

Chapter One

The Notice

Journal entry:

O glory be, awake, awake,
from slumber filled with bits and bursts.
Awake, awake the conscious mind,
to embrace the day a newborn babe.
#Gratitude

On this ordinary day, we find Gabby Bernstein going about her daily ordinary chores. A lass of modest means, she hummed as she tidied up her small studio apartment. Although bereft of material accoutrements typical of a twenty-something New Yorker, she didn't dwell on it. Rather, she chose to focus on being grateful for all the kindnesses bestowed upon her by the universe and the miracle of life with the richness and diversity of the flora and fauna that blessed this planet. She was so attuned to the preciousness and beauty of all living creatures that she never was inclined to harm even the smallest insect preferring to capture it and send it out her window to climb down the fire escape or fly away. But most especially, she was grateful for her life, which she never took for granted. In fact, at this very moment, she paused to acknowledge her joy of just being alive and to mark her calendar with the #gratitude entry, giving thanks for each and every day she had her wits and her health.

As she went about her light chores, an unexpected random play on her music app added a spark to her usual sense of wonder and bliss. A coincidental gift from the cosmos of a cherished performance of Luciano Pavarotti singing the aria Addio, fiorito asil from Madama Butterfly, a captivately wistful melody that was one of her personal favorites. She gleefully acknowledged this gift and said a silent "thank you." To her surprise and again serendipitously, immediately after the Puccini came the Adagio in G minor by Tomaso Albinoni, another favorite. Humming along with these glorious harmonics she dusted and tidied while luxuriating in the lush sounds filling her apartment. When first stumbling upon these works in her music app, she had an immediate connection to their beauty created by composers from so long ago.

Although these sorrowful melodies were contrary to her normal and purposeful joyful optimism, she was attracted to their wistfulness but only on a superficial level. She chose instead to think of them as a soundtrack of the human spirit, her particular spirit to shoulder on, no matter what. Because she greeted each day with wonder, Gabby reveled in all of the senses, normal and paranormal (intentionally sharpened through meditation) that made knowing the world around her possible. These senses are what she believed made her life experiences vibrant and full of awe. Through practiced mindfulness, the magical state of being alive became a palpable feeling of bliss. Happiness, to her, was a sentient choice. Her heightened awareness brought into focus her five senses that we all have but often go unnoticed, taken for granted, and ignored. Habitually and purposely, she would lasso these five senses into her consciousness and experience them intensely.

The starting point for being consciously aware would be random. Today, she started with touch, feeling with her fingers the softness of her cotton blouse, then she took notice of the taste of the sweet sucking candy in her mouth, taking a deep breath, she enjoyed the scent of her potted begonia offset by the stale odor of her recently burnt toast. The gift of sight, along with the ability to hear sounds, she found to be the most miraculous and celebratory. Right now, she could feel joy at being able to see the world that beckoned outside her apartment window. A glorious azure sky was dotted with cotton-candy clouds floating gently with the light breeze. The tumultuous New York city street below her apartment building was filled with dog walkers, joggers, and baby carriages being pushed by young moms or nannies.

In addition to the normal activity on this street, she could see the exploding richness of spring bringing vibrant shades of green to the orderly pattern of planted trees. Here and there, the odd yellow flower peeked among the unstoppable weeds growing in the tree beds as if mirroring the rare shiny clean car parked among the dusty compacts and SUVs. The magic of seeing all this while being able to hear this rapturous music was nothing short of remarkable. Life, specifically her life, was a gift for which she never stopped being grateful and for which she paid poetic reverence in her daily journal.

To the uninformed masses, to her friends and acquaintances, this childlike joy and optimism seemed misplaced given Gabby's daily challenges. Despite that, this was how she embraced her existence, a conscious decision to be thankful above all else. But that is not to say, she was not tested. Sorely tested, of which, she was painfully aware. Today, was perhaps exceptional bringing an abundance of tests. Today, her landlord had pasted a *Quit Notice* on her door right after her new puppy, Eliza Doolittle, had taken a poo on her brand-new white area rug just as she had laid it on the floor. Today, first thing this morning, in fact, her phone had pinged with a terse break-up text from her recent, short-lived boyfriend. "Sorry, not feeling it anymore," was all he wrote.

But Gabby would not be cowered, would not be brought down. She beat back the always near-at-hand negative energy by whispering her mantra, "Things could be worse." The dark forces that carried incurable disease, mental illness, being a victim of a crime, and poverty had been kept at bay. The power of positive energy in which she cocooned herself was strong enough, she believed, to thwart the negative energies that surrounded us all. And with this thought, after her daily acknowledgment that she loved her life, was the realization that her stomach flu had abated, and she could eat more than the toast that always burned in her cheap toaster. Things could be worse. There was great comfort in that thought. Positive thoughts, positive results.

Gabby's silver-lining attitude was an art form cultivated by years of watching her mother disintegrate after her father fled the household for another woman. She had just turned the vulnerable age of twelve when her father, who had stayed away for long periods of time all through her childhood, made his final move to his native Quebec and disappeared from her life. The only remnant in the household of his French-Canadian heritage was her name. Shortening it from Gabrielle to Gabby was, at best, a weak protest to sever this cultural connection to him. She could not speak or understand French and to some degree was glad her father never bothered to teach her. The sound of French or French accents reminded her of her loss and sadness would overcome her whenever she heard it spoken in movies or on TV. So, she tried to avoid any exposure to hearing that language whenever she could.

After her father left, Gabby's mother spent her remaining years staring out the living room window hoping to see her husband's car turning into the driveway. In that armchair, becoming increasingly worn, shabby, and used up like the woman herself, Gabby's mother sat all day, each and every day, seeing the world through dazed and vacant eyes. Only getting up for bodily functions or minimal nourishment, Mildred Bernstein wasted away while wasting her life.

With the help of neighbors in the Midwood section of Brooklyn who were her friends' parents, Gabby wasn't placed in a foster home because they engineered a charade of her being looked after. Since no one had seen her mother, it was easy to enlist a bogus parent for conferences, have report cards signed, and the like. Gabby went on to finish middle and high school, a pitifully neglected child with minimal friends due to her need for secrecy. She spent these formative years living under the constant fear of being discovered and taken away. She escaped into books, spending hours in the library. Books transported her from her lonely world. She loved spending hours browsing through the shelves and just being there. She especially liked books that took her to foreign places and those that brought history to life with stories based on real people.

Despite her aversion to hearing anything French, and also a complete mystery that would someday be revealed, she contrarily was intrigued by the French Revolution being oddly attracted to studying that period in history. She read all she could on Robespierre, Marie Antoinette, Guillotines, and the Bastille

prison. Maybe because of all the chaos and death that the French populace endured? A punishment deserved? Because of her keen interest to learn all she could about that era her nightly dreams were filled with scenes of herself in fancy dress and enduring the hardships of those times. Reliving the Reign of Terror became an obsession she could not explain but provided her an escape from an isolated and boring existence. Besides books on the French Revolution, she also read all the classics and became engrossed with the strong and powerful goddess figures of Ancient Egypt and Greek and Roman mythology. She explored Jung and far-Eastern gurus to learn about meditation and the seeds of her shift in interpreting her personal reality were sown.

On the day of her high school graduation, her mother's disintegration became more than just an emotional and physical decay but the culmination of a pitiful life. When Gabby arrived home with her diploma in hand, she did not receive the welcoming excitement for which she had hoped but did not expect. Instead, the customary disappointment of silence was what greeted her when she called out her accomplishment. Her mother's normal unresponsiveness did not alert Gabby that something was amiss and it had taken several hours before she realized what had actually happened. As she had been for these past six years, Mildred Bernstein was sitting upright in her living-room chair with her eyes wide open facing the window. But this time something was different. Gravely different.

When Gabby decided after her initial disappointment to finally show her the diploma, she discovered the awful truth. Her mother's unblinking eyes were flat and fixed. Her skin grey and icy to the touch. She was dead. Stone-cold dead. Finding her mother thus, shocked Gabby but did not surprise her. This fear of discovering that her mother had passed away had always been tucked away in the recesses of her mind and many times she had felt for her pulse while her mother slept. This miserable woman's retreat from life had reached its ultimate climax and conclusion. A life thrown away. The coroner's report said she had died from starvation. But Gabby knew it was from a broken heart.

The shock of seeing the skeletal form of her mother as she was being carried away by the paramedics became indelibly sealed in Gabby's psyche. Vowing to never be like her, Gabby decided that happiness is a choice. The mind can interpret reality in all sorts of ways. Why focus on the negative when there's always a positive alternative? Why succumb to feelings of depression and rejection that had consumed her mother when you can fill your heart with joy? Let others give those feelings the light of day. In her world, they would have no traction. Now, here she was in her tiny apartment many years forward from that life-changing discovery choosing to be optimistic by ignoring the pull of fear or robust anger. So, in her customarily buoyant mood, she took care of the necessities that waited to be crossed off the to-do list for that day.

First things first, Eliza Doolittle needed to be walked so her training was reinforced, a book was due at the library where she worked, and the milk carton was empty. She would resolve her living arrangements later. Much later if she could stall the eviction. Things could be worse. Today, rays of sunshine had just burst through the clouds and pierced through her windows after several days of torrential downpours on city streets that created hazardous, swiftly flowing streams in the gutters and crosswalks. The racing water carried the odd plastic bag, soaked newspaper bits, and cracked Styrofoam cups. But, also among the garbage were edible scraps of half-eaten knishes, soft pretzels pieces, and pizza crusts. These fragments of New York City fare were swept into the sewers by the rushing stream, creating a party atmosphere for the hordes of rats dwelling in the tunnels below. A veritable rat-infested soggy food festival. Their joy became part of the collective positive vibe electrifying the now sun-drenched urban landscape. Rainbows and glistening cleansed sidewalks greeted the happy pedestrian.

Into this firmament of exultation, Gabby emerged from her third-floor walk-up with Eliza Doolittle in tow, a fluffy white ball of energy and tail-wagging jubilation. The little pup immediately curried the favor of passersby, who would stop and make sweet baby sounds or ruffle her head. Walks with this adorable four-legged delight connected Gabby, in a real sense, to the rest of humanity and became her drug of choice to enhance her interaction with society. In good weather and bad, Gabby lived for these

walks each of which brought their own stories of new acquaintances and adventures. Needless to say, the excitement of the unexpected was the catalyst for these outings and they usually lasted longer than planned.

As she embraced this most welcome sunshine while absorbing the positive sub-atomic particles colliding with her skin, she decided to walk to the corner coffee shop where Leonard, the barista, always had a stash of dog biscuits for little Doo. The ever curious and friendly little Lhasa Apso mix enhanced Gabby's life and personal growth in more ways than she could have imagined. No one had chatted her up at this coffee shop before little Doo came along. Now, she was always bombarded with waves of "hello" or casual conversation whenever she entered. She chose the name, Eliza Doolittle because it was the perfect name for the disheveled, scrawny, and matted-down rescue dog who had the potential for being more. The recognition of being kindred spirits between Gabby and this downtrodden creature was immediate and life-affirming.

Inspired by a TV commercial asking for donations and adoptions by showing needy animals begging for love and a home had broken Gabby's heart. Right on the spot, she decided that as soon as she could, she would adopt a rescue dog from the nearby shelter. The poor little sweethearts. As luck would have it, she got a nudge from the cosmos sooner than expected. Purposeful synchronous events frequently happened in Gabby's life and such a coincidence occurred within hours of her seeing the soulful eyes of those wretched love-seeking creatures on TV. Later that day, when she went to get her mail, a flier had been shoved into her mailbox announcing that adoptions were open that very afternoon at the shelter just across the street. Indeed, the happenstance of receiving that flier on that particular day was not taken lightly by Gabby. She had great respect for the influence of cosmic forces in her life and paid attention to coincidences believing them to be messages not to be ignored. Before she fully realized what she was doing, Gabby found herself wandering over to the shelter. I'll just look around.

As she entered, she immediately felt a psychic pull to a cage toward the rear of the room and excitedly went over to investigate. There she was, a little disheveled mutt, her tiny face turned upward, her eyes pleading, her tail wagging. The connection was immediate and sustaining. Done. It was her! The fulfillment of the day's purpose. Gabby carried the scraggly cutie in her large purse while the puppy excitedly scoped out the territory from her place of safety.

And little Doo, like her namesake, cleaned up good. This floor mop with feet was transformed by some soap and water from a mangy-looking mongrel into an adorable ball of fluff making happy barking sounds as she ran around the apartment to dry off proving to Gabby, she had chosen the perfect name. Gabby's oft-repeated explanation for choosing this name became an icebreaker to begin interactions in the corner coffee shop and today on her walk with Doo was no different. Except for today though, the shop was also abuzz with the impending condominium project.

Everyone was impacted, even this coffee shop would now have to close. Gabby at least was not alone in this situation but that gave her no solace. Her cherished 18th Street apartment in Chelsea was on the chopping block and the reason for the Quit Notice. A luxury condo complex would take up the entire city block replacing all the neighborhood businesses. Stores like the mom-and-pop grocery with apartments above like Gabby's would be demolished. The lobby level of the luxury condo building would be rented to upscale street access shops and services replacing a dry cleaner, a kosher deli, a pizza parlor, a convenience store as well as the grocery and this coffee shop. Local businesses could not afford the hike in rent.

A hot yoga studio and specialty boutiques selling designer salt, designer olive oil, and an oxygen bar were slated to be some of the new businesses appealing to a yuppie clientele. Because she didn't read the Quit Notice carefully, Gabby now found out she had 10 days to find a new place before the wrecking crew came. Everyone murmured in unison that another rent-controlled building bites the dust bringing all of NYC closer to being an enclave just for the wealthy elites. The camaraderie of the group hardened but for a fleeting moment given their shared eviction problem. A brochure had been put in everyone's

mailbox fishing for prospective buyers for the 100 plus available units. A laughable exercise demonstrating just how out of touch the developers were with the economic situation of the tenants they were evicting.

Leaving this neighborhood saddened her but in her normalized optimism, she expected that finding another rent-controlled apartment or affordable studio would not be a problem. Continuing her upbeat approach to the challenges in her life, she looked forward to the possibility of making new friends with this move. Her blind faith in positive outcomes propelled her optimism. *Things could be worse.* Despite the fact the inner Gabby was a bouncing free spirit of jubilant thoughts and emotions, her outward appearance, contrarily, was quite somber. Although she had promised herself never to be like her mother, her dour face and serious demeanor were the mirror image of her mother's woeful countenance.

Poor Gabby would practice in front of the mirror to look more cheerful, but it could never be sustained or appear natural. Her attempts at walking about smiling only made her look deranged and her inner circle of friends and acquaintances would ask if something were wrong. So, she gave up the pretext and accepted the disconnect. But it took its toll. Her dates never felt she was enjoying her dinner, the movie selection, or their company. It was rough sustaining her inner optimism when everyone thought you a pessimist, or worse, just an angry and frustrated singleton. It was especially hard when dealing with the public where she worked. To compensate, she perfected a soft tone of voice that created a calming energy. Carrying around Little Doo definitely helped.

Given the devastating news about the development project and Gabby's habitually, frowning face, the crowd at the coffee shop attempted to cheer her up. "No, it's all right," she said. "I'm ok. I'm fine, really, I am. Of course, this situation is not welcome. I will miss this shop terribly and all of you and being able to walk to work, but I know things could be worse." A collective "awww" cycled through the crowd and they spontaneously threw their arms around her in a group hug to cheer her up while whispering to Doo how they all were heartbroken. "Let's keep in touch and find another meeting place," they each said as they made their way to the exit. Gabby gave a forced smile as she waved to everyone when it was her turn to leave but that seemed to make it worse and tears flowed freely among the remaining group.

"Howdy, Gabrielle," said Walter the head librarian as she walked into the Lower Westside branch of the New York Public Library where she worked as an archivist. "Why so glum?" he joked knowing her well enough to tease but not well enough to be sensitive to her discomfort and annoyance at the jab and at using her full name not being privy as to why she never did. "How's that sweet Eliza Doolittle today?" he asked as he reached out to scratch the tiny head peeking out from her hiding place in Gabby's large satchel. Doo loved being carried about in that bag ever since that first walk away from cages and into a world of love. It worked for Gabby as well not having to slow her pace for Doo's tiny feet when they were crossing busy thoroughfares.

Handing him her book, Gabby saw him involuntarily grimace as he stamped it revealing how much he hated manning the return desk when staff was shorthanded, as it was most Saturdays. Walter was a simple man in style and needs. Working at the library had met his requirements for a job with no pressure where he could sail along with minimal effort. A cuddly bear of a man, he was well-liked by all, especially in the Asian community where his wife's family had a few prosperous businesses. Her work ethic paid for the extras and frequent trips back to Hong Kong to see her relatives.

"I see in the paper your apartment building is being demolished for luxury condos. What a bummer...this city keeps losing its charm and affordability," he said when she just nodded. "Lucky for me my parents bought my apartment years ago and left it to me. Can't touch anything on Riverside Drive anymore." At that very moment, Gabby noticed Countess Ivanova sitting at her usual spot in the computer area, a woman of rare gifts and charm. Seeing her was a happy accident since Tuesday was her regular day and it was always a treat to spend time with her. Obviously, a spectacular beauty in her youth and still quite attractive, Anastasia Ivanova was now, as the story went, an impoverished former Russian heiress who had been victimized by her third husband, a con man whom she'd since divorced. Although no one was

absolutely sure if she were a real countess, her refined and regal mannerisms inspired all who interacted with her to treat her thus and the library staff did not disappoint. Certainly, the title suited her.

In addition to her aristocratic demeanor, her impeccable couture vintage clothing, an obvious vestige from her glamorous former life in London, enhanced her regal aspect. The story that circulated in hushed tones was that her astute grandparents and extended family of aunts, uncles, and numerous cousins had fled to Knightsbridge from St. Petersburg, Russia. They had grabbed what they could of their vast fortune quickly stashed in clothes and suitcases just before the Bolshevik revolution. Valuable jewels, cash, and small pieces of fine porcelain figurines were snatched quickly as they raced away from their lives to safety thinking they would come back to reclaim their property and live out the remainder of their days when Russia came to its senses.

Their summer and winter mansions held priceless art and artifacts that were eventually confiscated by the government. They mourned the loss of their significant assets and their former lives of luxury and the beauty of their home country but remained thankful for not perishing in the uprising.

As is often the case, the subsequent generations frittered away their modest inheritance in a rather short time and most of the remaining family had become quite poor. All style but no substance, they nevertheless traveled among the wealthy establishment as mannered and titled gentry and eventually married into the upper classes. The Countess's beauty served her well and, she too, married men who could provide the luxuries of life. Her first foray ended in divorce with a sizable settlement that solidified her place in society. The end of her second marriage could have been ripped from the tabloid headlines when Lord Joffrey Smythe III fell to his death scaling Mt. Everest for a documentary film he was producing. Her third and last husband was a charmer she met on a cruise crossing the Atlantic. As the social director of the ship, he was able to give her special privileges and made the voyage quite enjoyable. Before they docked in New York they were married by the ship's Captain, who pulled her aside and told her to watch her money. Alas, the euphoria of love had thrown caution to the wind and so here she was using the library computer apparently not being able to afford one herself.

"Hello, Countess, how are you on this lovely afternoon?" Gabby asked as she approached the charming woman as she was totally immersed in some paragraph on a website and unaware of her presence. Startled by the unexpected interruption, she jumped slightly and then immediately closed the web page and turned to greet her young friend. Clasping Gabby's wrist with her manicured and bejeweled hands, she said, "Hello, my dear. Isn't it just marvelous that the rain has finally stopped? And how is my little sweetheart, Doo?" she said as she reached into the satchel to rub the puppy's head. No one was fooled by this hiding place.

"I've just been reading about the construction project that will demolish an entire city block. Everything razed to the ground. Pizza parlors, delis, convenience stores, hairdressers, all will lose their locations for a glamorous high rise that nobody from this neighborhood can afford. Terrible, terrible blight on this city. The privileged classes are taking over all the charming neighborhoods, especially on the lower Westside. So sad. I love this part of town. Chelsea is vibrant. I hate to see it change. Progress they call it," she sighs. "So, does this affect you by any chance? Because if it does, perhaps, I can help."

"Well yes, it does, as a matter of fact. I, unfortunately, got my eviction notice today. But it'll be okay. We'll find something. Doo and I will be just fine, won't we, Doo?" Gabby picked up the pup and snuggled her face.

"If you need shelter, I would be happy to let you stay with me until you figure out what to do. I have lots of room."

"That's so kind of you, Countess," Gabby said, "I might have to take you up on that offer if I can't get situated in time. Most kind of you, really."

Gabby was touched by this offer but also her curiosity was piqued. She had often wondered where the Countess lived and more importantly how she lived. Was it a walk-up like Gabby's? That situation might get difficult as the Countess aged. Even for Gabby, carrying groceries up to her apartment could be challenging. She guessed the Countess was in her late sixties but seemed in good health. She was slender

and had a crisp gait, so stairs were still probably manageable and perhaps even good exercise. Although everyone assumed she was hard up for cash, she never seemed to be in dire straits, so it would be interesting to see her apartment. Most New Yorkers could not boast of having lots of room in their apartments. Her offer was intriguing, but of course wouldn't be necessary. Things would work out.

Although she tried her best to count her blessings and be upbeat, Gabby's forlorn childhood deprived of a mother left a gaping hole that only being part of a family could fill. So, from time to time, she would fixate on an acquaintance and imagine them as an aunt, a grandparent, or even as her mother. This mind game, which gave her much enjoyment, eased her loneliness. Her latest infatuation, the Countess, transported Gabby to a posh world where people spoke pleasantries with a refined British accent and ate caviar.

Because the Countess conveyed a sanguine attitude that Gabby consciously worked on for herself, the attraction to this woman was immediate and consuming. The Countess seemed to glow as if she had a spotlight following her wherever she went. Gabby was not the only one in awe. Anyone who came near the Countess felt lifted from their troubles. A sense of ease prevailed that could not be explained. For Gabby, it felt good just to think of her and she did so quite often in the quiet moments at the library or even sometimes in her apartment. The mystique of the Countess was top-of-mind, present, and real.

At times, she imagined the Countess as the heroine of old black and white World War II movies, a movie star from when Hollywood was in its heyday, glamorous and mysterious. She could picture the Countess with smooth coifed blonde hair pinned up and tucked under a floppy Fedora wearing elbow-length gloves while putting a cigarette into a bejeweled holder. She could hear the click of the lighter and imagine the Countess take a big inhale and blow the smoke out slowly and sexily. Or sometimes Gabby would picture her as a fun-loving divorcee living on a big estate in the country and having Gatsby-like parties with famous people. Certainly, her sitting in this library did not match Gabby's romantic notions of the Countess's life, but they prevailed, nonetheless.

Because Gabby was so consumed with thoughts of the Countess, sometimes when she went to the corner coffee shop, she would mimic the elegant way the Countess walked or held her mug to sip her tea. She would delicately bite into a pastry, as she had seen the Countess do the few times they had gone for a snack break at the bakery next to the library. Gabby became obsessed with inhabiting her style and grace even though she knew it seemed an affectation, not natural. Nevertheless, she practiced the moves.

She also envied the Countess's easy smile and her soft engaging laugh so as not to disturb the quiet when interacting with the other regulars at the library. She would practice mimicking the smile and soft laugh in front of the mirror, but it always appeared contrived. Even so, she felt closer to the woman as she pretended to be her. Although the Countess did not seem to need a companion, Gabby was convinced that one of the regulars, Captain Jim Jeffries, a retired captain who had been in the Merchant Marine was in love with her. The Countess seemed to enjoy his company and flirted with him shamelessly.

The thought of their courtship blossoming here at this library and the remarkable effect the Countess had on Gabby herself, gave Gabby a sense of destiny. We've all come together at this little library for a reason. True to form, Gabby's own interpretation of the meaning and mysteries of existence and how cosmic forces shape our choices gave her the satisfaction that she was on some lofty path not totally revealed to her. Accompanying her on this journey were these friends she had met right here. We've all come together at this little library for a reason was the often silently repeated phrase in her mind. What has the cosmos planned for us, I wonder?

The Captain, as he was known, had become a regular visitor several times a week perusing the travel section documentaries and books on miniature model building. He had enchanted everyone at last year's Christmas gathering with stories of his own exotic travels. Quite an attractive character, his bright-blue eyes glinted merrily while he stroked his pure-white handlebar mustache that matched the thickness of his long white hair pulled back in a ponytail that bounced slightly as he glided into a room. His unique appearance enhanced his ability as an accomplished storyteller that he had honed from holding travel

seminars for several cruise ship lines after he had retired from the Merchant Marine. When the Captain had finished sharing his numerous exotic experiences, Walter instantly asked him to lead the story time hour for preschoolers. Twirling his mustache and making faces as he acted out the books he was reading made him an immediate success with the children who howled with laughter and never wanted the session to end. The Countess and the Captain...a pleasant thought.

After their conversation had come to its natural conclusion and Gabby was about to leave with Doo, the Countess grabbed her arm, "Wait, I have a marvelous idea, darling," she said. "Why not come for dinner tonight? You can see the guest room and there's a giant pot of beef Stroganoff simmering on the stove and some cold borscht. Come. We can have a nice visit. If you come right now, we can leave together."

To be invited to dinner at the Countess's was not only a pulse-throbbing honor given her obsession but also because as far as Gabby knew none of her colleagues had ever been invited. Except perhaps for the Captain, she chuckled to herself. And so, she accepted gladly and they left as soon as the Countess logged off the computer. Slightly taller than Gabby in her high heels and with her graceful stride, probably borne of finishing school, made keeping up with the Countess challenging for Gabby even in her weekend jogging sneakers and she scurried after her.

Everyone at the library assumed the Countess's apartment was a short distance away in their downtrodden and gentrified mixed neighborhood but as soon as they hit the street, she hailed a cab. The noise on the street made it difficult for Gabby to hear the address as the Countess leaned in to tell the cabby. She immediately realized they were heading uptown toward the posh area around Bloomingdale's and then turned further west passing Lexington Avenue and then to Park Ave. Her curiosity was more than piqued. Eventually, they stopped in front of a lovely but smallish Italianate brownstone townhouse on 65th street near Park Avenue while Gabby remained in the car unsure whether to get out.

"Come, come," said the Countess to a perplexed Gabby who was rather unhinged by this turn of events.

She exited the cab slowly with her mouth open and was gobsmacked at what she saw. "You live here?" Gabby finally found her voice to ask.

"Why wouldn't I?" the Countess replied sounding slightly annoyed.