

"I thoroughly enjoyed
this...utterly charming
and sigh-worthy."

—JOSIE SILVER,
author of *One
Day in December*



the
second chance
boutique

a novel

LOUISA LEAMAN



reading group guide

1. The Colt family has a toxic, hidden history that Rafael tries to outrun. How would you feel if you learned that your family had a dark past? Would you react similarly to Raf? Would you react differently?
2. How would you characterize Janey's personality? Despite her mistakes, do you like her?
3. Flapper costumes, French couture gowns, kaftans, and princess dresses—the Whispering Dress boutique has them all. What kind of dress do you think Fran would recommend for you? Why?
4. Before meeting and falling in love, both Rafael and Fran drown themselves in their work to forget their loneliness. Have you ever worked especially hard to avoid dealing with your feelings? Did it help?
5. Discuss the friendship between Mick and Fran. Would you want to be friends with them?

6. Rafael gets angry with Fran when she embarrasses him at the gala. Do you think his anger is entirely justified? Discuss the importance of maintaining an image in the public eye. Does it matter to you?
7. Fran has the uncanny ability to see into the past of vintage dresses. Do you think this is magic or imagination?
8. Rafael criticizes Fran for her romanticism, claiming she can't hide in the idealized past. To what extent do you think her imaginative nature is good for her? In what ways is it detrimental?
9. From the very beginning, we know that Rafael can be short-tempered and rude. Do you think this behavior is reasonable? Discuss why he acts this way. What factors influence his behavior?
10. Mimi's views on marriage are pragmatic—her marriage won't be a passionate one, but it will allow her to get a visa and have a child. Do you think she'll be happy with this arrangement? Do you think that Fran's influences have changed her?
11. When she goes to check up on her past clients, Fran learns that Rachel is still happily married and that Melissa is divorced but content. Discuss these two kinds of happiness. What kind of joy can be found in a healthy marriage? What kind of joy can be found outside of marriage? In what ways are each important?

12. In the end, Fran chooses not to get married in the Alessandra Colt dress and sews her own gown. Did this choice surprise you? Why? Put yourself in Fran's shoes. Would you have made the same decision?

a conversation with the author

This book delves into the fashion world. Can you talk a little bit about your research for the story?

I write content for the Victoria and Albert Museum, the world's leading museum of art and design. The first subject assigned to me was their collection of bridal wear. It was a pinch-me-now moment, being paid to contemplate exquisite, historic wedding dresses. As I got deeper into my research, I realized it wasn't just the dresses that fascinated me, but the personal stories behind them. From demure to ultimate glamour, from the courtesan's sack-back gown to the ever-changing Victorian silhouette, from the thirties to the sixties to the nineties, these dresses were as varied in character as the women who wore them—and it struck me that the spirit of these women seemed very much present, embodied in the fabric and stitches. All my life I've loved clothes but have little experience of making or repairing them, so while I was working on the book, I asked a talented costumer friend for tips and advice on sewing jargon. I also became slightly addicted to vintage clothing websites and blogs!

What does your creative process look like?

It always starts with thinking and daydreaming (which can take weeks, months, years even). I can sense when a “good” idea is emerging—it just keeps blooming in my mind and won’t stay quiet. Once I’ve committed to developing an idea, I scribble in notebooks and on big sheets of paper, thrashing out character, theme, and plot ideas. I then pull all of this into something more refined on my laptop (usually in the form of a plot overview) and then, as quickly as I can, I get a messy first draft down. I don’t care about finesse at this stage—I just like having words to sculpt. It’s a bit like making an oil painting: a blank canvas is daunting, so just cover the whole thing in paint and build from there. I see a lot of parallels between writing and painting. You start with something raw and loose, then layer after layer, edit after edit, the clarity emerges. I’d say my process is roughly 30 percent writing, 70 percent editing. I love to hone and sharpen and see the power of the story come through. I listen to music when I write, often the same song on repeat to set the mood. Fran and Raf have their own theme songs, and I have playlists called *In the Wedding Shop*, *Special Dress Moment*, and *Encouraging Love*!

In the book, Fran matches each bride with the perfect dress to teach them an important lesson about happiness. What dress would she assign you, and why?

I love the glamour and sophistication of the thirties, but I think the dress I truly identify with is the good old cotton farm-girl frock. Its down-to-earth honesty makes sense to me. Life’s drama has

taught me the value of simple, everyday pleasures: a good cup of coffee, the roses in my garden, that tingly feeling when a sentence reads well. I'm happiest hanging out with my family, being creative and outdoors. To me, time matters more than stuff, and I think the Sarah-Anne Bootle dress reflects this. That said...if Fran could find me a dress that once belonged to a talented pastry chef, that would be marvelous! I love cake, but I'm a terrible baker!

The idea of a wealthy, corrupt family with a charitable foundation is an ironic one. What inspired you to write the Colt family?

I had a conversation about the nature of altruism with my sister, who is a charity fundraising director in the UK, and it got the cogs whirring. The desire to “give” isn't as straightforward as we might assume. There are many different factors and motivations underlying it, such as having personal experience of an issue or wanting to improve public image. I felt this would make an interesting background for my male protagonist. I was intrigued by the idea of a grand family with a glowing reputation who are hiding all kinds of malfunction. The foundation is their mask, but it's one that does a lot of good, so no one challenges it. For Raf, however, this deception of altruism is complicated. He's had high-status responsibility foisted upon him. He wants to do the right thing with it but is shadowed by his family demons.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

As a child, I loved the Finnish author Tove Jansson, who wrote the Moomin books—so much so that I named my daughter after her! I love reading, but I have precious little time to do it, so my

policy is to take a chance on whatever comes along. This way, I get plenty of variety, from comedy romance to creepy thrillers to literary epics. I've always had a thing for twentieth-century writers like J. D. Salinger, Daphne du Maurier, W. Somerset Maugham, and Evelyn Waugh. That's true escapism for me. I love reading books about periods of history that were written "at the time," the prose oozing old-style elegance. Jane Austen's another one.

Fran values clothes with a history. What is your stance on vintage versus modern clothing?

Vintage all the way. For day-to-day wear, I mostly buy modern, practical clothes (mum of three, lots of running around) and wear them until they fall apart, but for special occasions, I wear vintage. I love floaty, hippyish things from the seventies and regularly raid my mother's collection of original Biba dresses. They're so beautifully designed and cut, it's impossible not to feel wonderful in them. I love the sense of story in vintage clothes—their possible pasts. You can't always know them, but it's fun to imagine. I think vintage clothing, and secondhand clothing in general, has importance for many reasons: story, quality, style, and ethics. The ethical issue is pressing. The current appetite for cheap, disposable new fashion comes at a huge cost to society and the environment.

Fran's visions bring a touch of magical realism to this book. What made you decide to bring magic into the story?

Because I could! Or, in other words, because the world of fiction can go places that reality can't and this excites me. This is where my

imagination can do cartwheels. In its earliest incarnation, I imagined *The Second Chance Boutique* to be like a fashion-based *Quantum Leap* (an old time-travel TV show). Fran was literally going to travel in time to plunder the dresses of history and bring them into the present, but as the writing evolved, I found myself instinctively pulling back, losing the heavy sci-fi element, and finding a subtle but delectable thread of “time-sensing” within Fran’s talent. I do think old things have a certain kind of energy within them, but is this magic or sentimentality? The dreamer in me thinks it’s a bit of both.

You work for the Victoria and Albert Museum, researching and writing about archived gowns. Why were you drawn to this kind of work?

I’m creative to the core. I’ve always loved clothes. I wanted to be a fashion designer when I was younger, but equally I loved art and writing. At one point, I thought I was destined to become a portrait painter and secured a place at art school, but then I worried I’d miss writing. I traveled and did a bit of soul-searching, then eventually, I decided to combine interests and study art history. I spent a lot of time hanging around the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Art Library, then became distracted by living the rest of my life, so it was lovely when, years later, the opportunity to write for the museum came along. I immediately felt at home. The museum is known for its fashion and textiles, but I don’t just write about gowns. I’ve covered all kinds of objects and design eras, from art deco to David Bowie memorabilia. There is a secret part of me that still wonders whether I should have

become a portrait painter, but hopefully one day I'll have some spare time to explore this!

You and Fran share a love of vintage clothing. Are there other parallels between you and your protagonist?

I think we both have a sense of fun and curiosity. We're both optimists and we're both intuitive. I'm interested in psychology, and like Fran, I'm drawn to helping people. Also like Fran, I've made the mistake of focusing too much attention on others while ignoring my own problems. Fran throws herself into finding perfect dresses for other brides, while her own fateful dress lurks in the back of a closet, barely looked at but quietly scaring her away from love. I became happier when I learned not just to listen but to talk, to admit my troubles and let people in. And that's the journey I sent Fran on. She has to confront her fears and insecurities and let Raf in. So, in other words, yes, I think Fran's a little bit of me—but with better sewing skills!

Rafael, Fran, Janey, Mick, and even Mimi grow in their own ways. Did these characters teach you anything about love and happiness?

I think Mick says it all when he tells Fran "You have to show yourself, really show yourself." Growth to me is about developing self-awareness. If you know and accept yourself—not just the veneer of you, but the inner you, warts and all—then you're in a much stronger position to have an honest, healthy relationship with another person. Fran tries to achieve this for others through her dresses, but ultimately,

she's burying her own head in the sand. She can only move on in her relationship with Raf when she faces her hidden hurt. Likewise for Raf, he is freed by confronting his family demons. Crucially, the Alessandra Colt dress helps them both do this. As for Mimi, well, she's one of a kind, but I think she's quite comfortable in her cold-blooded, pragmatic skin. I like that the thirties dress gets her to loosen up a bit though—the glamour of backless full-length satin is potent.

You're from just outside of London. Did you choose to set the story in London for any significant reason?

If I jump on public transport, I'm only a twenty-five minute ride from the center. It's my city. I love it. I know it. The east, where Fran has her shop, is so vibrant. There are lots of vintage clothing stores and markets in the area, so it was fun to shop—I mean research! I wanted my characters to be based in London, with all its frenzy, excitement, and action, but equally, I wanted them to have an escape, somewhere they could be quiet and reflective. We all need a different pace from time to time. Their escape, Dryad's Hall, where Fran finds the dress, is based on an actual house near where I live in Epping Forest. The house was knocked down a few years ago and replaced with something modern. It broke my heart to see such an extraordinary old building, with so much history, suddenly disappear. I guess that got me thinking about the life and stories that inhabit old things.

What do you hope readers will take away from this story?

I hope readers will feel assured that inner demons—whether they are doubts, fears, insecurities, or emotional scars—don't have to

be a barrier to happiness. I also hope that readers might think a little more about the clothes they wear each day. And if a wedding is on the cards, that they'll think of Fran and go vintage!