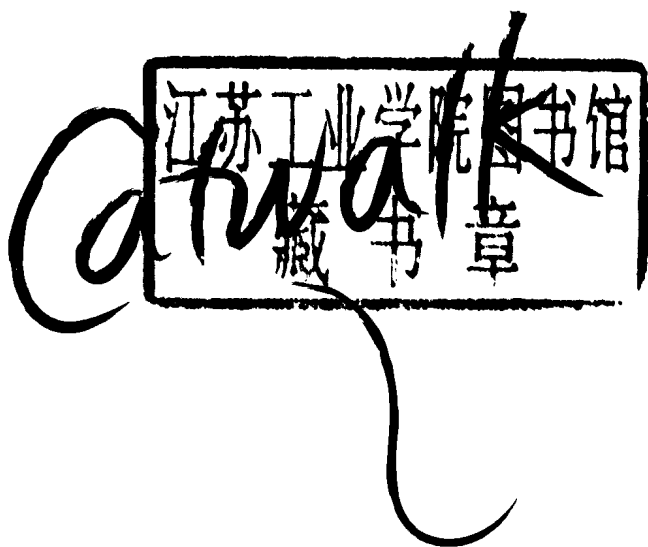


DEBORAH GREGORY
AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING SERIES **THE CHEETAH GIRLS**

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Catwalk

DEBORAH GREGORY

delacorte press

dedication

For my purrlicious friends "Pashmina," "Angora,"
and "Nole." Thank you for stroking my fur
and helping me unleash my feline fatale.

Meowch forever!

acknowledgments

Molto grazie to Stephanie Lane, a fabbie editor who truly earns purr points to the max. And to Lauren Heller Whitney, Andy McNichol, and Eric Zohn at the William Morris Agency. Most importantly, I must pay homage to the feline fatales who've made their mark in my life—and on the world—from Lynn Whitfield and Tonya Pinkins to Tina Andrews and Anath Garber. And to my best friend, a fashionista to the finish line—Beverly Johnson, the first black supermodel in America. Nothing will ever change that. Scratch, scratch!

Catwalk Credo

As an officially fierce team member of the House of Pashmina, I fully accept the challenge of competing in the Catwalk competition. That includes granting unlimited access to photographers and television crews at all times during the yearlong process. I will also be expected to represent my crew to the max, abide by directions from my team leader, and to honor, respect, and uphold the Catwalk Credo:

***Strap yourself in and fasten your Gucci seat belt.** By entering this world-famous fashion competition, I acknowledge that I'm in for the roller-coaster ride of my young, style-driven life. Therefore, whenever I feel like screaming my head off or jumping out of my chic caboose, I will resist the urge; instead, I will tighten a notch on my fears like a true fashionista.

***Illustrate your visions, but don't be sketchy with crew members.** My commitment to my House must always come first. Nothing must stand in the way of my Catwalk obligations—*nada, nyet, niente, Nietzsche!* And when someone or something presents itself as an obstacle, I promise to call upon my crew to summon the strength necessary to cut off the interference like a loose, dangling thread.

***Rulers are for those who rule with purrcision.** The true measure of my success will be not how I slope the terrain to fame but my ability to align my tasks and tantrums with those of my crew. I must always remember that grandiosity could land me in the half-price sale bin like Goliath—who was toppled by a tiny but well-targeted rock.

***Be prepared to endure more pricks than a pin-cushion.** Now that I've made the commitment to a goal sought after by many other aspiring fashionistas, I must be prepared for *catiac* attacks. Therefore, I will honestly share my fears and concerns with my crew, so that I can be pricked back to the reality that I am *not* alone in this not-so-chic and competitive world, nor will I achieve fabulosity solely on my own merits.

***Become a master tailor of your schedule.** I must face the fact that my time has now become a commodity more valuable than Gianni Versace's gunmetal mesh fabric from the seventies. Despite my daunting

tasks, I must always find the time to show up for my crew and attend my bimonthly Catwalk meetings throughout the year. Together we can make our dreams come true, one blind stitch at a time.

***Floss your teeth, not your ego.** Now that I'm part of a crew, carrying on about my accomplishments like I'm the Lone Ranger of Liberty prints is not cute; neither is grungy grooming or having food crouched between my teeth. I will carry tools of my trade with me at all times, including a container of dental floss and a hairbrush, so that I can be prepared for prime-time purring and on-camera cues that may come at me off the cuff.

***Ruffles don't always have ridges.** While everyone is entitled to an opinion, I will not allow myself to become hemmed in by well-meaning wannabes outside my crew. My individual style is only worthy when it becomes incorporated into the collective vision of my Catwalk crew. I will also resist the temptation to bite anyone else's flavor to the degree that it constitutes copying, or I will be asked to pack my tape measure and head back to the style sandbox on my own.

***Pay homage and nibble on fromage.** As a true fashionista, I must study the creative contributions of those who came before me so that I can become the maker of my own mélange. I will also publicly give the fashionistas who came before me the props they're due

whenever name-dropping is appropriate. Despite my quest for individual development, I must acknowledge that I will always channel influences from the past, present, and future.

***Click out your cat claws to defend your cattitudinal stance.** When others turn bitter, I must bring on the glitter. Competition always brings out the worst in foes—and even friends—because everyone will try to gobble the biggest slice of the fashion pie and no one settles for crumbs without putting up a fight.

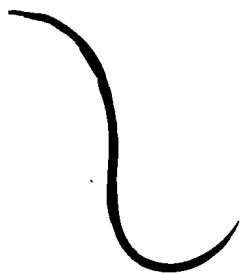
***Always be ready to strike a pose.** Even if I am not a model in the House of Pashmina, I cannot expect to strut the catwalk without getting a leg up on the competition first and saving my best riff for last. When it's showtime, I will be prepared to do my assigned task to help bring the House of Pashmina to the finish line.

***Act fierce even when you're not feeling it.** Never let the competition see you sweat. While going through this creative process, I may feel doubts about my direction. I will feel free to bounce my ideas off other crew members, but never reveal sensitive information to outsiders! Not all fashion spies have been sent to Siberia—they hide among us, always ready to undo a dart or a hemline.

***Keep your eyes on the international prize.** As a fierce fashionista, I intend to get my global groove on by sampling style and culture around the world. In

order to show my appreciation for the global access that style grants me, I commit to practice a foreign language for five minutes a day and double up on Saturdays because we're going to win the Catwalk competition and stage our style at a destination to be determined—over the rainbow! *Ciao, au revoir, sayonara!*

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My younger sister, Chenille, says that I prance instead of walk. I should, since my motto is *Sashay, parlay!* Even Fabbie Tabby knows how to work it like a cat on a hot tin ramp. You can tell by the way she prances on the heels of my bare feet as I patter down the creaky hallway to the bathroom. My mom hates when I walk around without shoes on the craggy wooden floors, but I'm feeling too wiggly this morning to be on splinter patrol. Once I hit the cold faux-marble bathroom floor, I fling open the purple paisley plastic shower curtain, swiping Fabbie Tabby in the process.

"So *sari*," I apologize to my kitty sister, to whom I bear a striking resemblance. See, we both have the same ultraslantey hazel eyes, pushed-in nose with wide-splayed nostrils, and bushy sprout of golden auburn hair (mine on my head; hers from head to tail). The only way we differ: Fabbie has a plumpalicious hinie, which I push out of the way so I can squeeze sideways into the too-tiny shower stall, but then I stub my big toe *hard* on a chipped tile. Serves me right for *dismissing* my beloved boo.

I'm feeling like a bona fried frittata today for good reason. It's my first day back to school, and now that I'm a junior I'm *finally* eligible to run in the most important elections in the fashion galaxy: house leaders in the annual Catwalk fashion show competition. If I don't snag one of the five highly coveted nominations, however, then I will *not* have a reason to survive like Gloria Gaynor.

"Oh, no, *not I! I will survive!*" I screech along to the hyped hook of my mom's favorite disco song like it's a motivational mantra. Chenille swears that I sound like a cackling jackal. So *what* if I can't sing? I'm just trying to put myself on blast, okay? What I desperately need right now is a blast of hot water, because everything is about to be on like popcorn.

Everything except the hot water, I realize after I turn the screeching knob and watch the pathetic dribbles sputter from the shower nozzle.

"*Chenille!*" I scream at the top of my lungs, because now I'm feeling *extra* crispy. Serves me right. I can't believe I let that early-bird specialist take a shower first when I know how rickety the hot-water situation is. All you have to say are the words "broken" or "repair" and our landlord Mr. Darius's English takes a magic carpet ride to Babbbleland. It doesn't matter how many times my mother complains and the repair guy futilely descends into the building's danky Tomb Raider basement.

The water situation remains chilly to tepid. The truth is, that relic of a boiler needs to be replaced with a new one from this century. And despite the fancy-schmancy name of our housing complex—Amsterdam Gardens—there are merely a few wilting shrubs on the premises. Any green thumb Mr. Darius has is from counting the thick stack of Benjamins he collects monthly in rent.

“Get out of here—*caboose babaluse!*” blasts Mr. Darius, his loud combustible rant rising from the courtyard into my second-floor bathroom window. That’s precisely why we call him Big Daddy Boom behind his back.

Standing over the bathroom sink, I brace myself to swipe at my underarms with a washcloth soaked in freezing cold water and dabs of Tahitian vanilla soap. If you ask me, loitering knuckleheads like the ones Mr. Darius just shooed out of the courtyard have it easy breezy: they don’t have to sweat the big stuff, like entering the Wetness Protection Program or getting nominated in the most important election any budding fashionista worth her Dolce dreams could run for.

Shivering, I hightail it back to my bedroom, catching a glimpse of plodding Chenille in her bedroom, already dressed in a gray polo shirt under her signature blue denim overalls and wearing black Puma sneakers. She’s huddled over her bureau, carefully placing her precious hairstyling tools in the compartments of her

gray melton cloth organizer. I scan the handygirl getup she's chosen to wear on her first day as a freshman at Fashion International, the fiercest high school in the Big Apple. I still can't believe Chenille was accepted into Fashion International's auxiliary program, designated for aspiring hairstylists and makeup artists. She should be toting a toolbox instead.

Personally, I think she should have followed in her friend Loquasia's Madden clunky-booted footsteps and applied to Dalmation Tech High School, which is directly across the street from our school. Fashion International is located on Thirty-eighth Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, in the heart of the most famous fashion district in the world. "You dropped a clamp," I mumble at her. Chenille studies the gray fuzzy area rug by her feet like a forensic examiner but comes up empty. "Psych," I say, deadpan.

Chenille squints at me with her beady eyes, then announces: "I'm taking the train with Loquasia."

"Whatever makes you clever," I shoot back. I walk into my bedroom, pulling out my pink sponge rollers and throwing them in my Hello Kitty basket caddy. *Puhleez*, I'd rather go bald like Shrek before I'd let Chenille touch my fuzzy goldilocks. Springing my spiral Shirley Temples into place one by one, I glance absent-mindedly at the poster on the wall above my bed: Miss