographed looking reasonable.

Miss Nona couldn't wait any longer. "I'm going to call Chanel."

"Paris? It's six dollars a minute," Sophie said.

Nona had the call put through anyway. Each ring sounded like the rattling of tin cans.

Then finally a voice: *"Allo, oui?"* It sounded so very far away.

"For Mademoiselle Chanel. Chez Ninon," the overseas operator said.

"Non."

"Non?" Miss Nona couldn't believe it. "Ask them if I can leave a message. *Pouvez-vous prendre un message?*"

"Non."

The line went dead.