

## CHAPTER ONE

Saks Fifth Avenue should have been moved years ago. The venerable department store sits alone among a series of medical and financial-service offices strung along the suburban side of US 1, known as City Line Avenue, the broad highway separating Philadelphia from its western outskirts. Everything else decent has retreated from the city limits and, except for the Saks store, the once golden mile of City Line is littered with discount shops and low-end restaurants that invite Philadelphians to cross the once forbidden dividing line between the city and the rest of the world. A gateway to the legendary Main Line, the surrounds of City Line are now distinguished by the number of car thefts and purse snatchings reported each Thursday in the local suburban paper.

Miriam Lavin was among the most undaunted and steadfast of Saks' customers, a relic from the days when affluent Jewish women relied on the store for Bar Mitzvah gowns and cruise wear, before Philadelphia's western suburbs became integrated and white families fled over the line to what they hoped was safer territory.

Miriam refused to betray her favorite store even after marriage to her second husband, Morrie, forced her further out than most of her cohorts, into a Valley Forge country condo, a thirty-minute drive from Saks on a good day. Miriam made the journey to Saks twice a week: on Wednesday nights to get her hair done, and on Friday nights to browse the sportswear and fine china departments. The Saks visits did not alleviate her sense of loneliness and isolation, but they at least got her out of the house. “I’ve got no one to cook brisket with prunes for anymore now that Morrie is gone,” she often complained to the manicurist in the beauty salon, a single mother of three children. “Two lifetimes I’ve lived: two houses, two children, two husbands, two funerals.”

Two inheritances, the manicurist thought, in anticipation of the meager tip Miriam always gave her.

A careful woman by nature, Miriam Lavin didn’t worry about the area’s crime statistics. She had been approached menacingly only once, on a night when she had parked her car in an exposed area just beyond the first floor entrance to the store. The ruffian had been a homeless drunk rather than a mugger, and the store’s security people had simply returned him to the city side of the avenue, where he belonged. Miriam now parked in one of the underground, protected spaces beneath Saks. She regularly pulled her steel-gray Cadillac, purchased by Morrie six months before his death, into a handicapped spot just outside the store’s lower-level entrance. The car was identified by a license plate bearing the initials MAL and a wheelchair symbol that should have been relinquished two years earlier, when MAL stopped breathing and, therefore, ceased to be disabled.

This Friday night was to have been a quick trip. “I’m giving my granddaughter an engagement party tomorrow,” Miriam told the saleswoman in china and crystal, “and I must have three place settings of Rosenthal right away.” She took a Saks post-Christmas sale brochure out of a large fabric Gucci handbag, opened it, and pointed to the black-and-gold-rimmed pieces she wanted. “I’m in a hurry,” she declared, tossing Morrie’s American Express Gold Card and the brochure onto the counter. “Gift wrap them as fast as you can. I only have a few minutes. I’ve got to pack tonight. I’m leaving for Boca Sunday, for the winter.” Miriam had a habit of telling everyone her business in hopes of provoking envy, a trait she projected from herself onto everyone she met. “My grandson’s law firm paid for the place after I sent a big malpractice case their way,” she concluded, speaking as if her grandson owned the law firm when, in fact, he was a new associate doing the grunt work in an old, Waspish Philadelphia organization.

Basically an unattractive woman, Miriam, at 78, did what was described by her girlfriends at the condo as “the best with what she’s got.” She relied on her Saks beautician to “do something” with her straight, bleached, pale blond hair. The beautician, partly out of revenge for Miriam’s extravagant boasts and frugal habit, pulled Miriam’s hair back into a chignon, a style that, unfortunately, called attention to her slightly pockmarked, sagging face and drooping eyelids. A tall, slim woman, Miriam countered her facial imperfections by dressing stylishly, in mostly Ann Klein and Bill Blass, purchased wholesale in New York through a niece’s clothing store. Her jewelry—mostly heavy gold and diamonds—came from 8<sup>th</sup> Street in Philadelphia, where she imagined she got a good deal on

bracelets and pins because the owner of the store she frequented had been represented by her “grandson’s law firm” when the jeweler had run into trouble for buying stolen property, some of it from Miriam herself.

While the saleswoman packed and wrapped the Rosenthal pieces, Miriam made two quick trips: one to the lingerie department on the second floor—where she bought the bride-to-be a sheer, white nightie—and the other to the first floor perfume department—where she picked up a bottle of Obsession for the maid-of-honor, an older granddaughter not yet betrothed and the object of benign kidding within the family. “My Molly will find herself a man one day soon,” Miriam assured the woman behind the Calvin Klein counter. Miriam used the word “my” in a proprietary way when speaking of her children and grandchildren, as if they were lamps. “If my Sandy, not half as pretty, can find someone, it’s just a matter of time for my Molly.”

“From your lips to God’s ears,” the perfume lady answered. She was used to old Jewish ladies and their family problems.

Miriam had Florida on her mind when she returned to the third floor to pick up the china. Without bothering to thank the saleswoman, she gathered her credit card and packages and hustled off to a bank of elevators. She hit the down arrow and glanced at her watch: 9:10. Just enough time to press ahead of the other shoppers before they rushed to leave the cavernous parking lot at closing time.

Miriam exited the elevator at ground level. Ignoring the security guard stationed in the lobby leading to the parking lot, she walked directly to the gray Cadillac. She scanned the area around the car before hitting the alarm

switch on her key chain. It was quiet for a Friday night with only a smattering of shoppers heading for their cars. An unseasonably warm January left little reason to shop for sweaters and boots, even at half off.

The alarm deactivated, Miriam opened the trunk of the Cadillac and dumped her packages into the storage space. She closed the lid slowly, allowing the electrical system to secure it. Ever cautious, she looked around again before unlocking the driver's side door. Miriam got into the car and placed her Gucci handbag on the passenger's seat beside her. She reached for her seat belt but before she could buckle up a burgundy Malibu sedan pulled behind the Cadillac, blocking its retreat. The driver, a woman in a black coat, her hair covered by a black scarf pulled low on her forehead, wearing sunglasses, pointed to the rear of the car. "Your trunk is open," she called out.

Annoyed at the delay, Miriam got out of the Cadillac and walked toward the back of the car. "Thank you," she said testily, barely looking at the sedan or its driver.

"No problem," the Good Samaritan responded. "Happens to me all the time," she concluded, without driving away.

Miriam pulled up on the lid of the trunk. It was closed tightly. Puzzled, she turned, and started to say something to the woman in the burgundy car. "There's..."

It took only a split second for Miriam Lavin to realize that her position tonight was far from enviable. She saw a hand come out of the driver's side window, got a fleeting look at a gun, and probably didn't hear the shot much before a bullet hit her above her right eye and tore through her brain. Her key chain flew from her hand as she fell back against the Cadillac trunk and slid down the car, her

blood splattering the wheelchair symbol on the license plate as she hit the concrete floor of the parking lot. She came to rest on her right side, her bloodied face looking toward the rear wheel of the sedan.

The Good Samaritan got purposely out of the Malibu. She picked up Miriam's key chain from where it had landed a few feet from the car, walked past the dead woman, reached into the Cadillac, and grabbed Miriam's handbag from the front seat. Her last task before getting back into the sedan and driving off was to stop for a second and kick the body of the consummate shopper.