

**everyone worth
knowing**

lauren weisberger

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the devil wears prada

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To my grandparents: This should help them remember which grandchild I am.
everyone worth knowing

1

How does it feel to be one of the beautiful people?

—From “Baby, You’re a Rich Man” (1967) by John Lennon and Paul McCartney

Though I’d caught only the briefest glimpse from the corner of my eye, I knew immediately that the brown creature darting across my warped hardwood floors was a water bug—the largest, meatiest insect I’d ever seen. The superbug had narrowly avoided skimming across my *bare feet* before it disappeared under the bookcase. Trembling, I forced myself to practice the chakra breathing I’d learned during an involuntary week at an ashram with my parents. My heart rate slowed slightly after a few concentrated breaths of *re* on the inhale and *lax* on the exhale, and within a few minutes I was functional enough to take some necessary precautions. First I rescued Millington (who was also cowering in terror) from her hiding place under the couch. Then, in quick succession, I zipped on a pair of knee-high leather boots to cover my exposed legs, opened the door to the hallway to encourage the bug’s departure, and began spraying the extra-strong black-market vermin poison on every available surface in my minuscule one-bedroom. I gripped the trigger as though it were an assault weapon and was still spraying when the phone rang nearly ten minutes later. The caller ID flashed with Penelope’s number. I almost screened her before I realized that she was one of only two potential refuges. Should the water bug manage to live through the fumigation and cruise through my living room again, I’d need to crash with her or Uncle Will. Unsure where Will was tonight, I decided it’d be wise to keep the lines of communication intact. I answered.

“Pen, I’m under attack by the largest roach in Manhattan. What do I do?” I asked the second I picked up the phone.

“Bette, I have NEWS!” she boomed back, clearly indifferent to my panic.

“News more important than my infestation?”

“Avery just proposed!” Penelope shrieked. “We’re engaged!”

Goddammit. Those two simple words—*we’re engaged*—could make one person so happy and another so miserable. Autopilot quickly kicked in, reminding me that it would be inappropriate—to say the least—if I were to verbalize what I really thought. *He’s a loser, P. He’s a spoiled, stoner little kid in the body of a big boy. He knows you’re out of his league and is putting a ring on your finger before you realize it as well. Worse, by marrying him you will be merely biding your time until he replaces you with a younger, hotter version of yourself ten years down the line, leaving you to pick up the pieces. Don’t do it! Don’t do it! Don’t do it!*

“Ohmigod!” I shrieked right back. “Congratulations! I’m so happy for you!”

“Oh, Bette, I knew you would be. I can barely even speak, it’s just all happening so fast!”

So fast? He’s the only guy you’ve dated since you were nineteen. It’s not like this wasn’t expected—it’s been eight years. I just hope he doesn’t catch herpes at his bachelor party in Vegas.

“Tell me everything. When? How? Ring?” I rattled off questions, playing the best friend role fairly believably, I thought, all things considered.

“Well, I can’t talk too long because we’re at the St. Regis right now. Remember how he insisted on picking me up for work today?” Before waiting for my answer, she raced breathlessly ahead. “He had a car waiting outside and told me it was just because he couldn’t get a cab, and said that we were expected for dinner at his parents’ house in ten minutes. Of course, I was a little annoyed that he hadn’t even asked if I wanted to go to dinner there—he’d said he’d made reservations at Per Se, and you know how tough it is to get in there—and we were having pre-drinks in the library when in walked both our parents. Before I knew what was happening, he was down on one knee!”

“In front of all your parents? He did the public proposal?” I knew I sounded horrified, but I couldn’t help it.

“Bette, it was hardly public. It was our *parents*, and he said the sweetest things in the world. I mean, we never would’ve met if it weren’t for them, so I can see his point. And get this—he gave me two rings!”

“Two rings?”

“Two rings. A seven-carat flawless round in platinum that was his great-great-grandmother’s for the real ring, and then a very pretty three-carat ascher-cut with baguettes that’s much more wearable.”

“Wearable?”

“It’s not as though you can roam the streets of New York in a seven-carat rock, you know. I thought it was really smart.”

“Two rings?”

“Bette, you’re incoherent. We went from there to Per Se, where my father even managed to turn off his cell phone for the duration of dinner and make a reasonably nice toast, and then we went for a carriage ride in Central Park, and now we’re at a suite in the St. Regis. I just had to call and tell you!”

Where, oh where, had my friend gone? Penelope, who’d never even shopped for engagement rings because she thought they all looked the same, who had told me three months earlier when a mutual college friend had gotten engaged in the back of a horse-drawn carriage that it was the tackiest thing on earth, had just morphed into a very close approximation of a Stepford Wife. Was I just bitter? Of course I was bitter. The closest I’d come to getting engaged was reading the wedding announcements in *The New York Times*, aka the Single Girls’ Sports Page, every Sunday at brunch. But that was beside the point.

“I’m so glad you did! And I can’t wait to hear every last detail, but you’ve got an

engagement to consummate. Get off the phone with me and go make your fiancé happy. How weird does that sound? ‘Fiancé.’”

“Oh, Avery’s on a call from work. I keep telling him to hang up”—she announced this loudly for his benefit—“but he just keeps talking and talking. How has your night been?”

“Ah, another stellar Friday. Let’s see. Millington and I took a walk over to the river, and some homeless guy gave her a biscuit along the way, so she was really happy, and then I came home, and hopefully killed what must be the largest insect in the tristate area. I ordered Vietnamese, but I threw it out when I remembered reading that some Vietnamese place near me was shut down for cooking dog, and so now I’m about to dine on reheated rice and beans and a packet of stale Twizzlers. Oh, Christ, I sound like a Lean Cuisine commercial, don’t I?”

She just laughed, clearly having no words of comfort at that particular moment. The other line clicked, indicating that she had another call.

“Oh, it’s Michael. I have to tell him. Do you care if I three-way him in?” she asked.

“Sure. I’d love to hear you tell him.” Michael would undoubtedly commiserate with me over the entire situation once Penelope hung up since he hated Avery even more than I did.

There was a click, which was followed by a brief silence and then another click.

“Everyone there?” Penelope squealed. This was not a girl who normally squealed.

“Michael? Bette? You guys both on?”

Michael was a colleague of mine and Penelope’s at UBS, but since he’d made VP (one of the youngest ever) we’d seen much less of him. Though Michael had a serious girlfriend, it took Penelope’s engagement to really drive the point home: we were growing up.

“Hi, girls,” Michael said, sounding exhausted.

“Michael, guess what? I’m engaged!”

There was the tiniest beat of hesitation. I knew that, like me, Michael wasn’t surprised, but he would be trying hard to formulate a believably enthusiastic response.

“Pen, that’s fantastic news!” he all but shouted into the phone. His volume did much to compensate for the lack of any genuine joy in his voice, and I made a mental note to remember that for next time.

“I know!” she sang back. “I knew you and Bette would be so happy for me. It just happened a few hours ago, and I’m so excited!”

“Well, we’ll obviously have to celebrate,” he said loudly. “Black Door, just the three of us, multiple shots of something strong and cheap.”

“Definitely,” I added, happy for something to say. “A celebration is most definitely in order.”

“Okay, honey!” Penelope called into the distance, our drinking plans understandably of little interest. “Guys, Avery’s off the phone and is pulling on the cord. Avery, stop! I’ve got to run, but I’ll call you both later. Bette, see you at work tomorrow. Love you both!”

There was a click and then Michael said, “You still there?”

“Sure am. Do you want to call me or should I call you?” We’d all learned early on that you couldn’t trust that the third line had disconnected and therefore always took the precaution of starting a new call before talking shit about the person who’d hung up first.

I heard a high-pitched voice in the background and he said, “Dammit, I just got paged. I can’t talk now. Can we talk tomorrow?”

“Sure. Say hi to Megu for me, okay? And Michael? Please don’t go and get engaged anytime soon. I don’t think I can handle you, too.”

He laughed. “You don’t have to worry about that, I promise. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. And Bette? Chin up. He might be one of the worst guys either of us has ever met, but she seems happy, and that’s all you can ask for, you know?”

We hung up and I stared at the phone for a few minutes before twisting my body out the window in a futile attempt to see a few inches of comforting river landscape; the apartment wasn’t much, but it was, thankfully, all mine. I hadn’t shared it in the nearly two years since Cameron had moved out, and even though it was so long and narrow that I could stretch my legs out and almost touch the opposite wall and even though it was located in Murray Hill and even though the floorboards were warping slightly and the water bugs had taken over, I had reign over my own private palace. The building was a cement monstrosity on Thirty-fourth and First, a multi-winged behemoth that housed such illustrious tenants as one teenage member of a dismantled boy band, one professional squash player, one B-list porn star and her stable of visitors, one average Joe, one former childhood actress who hadn’t worked in two decades, and hundreds upon hundreds of recent college graduates who couldn’t quite handle the idea of leaving the dorm or the fraternity house for good. It had sweeping East River views, as long as one’s definition of “sweeping views” includes a construction crane, a couple of Dumpsters, a brick wall from the building next door, and a patch of river approximately three inches wide that is only visible through unfathomable acts of contortion. All of this glory was mine for the equivalent monthly cost of a four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath single-family home upstate.

While still twisted on the couch, I reviewed my reaction to the news. I thought I’d sounded sincere enough, if not downright ecstatic, but Penelope knew ecstatic wasn’t in my nature. I’d managed to ask about the rings—plural—and to state that I was very happy for her. Of course, I hadn’t mustered up anything truly heartfelt or meaningful, but she was probably too giddy to notice. Overall: a solid B-plus performance.

My breathing had normalized enough to smoke another cigarette, which made me feel slightly better. The fact that the water bug hadn’t resurfaced yet helped, too. I tried to assure myself that my unhappiness stemmed from my genuine concern that Penelope was marrying a truly terrible guy and not from some deep-rooted envy that she now had a fiancé when I didn’t have so much as a second date. I couldn’t. It had been two years since Cameron had moved out, and though I’d cycled through the requisite stages of recovery (job obsession, retail obsession, and food obsession) and had gone on the usual round of blind dates, drinks-only dates, and the rarer full-dinner dates, only two guys had made third-date status. And none had made fourth. I told myself

repeatedly that there wasn't anything wrong with me—and regularly made Penelope confirm this—but I was seriously beginning to doubt the validity of that statement.

I lit a second cigarette off the first and ignored Millington's disapproving doggy stare. The self-loathing was beginning to settle upon my shoulders like a familiar, warm blanket. What kind of evil person couldn't express genuine, sincere happiness on one of the happiest days of her best friend's life? How conniving and insecure does one have to be to pray that the whole thing turns out to be a giant misunderstanding? How did I get to be so wretched?"

I picked up the phone and called Uncle Will, looking for some sort of validation. Will, aside from being one of the brightest and bitchiest people on the planet, was my perpetual cheerleader. He answered the phone with the slightest gin-and-tonic slur and I proceeded to give him the short, less-painful version of Penelope's ultimate betrayal. "It sounds as though you feel guilty because Penelope is very excited and you're not as happy for her as you should be."

"Yeah, that's right."

"Well, darling, it could be far worse. At least it's not some variation on the theme where Penelope's misery is providing you with happiness and fulfillment, right?"

"Huh?"

"*Schadenfreude*. You're not emotionally or otherwise benefiting from her unhappiness, right?"

"She's not unhappy. She's euphoric. I'm the unhappy one."

"Well, there you have it! See, you're not so terrible. And you, my dear, are not marrying that spoiled little brat whose only God-given talents appear to be spending his parents' money and inhaling large quantities of marijuana. Am I mistaken?"

"No, of course not. It just feels like everything's changing. Penelope's my life, and now she's getting married. I knew it would happen eventually, but I just didn't think eventually would be so soon."

"Marriage is for the bourgeoisie. You know that, Bette."

This triggered a series of mental images of Sunday brunches through the years: Will, Simon, the Essex, me, and the Sunday Styles section. We'd dissect the weddings for the duration of brunch, never failing to collapse into evil giggles as we creatively read between the lines.

Will continued. "Why on earth are you eager to enter into a lifelong relationship, the only purpose of which is to strangle every iota of individuality out of you? I mean, look at me. Sixty-six years old, never married, and I'm perfectly happy."

"You're gay, Will. And not only that, but you wear a gold band on the ring finger of your left hand."

"So what's your point? You think I'd actually *marry* Simon, even if I could? Those same-sex, San Francisco city hall weddings aren't exactly my scene. Not on your life."

"You've been living with him since before I was born. You do realize that you are, essentially, married."

“Negative, darling. Either one of us is free to leave at any point, without any messy legal or emotional ramifications. And that’s why it works. But enough of that; I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. Tell me about the ring.” I filled him in on the details he really cared about while munching the remaining Twizzlers, and didn’t even realize I had fallen asleep on the couch until close to 3 A.M., when Millington woofed her desire to sleep in a real bed. I dragged us both to my room and buried my head under the pillow, reminding myself over and over that this was not a disaster. Not a disaster. Not a disaster.

2

Just my luck that Penelope's engagement party fell on a Thursday night—the night of my standing dinner date with Uncle Will and Simon. Neither appointment could be denied. I stood in front of my ugly, postwar, high-rise Murray Hill apartment building, desperately trying to escape to my uncle's huge duplex on Central Park West. It wasn't rush hour, Christmas, shift change, or torrentially pouring, but a cab was nowhere to be found. I had been whistling, screaming, and jumping skywards like a lunatic for twenty minutes to no avail, when a lone cab finally pulled up to the curb. The cabbie's response when I requested to go uptown was "Too much traffic!" before he screeched off and disappeared. When a second driver actually picked me up, I ended up tipping him 50 percent out of relief and gratitude.

"Hey, Bettina, you look unhappy. Is everything okay?" I'd insisted that people call me Bette, and most did. Only my parents and George, Uncle Will's doorman (who was so old and cute he could get away with anything), still insisted on using my full name.

"Just the usual cab hassle, George." I sighed, giving him a peck on the cheek. "How's your day been?"

"Oh, just dandy as always," he replied without a hint of sarcasm. "Saw the sun for a few minutes this morning and have been happy ever since." Nauseating.

"Bette!" I heard Simon call from the lobby's discreetly hidden mailroom. "Is that you I hear, Bette?"

He emerged from the mailroom in tennis whites, a racket-shaped bag slung over his broad shoulders, and picked me up in a bear hug as no straight man ever had. It was sacrilege to skip a weekly dinner, which in addition to being a good time also provided by far the most male attention I received (not counting brunch).

Will and Simon had developed lots of rituals in the almost thirty years they'd spent together. They vacationed in only three places: St. Barth's in late January (although lately Will had been complaining that it was "too French"), Palm Springs in mid-March, and an occasional spontaneous weekend in Key West. They drank gin and tonics only out of Baccarat glasses, spent every Monday night from seven until eleven at Elaine's, and hosted an annual holiday party where each would wear a cashmere turtleneck. Will was almost six-three, with close-cropped silver hair, and he preferred sweaters with suede elbow patches; Simon was barely five-nine, with a wiry, athletic build that he swathed entirely in linen, irrespective of the season. "Gay men," he'd say, "have carte blanche to flout fashion convention. We've earned the right." Even now, moments off the tennis court, he'd managed to don some sort of white linen hoodie.

"Gorgeous girl, how are you? Come, come, Will is sure to be wondering where we both are, and I just know that the new girl has prepared something fantastic for us to

eat.” Always the perfect gentleman, he took my exploding tote bag from my shoulder, held the elevator door open, and pressed PH.

“How was tennis?” I asked, wondering why this sixty-year-old man had a better body than every guy I knew.

“Oh, you know how it is, a bunch of old guys running around the court, tracking down balls they shouldn’t even try for and pretending they’ve got strokes like Roddick. A little pathetic, but always amusing.”

The door to their apartment was slightly ajar and I could hear Will talking to the TV in the study, as usual. In the old days, Will had scooped Liza Minnelli’s relapse and RFK’s affairs and Patty Hearst’s leap from socialite to cult member. It was the “amorality” of the Dems that finally pushed him toward politics instead of all things glamorous. He called it the Clinton Clinch. Now, a few short decades later, Will was a news junkie with political affiliations that ran slightly to the right of Attila the Hun’s. He was almost certainly the only gay right-wing entertainment-and-society columnist living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan who refused to comment on either entertainment or society. There were two televisions in his study, the larger of which he kept tuned to Fox News. “Finally,” he was fond of saying, “a network that speaks to *my* people.”

And always Simon’s retort: “Riiight. That huge audience of right-wing gay entertainment-and-society columnists living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan?”

The smaller set constantly rotated between CNN, CNN Headline News, C-SPAN, and MSNBC, perpetrators of what Will referred to as “The Liberal Conspiracy.” A handwritten sign sat atop the second TV. It read: KNOW YOUR ENEMY.

On CNN, Aaron Brown was interviewing Frank Rich about the media coverage surrounding the last election. “Aaron Brown is a lily-livered milquetoast pantywaist!” Will snarled as he put down his crystal tumbler and hurled one of his Belgian shoes at the TV.

“Hi, Will,” I said, helping myself to a handful of the chocolate-covered raisins he always kept in an Orrefors bowl on his desk.

“Of all the people qualified to discuss politics in this country, to offer some insight or an intelligent opinion on how media coverage did or did not affect these elections, and these idiots have to interview someone from *The New York Times*? The whole place is more bleeding than a rare steak, and I need to sit here and listen to their opinion on this?”

“Well, not really, Will. You could turn it off, you know.” I suppressed a smile as his eyes stayed riveted ahead. I silently debated with myself how long it would take for him to refer to *The New York Times* as *Izvestia*, or to bring up the Jayson Blair debacle as further proof that the paper’s trash at best and a conspiracy against honest, hardworking Americans at worst.

“What, and miss Mr. Aaron Brown’s blatantly opinionated coverage of Mr. Frank Rich’s blatantly opinionated coverage of whatever the hell they’re talking about? Seriously, Bette, let us not forget that this is the very same paper whose reporters simply create stories when deadline looms.” He took a swig and jabbed at the remote

to silence both televisions simultaneously. Only fifteen seconds tonight—a record. “Enough for now,” he said, hugging me and giving me a quick peck on the cheek. “You look great, honey, as always, but would it kill you to wear a dress once in a while?”

He’d not so deftly moved to discussing his second-favorite topic, my life. Uncle Will was nine years older than my mom and both swore they’d been born to the very same set of parents, but it seemed impossible to comprehend. My mother was horrified I’d taken a corporate job that required me to wear something other than caftans and espadrilles, and my uncle thought the travesty was the suit as uniform instead of some killer Valentino gown or a fabulous pair of strappy Louboutins.

“Will, it’s just what they do at investment banks, you know?”

“So I’ve gathered. I just didn’t think you’d end up in banking.” That again.

“Your people, like, love capitalism, don’t they?” I teased. “The Republicans, I mean—not so much the gays.”

He raised his bushy gray eyebrows and peered at me from across the couch. “Cute. Very cute. It’s nothing against banking, darling, I think you know that. It’s a fine, respectable career—I’d rather see you doing that than any of those hippie-dippy-save-the-world jobs your parents would recommend—but you just seem so young to lock yourself into something so boring. You should be out there meeting people, going to parties, enjoying being young and single in New York, not tied down to a desk in a bank. What do you *want* to do?”

As many times as he’d asked me this, I’d never come around to a great—or even decent—answer. It was certainly a fair question. In high school I’d always thought I’d join the Peace Corps. My parents had taught me that that was the natural step following a college degree. But then I went to Emory and met Penelope. She liked that I couldn’t name every private school in Manhattan and knew nothing about Martha’s Vineyard, and I, of course, loved that she could and did. We were inseparable by Christmas break, and by the end of freshman year, I had discarded my favorite Dead T-shirts. Jerry was long dead, anyway. And it was fun going to basketball games and keg parties and joining the coed touch-football league with a whole group of people who didn’t regularly dread their hair, or recycle their bathwater, or wear patchouli oil. I didn’t stand out as the eccentric girl who always smelled a little bit off and knew way too much about the redwoods. I wore the same jeans and T-shirts as everyone else (without even checking to see if they originated in a sweatshop) and ate the same burgers and drank the same beer, and it felt fantastic. For four years I had a group of similar-minded friends and the occasional boyfriend, none of whom were Peace Corps-bound. So when all the big companies showed up on campus waving giant salaries and signing bonuses and offering to fly candidates to New York for interviews, I did it. Nearly every one of my friends from school took a similar job, because when you get right down to it, how else is a twenty-two-year-old going to be able to pay rent in Manhattan? What was incredible about the whole thing was how quickly five years had gone by. Five years had just vanished into a black hole of training programs and quarterly reports and year-end bonuses, leaving barely enough time for me to consider that I loathed what I did all day long. It didn’t help matters that I was actually good at

it—it somehow seemed to signify that I was doing the right thing. Will knew it was wrong, though, could obviously sense it, but so far I'd been too complacent to make the leap into something else.

“What do I want to do? How on earth can I answer something like that?” I asked.

“How can you not? If you don't get out soon, you're going to wake up one day when you're forty and a managing director and jump off a bridge. There's nothing wrong with banking, darling, it's just not for you. You should be around *people*. You should laugh a little. You should *write*. And you should be wearing much better clothes.”

I didn't tell him I was considering looking for work at a nonprofit. He'd start ranting about how his campaign to un-brainwash me from my parents had failed, and he'd sit dejectedly at the table for the rest of the evening. I'd tried it once, just merely mentioned that I was thinking of interviewing at Planned Parenthood, and he'd informed me that while that was a most noble idea, it would lead me straight back down the path to rejoining, in his words, the World of the Great Unshowered. So we proceeded to cover the usual topics. First came my nonexistent love life (“Darling, you're simply too young and too pretty for your job to be your only lover”), followed by a bit of ranting about Will's latest column (“Is it my fault that Manhattan has become so uneducated that people no longer wish to hear the truth about their elected officials?”). We cycled back to my high school days of political activism (“The Incense Era is blessedly over”), and then once again returned to everyone's all-time favorite topic, the abject state of my wardrobe (“Ill-fitting, masculine trousers do not a date outfit make”).

Just as he was beginning a small soliloquy on the far-reaching benefits of owning a Chanel suit, the maid knocked on the study door to inform us that dinner was on the table. We collected our drinks and made our way to the formal dining room.

“Productive day?” Simon asked Will, kissing him on the cheek in greeting. He had showered and changed into a pair of Hefesque linen pajamas and was holding a glass of champagne.

“Of course not,” Will responded, setting aside his dirty martini and pouring two more glasses of champagne. He handed one to me. “Deadline's not until midnight; why would I do a damn thing until ten o'clock tonight? What are we celebrating?”

I dug into my Gorgonzola salad, grateful to be eating something that hadn't originated in a street cart, and took a gulp of champagne. If I could have somehow finagled eating there every night without appearing to be the biggest loser on earth, I would've done it in a second. But even I had enough dignity to know that being available for the same people—even if they were your uncle and his partner—more than once a week for dinner and once for brunch was truly pathetic.

“What, we need to be celebrating something to drink a little champagne?” Simon asked, helping himself to a few pieces of the sliced steak their housekeeper had made for the main course. “Just thought it would be a nice change. Bette, what are your plans for the rest of the evening?”

“Penelope's engagement party. I'm going to have to head there soon, actually. The mothers put the whole thing together before either Avery or Penelope could veto it. At

least it's at some club in Chelsea, though, rather than somewhere on the Upper East Side—I think that was their one concession to their children actually enjoying themselves.”

“What's the name of the club?” Will asked, although there was little chance he knew anything about it if it wasn't dark, wood-paneled, and filled with cigar smoke.

“She mentioned it, but I can't remember. Begins with a B, I think. Here,” I said, pulling a torn slip of paper from my bag. “It's on Twenty-seventh between Tenth and Eleventh. It's called—”

“Bungalow 8,” they replied in unison.

“How did you both know that?”

“Honey, it's mentioned so often in Page Six that you'd think Richard Johnson owned the damn place,” Will said.

“I read somewhere that it was originally modeled after the bungalows at the Beverly Hills Hotel, and that the service is just as good. It's just a nightclub, but this article described a concierge who will cater to any whim, from ordering in a special kind of rare sushi to arranging for helicopters. There are places that are hot for a few months and then vanish, but everyone agrees that Bungalow 8 has staying power,” Simon said.

“I guess sitting at the Black Door on my nights out isn't really helping my social life,” I said and pushed my plate away. “Do you guys mind if I bail early tonight? Penelope wanted me there before the hordes of Avery's friends and her family arrive.”

“Run, Bette, run. Stop only to reapply your lipstick and then run! And it wouldn't hurt a damn if you found yourself a dashing young gentleman to date,” Simon declared, as though there would be roomfuls of gorgeous, eligible guys who were just waiting for me to walk into their lives.

“Or even better, a dashing young bastard to play with for one evening.” Will winked, only half-kidding.

“You guys are the best,” I said, kissing each one's cheek before gathering my bag and cardigan. “You have no compunction whoring out your only niece, do you?”

“Absolutely none,” Will announced while Simon shook his head gravely. “Go be a good tart and have some fun, for Christ's sake, will you?”

There was a crowd—three deep and a block long—when the cab pulled up in front of the club, and if it hadn't been Penelope's party, I would've had the cabbie keep driving. Instead, I plastered on a smile and strolled to the front of the forty-person line, where a giant guy wearing a Secret Service earpiece stood, holding a clipboard.

“Hi, my name is Bette and I'm with Penelope's party,” I said, surveying the line and not recognizing a single face.

He gazed at me blankly. “Great, nice to meet you, Penelope. If you could just wait in line like everyone else, we'll get you inside as quickly as possible.”

“No, this is Penelope's party, and I'm her friend. She asked me to be here early, so it'd really be better if I could go in right now.”

“Uh-huh, that's great. Listen, just step aside and—” He placed a hand over his earpiece and appeared to listen intently, nodding his head a few times and studying the

line that now looped around the corner.

“Okay, everyone,” he announced, his voice causing immediate silence among the barely dressed would-be partiers. “We’re already at capacity right now, as determined by the FDNY. We’ll only be letting people in as others leave, so either get comfortable or come back later.”

Groans all around. *Well, this simply isn’t going to work*, I thought. *He must not understand the situation.*

“Excuse me? Sir?” He peered at me once again, now visibly annoyed. “You’ve obviously got a lot of people waiting to go in, but it’s my friend’s engagement party, and she really needs me there. If you only knew her mother, then you’d understand how imperative it is that I get inside.”

“Mmm. Interesting. Look, I don’t care if your friend Penelope’s marrying Prince William. There’s no way I can let anyone else in right now. We’d be in violation of the fire code, and you certainly don’t want that.” He backed off a bit. “Just hang out in line and we’ll get you in as soon as possible, okay?” I think he was aiming for soothing, but it only served to incense me more. He looked vaguely familiar, although I wasn’t sure why. His faded green T-shirt was tight enough to show that he was quite capable of keeping people out if he so desired, but the slightly baggy, faded jeans that hung low on his hips suggested he didn’t take himself too seriously. Just as I was conceding that he had the best hair I’d ever seen on a guy—longish, dark, thick, and annoyingly shiny—he shrugged on a gray corduroy jacket and managed to look even cuter still.

Definitely a model. I restrained myself from announcing something super-snotty about what a power trip this must be for someone who most likely hadn’t made it past seventh grade, and skulked to the back of the line. As repeated attempts to call both Penelope’s and Avery’s cell phones went straight to voice mail, and the front-door goon was only allowing in an average of two people every ten minutes, I stood there for the better part of an hour. I was fantasizing about the many ways I could humiliate or otherwise harm the bouncer when Michael and his girlfriend slinked outside and lit cigarettes a few feet from the door.

“Michael!” I shrieked, aware of how absolutely pathetic I sounded, but not really caring. “Michael, Megu, over here!”

They both looked over the hordes of people and spotted me, which probably wasn’t hard considering I was screaming and waving with zero dignity. They waved me over, and I practically ran to them.

“I need to get inside already. I’ve been standing outside this goddamn hellhole forever, and that guy won’t let me in. Penelope’s going to kill me!”

“Hey, Bette, great to see you, too,” Michael said, leaning over to kiss my cheek.

“Sorry,” I said, hugging first him and then his girlfriend, Megu, the sweet Japanese med student with whom he now shared an apartment. “How are you guys? How on earth did you both get out for this?”

“It happens like once every six months.” Megu smiled, taking hold of Michael’s hand and tucking it behind her back. “The schedule just falls into alignment for one twelve-hour period when I’m not on call and he’s not at work.”

“And you came here? What, are you crazy? Megu, you’re a really good sport. Michael, do you realize what a girl you have here?”

“Sure do,” he said, gazing at her adoringly. “She knows Penelope would kill me, too, if we didn’t make an appearance, but I think we’re out. I’ve got to be at work in, oh, let’s see, four hours now, and Megu was hoping to sleep for a full six-hour block of time for the first time in a few weeks, so we’re going to bail. It looks like people are headed inside now.”

I turned to see a massive exchange of gorgeous people: one crowd surged outside, apparently on their way to a “real” party in TriBeCa, and another seeped in through the door when the bouncer lifted the velvet rope.

“I thought you said I was next on the list,” I said flatly to the bouncer.

“Feel free to visit Princess Penelope,” he told me, sweeping expansively with one arm and adjusting his earpiece to hear what I’m sure was crucial information with the other.

“See, there you go,” Michael said, pulling Megu out into the street with him. “Call me this week and let’s grab a drink. Bring Penelope—I didn’t get a chance to even talk to her tonight, and it’s been forever since we all caught up. Tell her I said good-bye.” And they were gone, undoubtedly thrilled they’d managed to escape.

I turned around and saw that there were only a few people loitering on the sidewalk, talking on cell phones, apparently indifferent to whether they went inside. Just like that, the crowd had evaporated, and I was finally being granted entry.

“Gee, thanks. You were extraordinarily helpful,” I said to the bouncer, brushing past his massive frame and walking through the velvet rope he held open. I yanked open the giant glass door and stepped into a dark foyer, where Avery was talking very closely to a very pretty girl with very big breasts.

“Hi, Bette, where have you been all night?” he said, immediately moving toward me and offering to take my coat. In the same second Penelope bounded over, looking flushed and then relieved. She was wearing a short black cocktail dress topped with a sequined shrug and extraordinarily high-heeled silver sandals, and I knew immediately that her mother had dressed her.

“Bette!” she hissed, grabbing my arm and leading me away from Avery, who immediately resumed his intense conversation with the girl. “What took you so long? I’ve been suffering alone all night.”

I raised my eyebrows and looked around. “Alone? There must be two hundred people here. All these years, and I didn’t know you had two hundred friends. This is quite the party!”

“Yeah, really impressive, right? Exactly five of the people in this room are here to see *me*: my mother, my brother, one of the girls from the real-estate department, my father’s secretary, and now you. Megu and Michael left, right?” I nodded. “The rest are Avery’s, of course. And my mother’s friends. Where have you been?” She took a gulp of her drink and passed the glass to me with slightly shaking hands, as though it were a pipe and not a champagne flute.

“Honey, I’ve been here for over an hour, as promised. Had a bit of trouble at the door.”

“You didn’t!” She looked horrified.

“I did. Very cute bouncer, but a total creep.”

“Oh, Bette, I’m so sorry! Why didn’t you call me?”

“I did, a few dozen times, but I guess you couldn’t hear your phone. Listen, don’t worry about it. Tonight’s your night, so try and, well, uh, enjoy it?”

“Let’s get you a drink,” she said, pulling a cosmopolitan from a circling waiter’s tray.

“Do you believe this party?”

“It’s crazy. How long has your mother been planning this?”

“She read in Page Six weeks ago that Gisele and Leo were seen ‘canoodling’ here, so I guess she called and booked it right after that. She keeps telling me that these are the kinds of places I should be patronizing because of their ‘exclusive clientele.’ I didn’t tell her that the one time Avery dragged me here the clientele was basically having sex on the dance floor.”

“It probably would’ve only encouraged her more.”

“True.” A model-tall woman wedged herself between us and began air-kissing Penelope in a manner so insincere I actually cringed, gulped my cosmo, and sneaked away. I got pulled into some inane conversation with a few people from the bank who’d just arrived and who looked a little shell-shocked to be away from their computers, and I chatted as briefly as possible with Penelope’s mother, who immediately referenced both the Chanel suit and the heels she was wearing and then pulled Penelope by the arm to another cache of people. I surveyed the designer-clad crowd and tried not to shrink in my outfit, which had been purchased online from a combination of J. Crew and Banana Republic at three in the morning a few months ago. Will had been particularly insistent lately that I needed “going out” clothes, but the catalog orders were not what he had in mind. I got the feeling that any of these people could—and would—feel perfectly comfortable roaming around naked. Even better than the clothes (which were perfect) was the confidence, and that came from somewhere else entirely. Two hours and three cosmos later, certifiably tipsy, I was considering going home. Instead, I grabbed another drink and ducked outside.

The line to get in had cleared up entirely; only the bouncer who’d held me in club purgatory for so long remained. I was preparing my snide remarks should he address me in any way whatsoever, but he just grinned and returned his attention to the paperback he was reading, which looked like a matchbook in his massive hands. Shame he was so cute—but jerks always are.

“So, what was it about me that you didn’t like?” I couldn’t help myself. Five years in the city and I’d tried to avoid places with doormen or velvet ropes unless absolutely necessary; I’d inherited at least a bit of my parents’ egalitarian self-righteousness—or intense insecurity, depending on how you looked at it.

“Pardon?”

“I mean, when you wouldn’t let me in before, even though it’s my best friend’s engagement party.”

He shook his head and half-smiled to himself. “Look, it’s nothing personal. They hand