

INCLUDES THE NOVELLA
PARTY GIRL'S FIRST DATE

Party Girl

A NOVEL

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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PARTYgirl

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*For Mama, who gave me wings
and
For Daddy, who taught me how to use them*

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Chapter ONE

I'm singing . . . or, really, bellowing might be a better word.

My voice is miserable, and I'm a far cry from Miley, who's wailing from my iPod dock, but I'm too happy to care.

This is the very first day, of my very first real job, in my very first week in my very new city. This is the first day of the rest of my life, and I'm going to kick this day's butt! Watch out LA, Landon Brinkley is here and she's . . . belting out every word of this song like her life depends on it!

I wrap another piece of long blonde hair around the outside of the flat iron and stare at my reflection in the mirror while the curl heats to perfection. My big blue eyes shine back, outlined all around by the perfect shade of teak liner. The few clusters of individual lashes I added are definitely the right choice; they really stand out against the shimmery champagne coating on my lids. The eye shadow matches the MAC Lipglass in glittery pink I've bought just for this day. There's a little shimmer in my bronzer too, so my makeup ties in beautifully with the gold rhinestones lining the collar of my fitted pink cardigan. I smile at my own shining reflection; all the light-catching glimmer is gorgeous, and so *me*. If I had a power color, it would definitely be *sparkle*.

I work the last length of hair down through the flat iron, creating the ideal bouncy curl I perfected in seventh grade. The door to the bathroom bursts open behind me, and I try not to flinch when Max glares at me through mascara-smudged eyes. Her dark pixie cut is sticking up in every

possible direction, and I gather from the deep creases running down one side of her face that however few hours she's been in bed she's slept all of them on that cheek.

"I'm sorry, is the music too loud?" I smile sheepishly and lower the volume.

"Miley isn't appropriate at any time of day, but before eight is ridiculous for anyone over the age of eleven," she says with a scowl.

She rubs one eye aggressively and pushes a hand through her hair. The movement jangles the pile of bracelets she never seems to remove from her left wrist. Her "pajamas" are an oversize T-shirt with a picture of a muscle car and the words "My Other Ride is Your Mom" stamped across the front.

Charming.

I hope she's got underwear on, but the shirt's hanging down too low to tell. She's clearly comfortable walking around the apartment wearing just a top, and I suppose if I were that thin and tall and had legs that long, I'd probably run around naked. I sigh. At five foot three I suppose it's my lot in life to forever envy anyone taller than I am. Oh well, a little tease and a back comb and my hair gets me at least two inches closer to heaven.

"Oh, come on, she's edgier now. She got that crazy haircut, I thought you'd—" I try.

"We can't even debate this topic . . . My brain cells are *literally* dying right now in an attempt to contemplate something so inane."

She doesn't even look at me as she speaks. She just walks across the space of the small bathroom, pulls down the underwear that were indeed hidden by her shirt, and sits down on the toilet.

I want to act cool, like finishing my makeup while she pees three feet from me is totally normal. But we've been roommates for exactly six days, and during that time we've spent a sum total of forty-something minutes together. I'm not a prude or anything, but *Lord*, let's ease into this, shall we?

"Why are you even awake this early?" Max grumbles, standing back up.

"It's my first day, remember?" I sound way too perky, even to my own ears.

“Oh yeah. Well, good luck, I’ve heard Selah’s a total asshole.”

I start to ask her what that means, but she’s already yawning out the door, presumably to sleep until the afternoon. I take one last look in the mirror and then head into my room to grab my purse. My bed is already made and covered with throw pillows in various shades of purple. Max made fun of the fact that I was already unpacked, with pictures hung and clothes organized by style, by the end of my first day here, but I can’t stand disorganization. I told her that when she interviewed me on the phone for the roommate position. She told me she was the polar opposite but that she was home so rarely it shouldn’t be an issue. Then she said that if I could cover half of the \$1,650 monthly rent and promise not to bring home any douche bags (her words, not mine), I could move in. And \$825 later I had a place to live . . . in *Hollywood*. I still smile every time I think about my new zip code.

I step into the pumps patiently waiting next to my bed and reach for my purse. Even though it’s a couple months old, I grin every time I look at this bag. It’s a velour Juicy Daydreamer in bubble-gum pink with satin bows and gold charms; I saved my tips for months to get it. I don’t usually buy anything so expensive but it was so worth it. I glance at the clock on my phone: it’s 8:17 a.m.

Perfect: I have just enough time to head down to the garage, get on the road, and drive from my apartment to my new office in Beverly Hills. I might even get there a little before nine and have a chance to grab some coffee.

Beverly Hills. Eek! I almost can’t believe it. I’ve dreamed about moving to LA for most of my life, and now I’m here!

The ancient elevator doors open to reveal our apartment’s underground garage, which apparently always smells like trash no matter what day it is. With every step the butterflies in my stomach seem to grow in size and strength. I start whispering the mantra I’ve said to myself a thousand times over the last year whenever I’ve gotten nervous.

I am strong. I am smart. I am courageous.

I am strong. I am smart. I am courageous.

The words are a litany as my heels clip-clop on the cement and I home in on my battered Ford Explorer. I had it washed once I got here to get rid of the millions of bugs that were murdered against the windshield on the drive through four states, but it still looks beat-up. Even if the license plate weren't from Texas, the SUV, with its custom Longhorns trailer hitch, would be out of place on LA streets. But it's not like I can afford to get anything else.

I pull out of the garage and am just turning right onto Fountain when my iPhone starts playing "I Hope You Dance" by Lee Ann Womack . . . It's Mama.

I hit the button for speakerphone. I'm still not used to this whole hands-free thing in Cali.

"Hi—wait, hold on, I thought this lane was clear. Now I'm stuck behind a parked car—ugh! Come on, let me back in!"

"Are you hollerin' at me, baby?" Mama asks cheerfully.

"No, Mama, I'm tryin' to—wait, OK, I'm back in. Sorry, I was tryin' to merge. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Just workin' on my biscuits."

In the background I can hear the rolling pin hit the edge of the counter as she works her dough down to the perfect density. My parents have owned The Pit since before I was born, and even though they have plenty of faithful employees, Mama refuses to let anyone else in on her legendary buttermilk-biscuit recipe. Even I don't know what she puts in those things, because a southern woman would sooner give up her firstborn than share the secrets of her best recipe.

The Pit is famous for Daddy's barbecue, but no table ever leaves without working their way through at least two helpings of Mama's biscuits. Which is why, every day they're open, you'll find Mama in the kitchen making her biscuits.

"Ooh, I wish I had one right now. I'm starving!"

"Bless your heart, why didn't you eat somethin'?" she asks, concerned.

"I was too nervous before. I'll grab something later."

"Baby, don't start skippin' meals now; you're already too skinny."

“Oh, I won’t. I was just in a hurry. Hmm, I wonder what’s taking so long—” I glance at the clock on my dash: 8:41.

“What’s that honey?”

“Sorry, it’s just, I haven’t gotten all that far down the street. I don’t understand where all this traffic is coming from. I’m supposed to be there in nineteen minutes and I’m not even to La Cienega yet.” I crane my neck to try and see around the car in front of me . . . All I see are more cars.

“All right, girl, I’ll let ya go. Just wanted to check in. I miss ya.”

“I miss you too, Mama. I’ll call you after, OK?”

I push the end button and scoot my car forward a scant two feet in line.

“Oh *please*, I can’t be late!” I cry out to the cars in front of me. The clock on the dash reads 8:45.

Oh God, Lord Jesus, I cannot be late on my first day!

I don’t know if what Max has heard about Selah is true, but I certainly don’t want to make a bad impression. Everything I know about my new boss is based on a Google search. She started Selah Smith Events five years ago just after turning twenty-eight, and in that short time has become the most publicized event planner ever. SSE has produced some of the biggest celebrity weddings, baby showers, and movie premieres in the last few years, giving each one the stamp of edgy luxury Selah is known for. She isn’t just the planner either; Selah has become a celebrity in her own right, often walking the red carpet at the same events she produces. She’s model gorgeous, tall and thin, and her dark-brown hair never changes from her signature severe A-line bob.

Selah is easily the coolest woman alive, and I can’t believe she’s going to be my boss! I had to beg, *beg*, the planner I’d assisted last summer to make a call to her old colleague in Houston. That colleague called someone else in LA, who called someone else, who finally had a contact at SSE. I’d e-mailed back and forth with someone named McKenna for nearly two months before finally getting a ten-minute phone interview with some girl who was in such a hurry that I never even got her name. After another e-mail from McKenna asking for a picture of myself that was apparently approved, I got a

formal offer letter via e-mail. The deal was for a three-month unpaid internship with the promise that if I proved myself I'd be offered a permanent position at one of the most successful event agencies on either coast.

Unpaid or otherwise, I am beside-myself-excited by the opportunity; my parents, less so. I'm their only child, so the idea of me leaving our small town in West Texas to move to Los Angeles was more than a little upsetting. But there was really nothing for it. I'd grown up in a big, loud southern family, surrounded by aunts, uncles, and cousins, with parents who made a huge fat celebration out of *everything*. I could set a dinner table with Mama's wedding china by the time I was four, write out my own invitations by six, and when I was thirteen I saw Jennifer Lopez in *The Wedding Planner*. It was the first time I realized there were people whose job it was to throw beautiful events. It's all I've ever wanted to do since. Daddy couldn't fathom a world in which someone would pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for a single party, but he wasn't allowed to complain about my choices since I'd done everything he asked of me first.

I'd gone to all four years at the state college in the next town over and earned the teaching degree he'd insisted I have as a fallback. I knew he had secretly hoped I'd find some reason to stay home during those years, but my resolve only grew. I took on every shift I could at The Pit and stockpiled my cash reserves so that I could move to LA and start the glamorous life I'd always dreamed about. By my calculations, the \$9,342 in my savings account can last exactly five months. It's a big gamble, but one I am willing to make in the hopes that I'll be promoted to the job of my dreams.

Every single dream I have revolves around me working for the best in events, and that's Selah Smith. I have to go in there and show her what an asset I am to her team. I have to—

Crap!

The clock on the dash reads 8:58 a.m., and I'm nowhere near Beverly Hills.

Chapter TWO

I'd been so excited to find out that the offices of SSE sit on the busiest part of Beverly Drive, with its cute boutiques and great-looking restaurants, but I barely even notice them as I sprint down the street in heels.

It's 9:22 a.m. by the time the elevator stops at the top floor of the building where SSE is located.

The doors open, and I walk into a small reception area. It's all clean lines and stark white. A pretty girl, probably my age, sits at a modern-looking desk in the center of the small space. Behind her, a faux wall with the SSE logo on it separates the reception desk from the large industrial-style office behind her. The whole place looks expensive and gorgeous, and I'd be in awe if I wasn't sick with the knowledge that I'm probably never going to work here since I was incapable of showing up on time.

I walk over to the desk, but before I can get any words out, the receptionist's phone beeps. She punches a button with her finger and speaks into the microphone of her earpiece.

"SSE? Yes, absolutely." She punches a few buttons, then looks up at me waiting.

"Hi, I'm—"

As the phone beeps again the receptionist's finger flies up, the universal signal for I'll-be-with-you-in-a-second.

"SSE? Yes, may I ask who's calling? One moment." She jabs the buttons again, and I wonder fleetingly if she takes out her frustration on that poor

phone. She speaks into her headset. “Hi, I have Meryl for you . . . I don’t know, you know she never remembers your direct line. OK, here she is.” She abuses the phone again and then looks up at me.

“I’m—” The phone beeps and that single digit flies up again, telling me to hold on. I’m already so late; my chances of keeping this job are depleting with every call she takes. When she looks up at me again, I pounce.

“Hi there, I’m Landon Brinkley,” I explain.

“And?” Her eyes narrow, and because her hair is pulled back into such a tight ponytail, I think it has to be painful to make that expression.

“I, um . . . I’m starting my internship today.”

“Of course you are,” she says sarcastically. “Who’s your contact?”

“Oh, my contact is McKenna. Um, gosh, now that I think about it, I don’t actually know her last name.” I laugh nervously.

The receptionist is not amused.

She punches numbers into the phone.

“Hi, there’s an intern here for you. Hmm . . . OK, uh-huh . . .” As she listens to whoever is on the phone, she looks at me with even further disdain.

Crap! Crappity-crap-crap!

“You were supposed to be here at nine,” she says.

It’s the nail in my coffin; I can tell by her tone. Normally I would grovel, or cry, or start apologizing profusely, but I know instinctually it won’t make any difference. I’m gonna have to lie. I hate lying, and I’m terrible at it, but it’s my only option if I want to keep this job.

“There must be some confusion.” I try and sound as authoritative as she does. “I was told to be here at nine thirty. In fact I came a bit early in case I couldn’t find parking.” Jeez, my first day on the job in LA and already my moral compass is bent sideways.

“She says she was supposed to be here at nine thirty,” she speaks into her headset. “I don’t know . . . Yes . . .” She gives me a quick once-over. “Cute enough, I guess . . . OK.”

She stabs the phone with her finger and looks back up at me. “Wait over there.” She nods in the direction of the modern white lounge furniture

set up in the corner. The phone beeps again and she looks down, dismissing me.

I sag in relief. I don't think I'm out of the woods yet, but at least they didn't throw me out. I walk over to the waiting area, trying not to let my heels make too much noise on the polished cement floor.

I'm too nervous to sit down, so I stand next to the fancy sofa and stare at the framed photos that hang on the wall. They're a montage of sorts, hung gallery-style with images of various sizes and shapes. Each picture shows elements of different events: modern centerpieces at a cocktail party, a long elegant dinner table set for at least thirty people, red-carpet arrivals of various movie premieres . . . Each image is more gorgeous than the last, evidence of a designer with exceptional taste and an unlimited budget.

"You're lucky I couldn't find the e-mail with your arrival time," a voice says from behind me.

I whirl around to face the handsome, perfectly dressed man-child standing next to the reception desk. He's not much taller than I am and dressed like a professor from the 1950s with his oversize glasses and his bow tie. His outfit fits his thin frame to perfection, and each piece—slacks, button-down, dress shoes—is black and stands out against the all-white decor in the office.

"I'm sorry, what?" I ask, confused.

He smirks. "I said you're lucky that I can't find the e-mail proof that your start time was nine. I know for a fact you're late, but you get some credit for having the balls to lie about it. Follow me." He turns on his heel and starts walking off. I have no choice but to hurry after him.

Balls?

Behind the faux wall SSE is a hive of activity. The office is one large industrial-style room, with desks that look like white glass cubes, and is cooler than any workspace I've ever seen. The desks are arranged in a perfect rectangle of three rows of five. Even with big desktops, most of the workstations are overcrowded with paper, magazines, linen samples, centerpiece mock-ups, and invitations in every style imaginable. The

employees are going at a feverish pace on computers, on phone calls, on design samples and mood boards . . . It's cooler and prettier than I ever could have imagined!

As I hurry to follow the professor, I notice the white decor continues in this room too. Everything—the walls, the desks, the oversize Apple screens—are all stark white. In contrast, the staff of SSE, who are fifteen or so of the prettiest under-thirty set I've ever seen, are dressed just like the professor and the receptionist in all black. I look down at my polka-dot pencil skirt, my blue blouse, my pink cardigan, and the bubble-gum purse in my hand.

Crap.

At the far end of the office, walls of opaque glass create one large room and a smaller one next to it. I follow the professor into the latter. He closes the door behind me and takes a seat at one of the two desks in the room. He puts a headset on while waving at me to take the chair next to his desk.

“OK, we're off to a bit of a rocky start here, Brinkley. You and I both know you were late, but since I can't prove it I'm giving you until the end of the day to impress the hell out of me, or you can pack off to whatever quaint hamlet in West Virginia you hail from.”

“I'm—”

“Nope,” he cuts me off, “not interested in whatever it is you're about to say. I don't have the time or the inclination to hear your excuses. I've got work to do. Do you want to be a part of that or not?”

I'm so embarrassed and don't trust myself to speak without breaking into tears. Instead, I nod.

He nods once in response and types quickly on his laptop. His iPhone chirps and he grabs it and reads the screen while talking.

“There are three things you need to remember here at all times. First of all, nobody wants to hear what you think.”

I must wince or something because he looks annoyed.

“That's not me being an asshole, that's just a fact. Interns are a dime a dozen and everyone whose opinion *does* matter has earned the right to that position. So keep your mouth shut. Secondly, whatever someone asks you

for, they needed it *yesterday*. We're constantly handling millions of dollars' worth of events at one time, and the pace here is fast. If you can't keep up, you'll get run over like roadkill. Got it?"

"Sure, I—"

"Nope," he cuts me off again, "remember, I'm not interested. Just nod please."

I nod.

"You'll be working directly for me, and I work directly for Quade. Quade, of course, works directly for Selah. Just do whatever either of us asks you to do as fast as possible without fucking it up. Understand?"

I nod again.

"OK, come with me."

I stand, place my bag under the small chair next to his desk, and follow him just outside the door. He points to a low bookshelf that runs the length of the frosted glass of the office wall. It holds a mess of binders in every color, some half-hanging off the shelf and some lying on their sides. Colorful pages have been ripped out of magazines and haphazardly inserted here and there in the lineup.

"Organize these." He points at the mess.

"Is there a particular order y'all want them in or—" I ask before I remember that I'm not supposed to be speaking.

"Oh, she'll *hate* that accent. You better do something about it." He turns to walk away while I stare after him, dumbfounded.

What? How is that even something to hate? I can't help the way I talk!

I want to tell him to shove it and that I'm from Texas, *not* West Virginia. I want to mention how hard I've worked to get here today and that I won't have it destroyed by some snobby, overdressed jerk. But I don't say any of those things; I just stand there and stare at his back as he goes to turn the corner, and before I can think better of it, I call out.

"What's your name?"

He turns back. "I thought you realized." He walks towards me with his hand out, apparently finding, or faking, some manners. "I'm McKenna."

"*You're McKenna?*" I say, shaking his hand. "I've never met a man named McKenna. I didn't realize who you were."

"My name is Will, but as far as Selah's concerned, I'm McKenna, Samantha is Quade, and you'll be Brinkley. It's last names only here."

"But my name is Landon," I say, more confused than defiant.

McKenna cocks his head to one side and smirks. "Don't you get it? Nobody cares what your name is, Kansas. You'll either fade into oblivion or find some way to earn your keep; the means by which you make your impression are up to you, but in either case your name is irrelevant."

With that he turns and goes back into the little office.

I stand there a moment, perplexed.

I'd always known people in LA were going to be tougher than people from back home, but I hadn't expected them to be so openly rude. Oh well, not much I can do about it now. I look down at the offensive bookshelf. I might not be able to make McKenna like me, but this cluttered disaster I can handle. I start pulling binders off the shelves and get to work.



I don't know how long I've been down on the glazed cement floor, but it's got to be hours because my knees hurt like hell. Even still, I've managed to organize each of the binders into some semblance of order.

It took awhile, but eventually I discovered that these binders are inspiration books filled with tear sheets. Every binder housed a different party element, and I'd labeled each one appropriately with the little label maker I'd found buried on the shelf. Some were obvious: centerpieces, candles, tablecloths in solid colors, and tablecloths in patterns. Others took a little more thought to figure out, and in some cases required a bold-faced assumption. Those included things like "fish-based appetizers," "unique cocktail vessels," and "atmosphere/air." This last binder was filled with images of bubbles and smoke . . . I took a guess.

Now that each binder has a label, I set out to alphabetize and place them back on the shelf. I grab the first stack and begin to sort through them on the floor around me. I'm on my third stack when I hear the clip of heels coming my direction. I look up just as a willowy brunette with a perfect A-line bob and an angry-looking girl with pin-straight black hair both come to a stop next to my binder city.

I look up in awe. Selah is easily one of the prettiest people I've ever seen in real life. She's also the only person in the room wearing color (well, besides me). She's in tight gray slacks that hug her long legs and an ivory blouse that's only partially tucked in messy perfection. Her black ankle boots have a peep toe and gold buttons laced over black suede. I can see the red peeking out from their bottoms, and even I know how expensive that makes them.

I smile up at her. She's so cool—exactly like I knew she'd be! Every single thing about her is crisp, tailored perfection. She's my biggest idol come to life, and she's . . . glaring at me like I'm the blight on her otherwise perfect day.

McKenna comes out of his office to meet her, but before he can say anything, she speaks in an overly loud voice as if she needs everyone in the room to pay attention.

“Isn't there something else *this girl* could be doing with her time other than cluttering up my floor?”

I hold my breath, too terrified to respond. McKenna told me that no one cared what I had to say. It doesn't escape me that Selah spit the words “this girl” with the same venom one might use to say the words “crack addict” or “puppy rapist.”

My stomach is churning. I'd imagined meeting Selah Smith for years. I had it all planned out. I was going to tell her how much I loved her design aesthetic and how the Pucci tablecloth she used for Margo Reeve's fiftieth birthday party set the stage for one of the prettiest tablescares I'd ever seen. I never imagined she'd hate me before I'd even opened my mouth, or that she'd blow away just as quickly as she'd arrived with her two minions in tow,