



#1 New York Times Bestselling
Author of *The Devil Wears Prada*

**LAUREN
WEISBERGER**

A Novel

*Where The Grass
Is Green And The
Girls Are Pretty*

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A NOVEL

Lauren
Weisberger



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1

Spinning for Boys

“I think the reservation is under Marcus,” Skye told the statuesque, Nordic-looking blonde who grudgingly acknowledged her at the door of Le Bilboquet.

Presumably the hostess at this A-list restaurant didn’t see a lot of people come in

wearing maxi skirts and Birkenstocks.

“Mmm,” the girl said, gazing at the screen in front of her, the kind that couldn’t

be read unless someone was standing at exactly the right angle. “Is that so?”

Skye flushed. An hour earlier she’d been happily sharing coffee with her old

teacher friends in Harlem, but here she was nothing but an aging hippie. “It would be

under Peyton Marcus, from ANN?” She hated the way she sounded as she said it.

The hostess’s head shot up. “Oh! I’m sorry, did you say *Peyton* Marcus? All News Network?”

Skye forced a smile. “She’s my sister.”

“Of course!” The girl beamed. “We normally don’t seat anyone until the full party

has arrived. And naturally, we don’t hold reservations for more than seven minutes,

but please, follow me.”

She led Skye past a cluster of tightly packed tables to a two-top positioned perfectly between the dining room and the sidewalk. With unobstructed people-

watching on Madison Avenue, it was the type of table Skye would never, ever have

been shown to on her own.

The hostess placed two menus on the table. “How funny,” she said, smiling at

Skye. “There isn’t even a hint of a family resemblance.”

“Yes, I hear that a lot,” Skye replied.

“I mean, Ms. Marcus is just so fair! Her hair, her skin, her eyes...”

“Mmm, isn’t that true.”

“Well, anyway! I’ll send her over as soon as she arrives,” the young woman said

before finally leaving.

Skye maneuvered herself into the seat with the inferior view and dropped her bag

on the ground next to her. Instantly a uniformed waiter produced a tiny wooden stool

and proudly placed the worn suede bag on it. Then, in either a bad fake French accent

or a completely charming authentic one—Skye could never tell—he dramatically

revealed a champagne flute and filled it with a bubbling, golden liquid.

“With our

compliments,” he crooned, before sashaying away.

Skye tasted the champagne: dry and unbelievably delicious. The fizz went to the

back of her nose, the warmth hit her stomach, and she sat back to enjoy the all-too-rare

feeling. She wondered why she didn't drink more. Every now and then she'd pour

herself a glass of wine on a random Tuesday night and feel rebellious and crazy, but

then she'd inevitably fall asleep or get a migraine or both, and her freewheeling

drinking would end for another couple weeks.

Skye felt a tap on her back and jumped. At the adjacent table, a blond woman

with bass lips smiled. "Pardon me," the woman said. "But is your bag Saint Laurent?"

It took Skye a moment to understand. "Oh, this?" Skye pulled her imitation suede

bag from its throne. "No, it's actually from Urban Outfitters."

The woman raised her eyebrows and forced a chuckle. "Oh! My. Well,

irregardless, it's lovely." She turned back to her dining companion, a man half her age

who had used the fifteen-second interaction to check his phone.

It's "regardless," Skye thought, feeling the blush cover her neck. *And you should*

get a full refund for those lips.

Finally, her sister hurried in. "Hello, darling!" she said, smiling and leaning across the table to kiss Skye's cheek. Twice.

"Seriously?" Skye asked.

“What? We’re French, at least for the afternoon!” Peyton pulled out her AirPods.

“How long has it been since you’ve heard ‘Don’t Know What You Got’? Twenty years?”

“Is that Cinderella?” Skye laughed. “Way more than twenty. I made out with

Harry Feldman in the temple coat closet at Samantha Weinstein’s bat mitzvah to that

song.”

“Life was so much easier in the time of power ballads.”

Skye laughed. “There was no emotion Whitesnake couldn’t quantify.”

“Exactly.” Peyton sipped her champagne. “Now everything’s gone to shit. My life

is a hot mess.”

Her sister looked more put together on a casual Saturday morning than Skye did

ever. Peyton’s coral-colored jacket, likely Chanel, topped a white silk T-shirt, skinny

crop jeans, and peep-toe Louboutins in a gorgeous nude patent. Her blond hair looked

freshly cut, colored, and blown straight so that the slightly turned-out ends grazed her

chin and disguised her oversized ears, the one fault that Peyton hadn’t yet corrected.

She pulled off her Tom Ford sunglasses and tossed them into her bag, which was, of

course, the authentic white leather Saint Laurent version of Skye's cheap imitation.

"Yes, I can see that. Remind me how, exactly?"

"The usual," Peyton said breezily. "The higher our ratings go, the more everyone

freaks out trying to protect them. Jim, my very favorite sexual-harassing co-host, is

being even more of a dick than usual. I've been working on keeping a list of really

excellent on-air experts—I don't always love the ones the producers book—and that's

been challenging to navigate. And there's so much to do to get Max ready for school. I

mean, who would have thought my own daughter can't so much as book herself a hair

appointment?"

"There's a difference between 'can't' and 'doesn't care.'"

The waiter swept in to refill Skye's champagne glass and swoon over Peyton,

who asked for a bottle of pinot grigio.

"A bottle? It's eleven-thirty," Skye said.

"Thanks for the time check, Mom." Peyton turned to the waiter. "I'll have the

Niçoise, please. Dressing on the side.”

“Of course, Ms. Marcus.”

He turned to Skye.

“I’ll have the same, please. And also an order of fries.”

The waiter nodded and disappeared. Peyton wrinkled her nose. “Fries?”

“You don’t have to eat them.”

Another waiter materialized, this one a young woman who was trying very hard

not to stare at Peyton while she struggled to open the bottle of wine. Her fingers

slipped. “Ohmigod, I’m sorry. I’m new, and…”

Peyton made a motion for the girl to give her the bottle and opener. “Here, let

me.” She expertly inserted the corkscrew, twisted it, and pulled it straight out with a

refreshing pop. “I used to wait tables, when I was first starting out.” She handed the

bottle back.

“Thank you,” the girl said. “That’s so nice of you.”

While she was pouring, a heaping plate of fries landed on their table. Crispy and

hot, they were topped with sea salt, and Skye immediately popped two into her mouth.

“Apparently, only brunettes with shit-brown eyes would ever order fries around here,”

she said through bites. “The hostess was very taken with our lack of physical

resemblance.”

“You may have gotten the shit-brown eyes, but I’d trade my baby blues in a heartbeat for the genetic aberration that allows you to eat like you’re eighteen every

day of your life. Do you even realize how rare that is after forty? I will gain a pound

today by simply sharing a table with those fries,” Peyton said, watching Skye chew.

Skye laughed. “I turned forty less than a year ago. You only have nine months to

go. May as well enjoy them while you can.”

“Dreading it. My metabolism is shot, just like my vagina,” Peyton said, taking a

long drink of the wine. “Have I mentioned that?”

“Only a thousand times.”

“One lousy, completely uncomplicated childbirth all those years ago and still, it’s

never recovered.”

Skye held up her hand. “Do not. The last time you likened it to the hanging slabs

of deli meat at Gold's, I couldn't eat for two days."

"I won't, I won't," Peyton said, waving her hand. "I found a new physical therapist, who gave me a set of weights. Did I tell you this? You're supposed to start

with the smallest one and work your way through the whole set. Apparently, by the

time you can hold in the heaviest one, you're not peeing when you sneeze anymore."

Skye smiled. "And?"

"And I couldn't keep in the starter weight!" Peyton leaned forward. "Literally, the

lightest one. For, like, *beginners*. You're supposed to wear it ten minutes a day and

walk around, do your normal stuff, but it kept slipping out! My therapist said she'd

never heard of anyone who couldn't keep in the lightest one."

"That's reassuring. She sounds really great."

"Right? Like, 'Wow! You have the widest, most gaping vagina of anyone I've

ever worked with, and I'm a pelvic floor specialist, so that's really saying something.'"

Skye wiped tears from her eyes. She often thought how unfortunate it was that the

viewing public never got to see this wickedly funny, outrageous side of her sister.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Peyton continued. “One average-sized baby a hundred years ago. Thank god I didn’t breastfeed.” She cupped her breasts. “These are still passable.”

“You’d be hung today if anyone else heard you say that.”

“Please. Mothers today have it so easy. You get your hair blown out, your nails

done, and you take a comfy Uber XL to the hospital at a mutually convenient time. It’s

all so civilized.”

“It’s supposed to be one of the most meaningful and beautiful experiences in a

woman’s life.”

Peyton took another long drink of her wine. “Meaningful? Maybe. But the kind of

women who think it’s *beautiful* are the ones having babies in bathtubs in their living

rooms. Hard pass.”

Skye laughed. “Esther said her bathtub birth was really special.”

Peyton rolled her eyes. “You know I love Esther, but please stop reminding me

about her living room deliveries? It makes me judge her.” She speared her salad. “How

is she, by the way?”

“She’s good, I think. Still not dating anyone, but trying.” Skye pulled an iPad

from her overstuffed bag, trying not to spill anything. “She’s been advising me on the

legal issues for the girls’ residence, which has been extremely helpful. Want to see my

mood board?”

“Yes, just don’t call it that,” Peyton said. She took the tablet and started to swipe

and zoom through the different sections for carpeting, wall decor, furniture, and

bedding Skye was considering for the five-bedroom home that was being converted

into a residence for underprivileged girls, who would then attend Paradise’s award-

winning public high school.

“Wow, this looks *amazing*.”

“It’s really coming along.”

“I’d say. What’s your move-in date?”

“Labor Day weekend at the latest, if I want the girls to have an uninterrupted

school year. If the funding comes in soon from Isaac's friend, we'll be fine."

"Henry can be a prick, but he'll come through with the money. It's the only thing

he's good at."

"He's been nothing but wonderful so far," Skye said, forking the last of her salad

into her mouth.

"He may only be funding this to meet some corporate responsibility requirement," Peyton said.

"That's fine with me. He can do it for whatever reason he wants, just so long as

he does it."

Peyton grabbed the bottle of pinot grigio by its neck and hauled it out of the silver

ice bucket. "I'm proud of you for getting this girls' residence idea out of your head and

off the ground. And you're getting back to work after so many years off."

Skye stared at her.

"What?" Peyton asked. "I'm not *judging* you for your extremely extended maternity leave. I've just heard you drone endlessly how you're done with Girl Scouts

and looking forward to something a little more...stimulating."

“How about you?” Skye said. “Max leaving for school? Your one and only baby

girl, grown and flown?”

Peyton scrunched her nose. “More like irritable and entitled.”

“You’re too tough on her.”

“On the child who’s devastated to be heading to Princeton?”

Skye sighed. “Film school would have ruined her life? That’s all I am saying.”

“Can we not rehash this? My god, it’s *Princeton*. Anyway, she’s all yours this

summer.”

“I can’t wait. Maybe you and Isaac could come up and stay, too?”

“Max definitely wouldn’t want us there. And I’ll be in the studio even more than

usual this summer, making sure we can keep ratings firmed up going into fall.” She

pointed to Skye’s phone. “You just got a text,” she said, at the same time that her own

phone vibrated to indicate a new email.

“How does Mom always know when we’re together?” Skye muttered, glancing at

the notification. “If she knew how to download the app—any app—I’d think she was

tracking us.”

Peyton swiped open her email and read, "Subject line: talcum powder."

"Oh, please don't," Skye said, placing two fingers and a thumb on the side of her

forehead.

" 'Dear girls,' " Peyton read in her best Marcia voice. " 'There is some evidence,

parentheses, not conclusive, end parentheses, that talcum powder increases the chance

of quote ovarian cancer, end quote. I used it with both of you often. You may want to

mention it at your next doctor's appointments. Love, Mom.' "

"What a useful email to get on a random afternoon in June! Thanks, Mom," Skye

said.

Peyton snorted. "Why do you think she put 'ovarian cancer' in quotes? Like, it's

not a real thing?"

"It still doesn't come close to her email about Aunt Hattie," Skye said.

" 'Dear girls,' " Peyton started, reciting it from memory. " 'I'm sorry to have to

tell you that Aunt Hattie died last night. I'll email you as soon as I have the shiva

information. In other news, I finally decided on colors for my new Camry. Silver cloud

for the exterior, charcoal gray leather on the inside. Love, Mom.’”

Both women were in tears. Despite the fact that they’d recited this particular

email to each other no fewer than a hundred times, it never got less funny.

“We should laugh while we can,” Peyton said while dabbing her lips with a sheer

gloss from a brand Skye had never heard of. “Because it’s only a matter of time until

we do this to our own daughters.”

“Speak for yourself. I think it’s well established that I’m the cool mom,” Skye

said.

“I would have made a good boy mom, I think.” Peyton nodded thoughtfully.

“I’m pretty sure in Paradise they’re spinning for boys. There is no way that many

families are having all those boys naturally.”

“Your town is so fucked up.” Peyton tucked her blond hair behind an ear.

“Why

would anyone want *boys* that badly?”

“Sports, I think. The more boys you have, the more seasons you can cover and the

more fields you can sit on and carpools you can drive and practices you can attend and

teams you can coach. My working theory is that it's a way for unhappily married

couples to avoid having to spend a second of time together on the weekends."

Peyton laughed. "I did warn you when you moved to the suburbs." She held her

hands up. "I know, I know—outstanding schools, Gabe's job. But what did you

expect? It's a tough crowd." She pushed back her chair. "Let's get out of here?"

They paid the check and wove through the restaurant, past the now friendly

hostess, and out onto the sidewalk. A mother and daughter pair did a simultaneous

double take when they spotted Peyton, who offered an enthusiastic wave and a bright

smile.

"I don't know how you do it," Skye said, watching the exchange.

"What?"

"Constantly cater to your adoring public. Don't you ever want to go somewhere

and not be recognized? Especially on a weekend."

"Nope."

Skye laughed. "You're a lunatic. I love you." She hoisted her scruffy bag onto her

shoulder and held out her arms.

“Love you, too,” Peyton said, walking into Skye’s outstretched arms. “Send me

ideas for Mom’s present. And we have to get on a birthday plan for her soon.”

“Copy that,” Skye said. “By ‘we,’ I’m assuming you mean me?”

“Yes.” Her sister made a mock-guilty face. “You’re so much better at this stuff.”

They hugged goodbye, blocking the flow of pedestrian traffic on Madison Avenue. Skye pulled back quickly, unwilling to inconvenience strangers. Peyton

laughed at her.

“Love you,” Peyton said, offering a little flat-palmed wave like Queen Elizabeth

at the Trooping of the Guard.

“Love you, too.” Skye stepped out of everyone’s way and watched her sister

stride down the street like it was a runway in Paris. Peyton could be self-absorbed and

showy, sometimes downright impossible, but Skye couldn’t deny that she loved that

crazy bitch.

2

Good Things Come to Those Who Pay

“Back from commercial break in sixty seconds, stand by!”

Peyton sipped her coffee from her All News Network mug and turned her head

sideways, toward the makeup artist who’d materialized to powder Peyton’s forehead.

The cameramen adjusted their positions for the upcoming segment while Sean, the EP,

called over the studio’s audio system. “Homestretch, everyone! Only six more minutes

to the weekend.”

Peyton could see a few people in the control room give a cheer. It had been a long

week, and everyone was anxious to get home to their real lives that weren’t counted in

thirty-second increments or rated on a segment-by-segment basis. The living that took

place outside the brutal hours of five to eight in the morning, the blazing studio lights,

and the relentless, unforgiving pressure of live national television.

Jim, her co-host, returned to their shared desk and lumbered to his anchor chair.

Peyton wondered if Jim’s frequent bathroom visits during commercial breaks were

actually a cover for a quick set of bicep curls.

“TFGIF,” he said, reinserting his earpiece. He smoothed his hair back, but not a

strand moved under his industrial-strength lacquer spray. “A full bottle every three

days,” he’d often bragged.

It’s not that Peyton didn’t like Jim, it was just that...well, fine. She didn’t like

him. He was a damn good anchor, no arguing that, and their audience, which skewed

female, absolutely loved his on-air personality—a kitchen-sink mixture of hyper-

masculinity, unwavering positivity, and, when required, something that very closely

resembled empathy. However, when the cameras were off, he reverted to his authentic

self.

“Am I right?” he asked Peyton, looking at her.

“Huh?” Peyton asked. She’d just remembered that she needed to make a dentist

appointment for that afternoon.

“Thirty seconds!” the loudspeakers announced. A PA appeared to refill both their

water glasses.

“TFGIF,” Jim repeated. “Get it? Thank fucking god it’s Friday.”

“Mmm.” Peyton forced a smile as she pulled out the small Moleskine she kept in

their anchor desk, in which she wrote down the constant to-dos she only remembered

when least able to act.

Book dentist for 5 pm, she scribbled, before another thought occurred to her. Max

had to schedule herself dentist, doctor, and gyn checkups before she left for college at

the end of the summer.

“Twenty seconds!”

As she wrote, Jim took a loud, slurpy slug of whatever was in his ANN mug.

Peyton wondered, for the thousandth time, if his coffee was laced with cocaine or

crushed Adderall or at the very least some sort of black-market testosterone supplement. What else could make a seemingly normal man that *aggressive*?

“Ten seconds!”

Jim cleared his throat, pulled back his shoulders, and began making intimate eye

contact with Camera 3, the one that would lead them back from commercial break.

“Peyton? You good?” Sean asked, this time through her earpiece.

She nodded. *Dammit!* She'd forgotten to check back with Skye about her mother's birthday. She circled the reminder, making it priority number one.

"And we have five, four..."

"Peyton, for chrissakes, move it!" Sean's tone was spiked with irritation.

"...three, two..."

She closed her notebook.

The set went silent. Camera 3's red light blinked to indicate they were live.

Peyton felt a surge of calmness. It was the opposite of an adrenaline rush, a sudden

feeling of complete tranquility. Her brain, ping-ponging only seconds earlier, settled

into that hyper-focused sweet spot, and Peyton morphed, without the least bit of effort,

into her trademark warm composure.

"Welcome back," she said, smiling straight into Camera 3 as though it were a

living room full of her favorite people. "To close out this Friday, we'd like to share

with you one family's incredible story of fortitude and love," Peyton read from the

teleprompter. They always tried to end the week with a fuzzy human-interest story to

leave viewers feeling less suicidal about the state of the world.

“Logan Pierce is a nine-year-old boy who loves drawing, Legos, and cheering on

the Astros from his family’s home outside of Houston,” Peyton read with just the right

mix of gravitas and admiration, even though she was wondering which segment

producer’s pet border collie had written that moronic script. “So imagine the Pierce

family’s horror when Logan was diagnosed with pediatric lymphoma, a rare and life-

threatening disease.” But then, the mother’s dignified sadness as she recounted

Logan’s diagnosis, treatment, and ultimate recovery captured Peyton’s attention

completely, an almost unheard-of phenomenon when she was on air and needed to

juggle so many competing inputs. She was so absorbed by the woman’s voice—and

Logan’s obvious sweetness as he cradled his infant sister—that she almost missed

Sean’s urgent breaking news announcement in her ear.

Her eyes darted to the control room, which had transformed from a calm, finely

choreographed ballet to a chaotic rave. She glanced at the enormous digital clock

above the cameras that counted the time to the second. *Shit*. They were still five full

minutes away from eight o'clock, which meant that the breaking news would need to

be announced on their watch.

"I'll take it," Jim murmured into his microphone. On the monitors in front of

them, Logan's doctor described the effects of lymphoma on children.

"Negative," Sean's voice came back. "Too disruptive. Bad enough we have to cut

short the kid. Go to commercial when this B-roll ends."

Both anchors nodded their understanding.

"They're writing up the intro now but it'll only be thirty seconds' worth of material," Sean continued. "The charges and a brief description. From there I'll talk

you through it."

With this, Peyton felt a small jolt of anxiety. It wasn't panic, exactly, but

something uncomfortable enough that it made her sit up straighter and breathe a little

faster. Breaking news was always unpredictable.

The tape ended, and when the camera switched back to Peyton, she calmly told

the viewers that they'd be back after a quick break. Almost immediately all hell broke

loose.

“This better be worth it,” Peyton said aloud to no one in particular.

“Seriously,” Jim echoed. “We just bailed on a kid with cancer!”

One of the segment producers, Jenna, a prodigy in her mid-twenties who they’d

recently poached from Fox News, announced, “FBI just confirmed simultaneous

arrests for twenty-two individuals, some high profile, all charged with felony

conspiracy and/or mail fraud.”

“Who gives a fuck about mail fraud?” Jim boomed, reading Peyton’s mind.

Jenna ignored him. “All twenty-two are affluent parents accused of buying their

kids’ way into elite universities,” she told them through their earpieces.

“Thirty seconds!” came a voice over the loudspeaker.

Peyton felt a flush of adrenaline. “What do we know? Are we ready?”

Sean burst into the studio, a stack of papers in one hand and his signature large

black glasses in the other. “Jenna, prompter?” he asked into the ether.

Jenna’s disembodied voice confirmed that the teleprompter was set.

“I have enough information here to get us to the end of the show,” Sean said,

waving the printouts. “Read the prompter slowly, and we’ll take it together from

there.”

“Ten seconds!”

Sean went back behind the control room’s glass wall. Peyton watched as he pulled on his headset and jabbed his finger at the graphics guy.

“Buckle up, Buttercup,” Jim said, once again arranging his face into an impressive facade of empathy.

“...three, two, one...”

Camera 2 switched on, the one they primarily used for close-ups, and Peyton’s

eyes found the teleprompter.

“We are interrupting the emotional story of Logan Pierce to bring you breaking

news,” Peyton read, wondering if the slight waver she heard in her own voice was real

or imagined. “ANN has confirmed that the FBI has arrested twenty-two parents of

college applicants across four states and accused them of *purchasing* their children’s

admissions to certain elite universities. While we don’t yet have many of the specifics,

sources have confirmed that at least three of these parents are high-profile

individuals.”

The teleprompter stopped scrolling. She knew it had merely run out of words—

those were the only sentences that Jenna had time to type—but Peyton stopped

breathing. It was only Sean’s voice in her ear that kept her from total panic. No anchor

liked ad-libbing blind to millions of viewers.

“Breathe!” he barked. “I got you.”

And as she inhaled, Sean relayed nugget-sized bits of noninformation to Peyton,

which she synthesized and regurgitated back to the cameras: “No comment yet from

the College Board”; “Waiting to hear from the Manhattan district attorney”; “The

largest conspiracy ever involving college admissions.”

Then Sean barked, “Jim, ask Peyton when we’ll know more!”

Jim, without missing a beat, turned his upper body toward Peyton, furrowed his

brow, and said, “When can we expect more information on this developing story?”

Sean said, “Peyton, end it,” seconds before Peyton returned Jim’s look and

smoothly—she hoped—replied, “Our time this morning is just about up, but Suzanna

and Alejandro will be closely following this story all throughout the nine o'clock

hour.” She turned back to Camera 1 on her left diagonal and said, “Stay right here for

all the details on this emerging scandal. We are Peyton Marcus and Jim Atwood, and

we’ll see you bright and early Monday morning.”

There was a three-second pause where no one moved, and then Sean announced,

“We’re clear!”

The studio broke into applause.

Sean materialized in front of the anchor desk. “Loved that you called it a scandal,” he said, a slight sheen of sweat on his forehead. “Juicy!”

“Thanks for carrying me,” Peyton said, her heart thumping hard in her chest. She

pulled out her earpiece and collapsed back into her chair.

“Good show,” Jim said, removing his earpiece. He stood up, towering over

Peyton and Sean. He had the body of a former college football player and an uncanny

knack for working the phrases “when I played football at Clemson” and “during my

QB days” and “there’s no training for life like D1 football” into regular conversation,

to the point where Peyton felt like she should do a shot of Jäger every time he used one

of them.

“Anyway, I’m out, girls,” he announced, grinning at Sean to show how totally

cool he was with Sean’s gayness. “Have great weekends. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t

do...” He offered a meaty hand in a wave and barreled toward his dressing room.

“Is he wearing Drakkar?” Sean asked, scrunching his nose. He turned back toward his office. “Walk with me.”

Peyton unclipped her microphone and jumped down off her seat. “Do we know

anything else?” she asked.

“About?”

“About the college thing! I mean, we have covered this before, have we not? Is

this really still a thing?” Peyton hurried along the corridor behind him.

He pushed his office door open and flopped into his desk chair. “It’s always a

thing. I’d bet half my class at Stanford got in by rowing or playing volleyball. Or

tennis. *So much tennis*. These idiot parents certainly take it up a notch, but it never gets

old hearing what the wealthy will do to get their kids into Ivy League schools.”

Peyton accepted the bottle of water he passed her. She hadn’t realized how thirsty

she was. Her breathing returned to normal. “Yeah, you’re right,” Peyton said, nodding.

“This goes on all the time, I’m sure. But these parents are probably different, at least if

they were like the last ones: literally faking photos of their kids and paying strangers to

take tests for them. I mean, who does that?”

“Exactly.” Sean’s desktop phone rang. “Yeah? On my way.” He stood up again.

“Gotta run. If I don’t see you before you leave, have a great weekend.” He kissed her

on the cheek and pulled the door shut behind him. It was a small courtesy but a

fortunate one, since Peyton felt a wave of nausea wash over her. Probably just

lingering adrenaline, she thought. The parents getting rounded up were nothing like

her or any of the thousands of other parents who killed themselves giving their kids

every possible advantage. Still, it was unsettling. A second round of this, after they’d

all just put the first one to bed? Peyton took one last sip before she dropped to her

knees and swiftly vomited up the entire contents of her stomach into Sean's elegant

wooden wastebasket.

—

It only took thirteen minutes in an Uber—a record—to get to her private gym at

Seventy-fourth and Madison, a second-floor loft space so gorgeous that it could easily

be mistaken for a movie set. Tucked into one of the spacious, private changing pods,

each featuring a steam shower and vanity stocked with Malin+Goetz products, plus a

lounge area with a loveseat and gas fireplace, Peyton stripped off her sapphire-blue

sheath dress. She yanked on a pair of cropped leggings and a tank with a built-in bra. It

took four premoistened makeup remover wipes to clean off the extra-thick layer of TV

foundation and a half dozen swipes with a boar bristle brush to break up the industrial-

strength hairspray, and although every inch of her body screamed to sit down on the

plush sofa—just for a minute!—she willed herself to keep moving.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Kendric said to her, swatting her with a towel when she entered

the cardio area. “Great show today. Now get on there and move that ass.”

Peyton saluted and headed to the nearest treadmill. Sometimes she missed the

frenetic energy of Equinox, but not the fact that everyone recognized her and would

either stare at her, sneak pictures, or, worst of all, approach her for a chat. But here, at

the hidden oasis that called itself a gym but charged like it was a fractional jet service,

there were only two men in their sixties on adjacent treadmills and one woman in her

twenties working distressingly hard on a stair-climber. Otherwise the place was empty.

Abandoned! It was beautiful.

Peyton claimed the treadmill in pole position and plugged in her earbuds.

While she waited for the screen to load ANN, she set the pace to a brisk 6.0 with

a 4 incline to get warmed up but was distracted by her own appearance in the fully

mirrored wall. Lord. Not good. Everyone *looooved* to talk about how the wheels came

off at forty, and Peyton always smiled and nodded and was not the least bit worried

that it would affect her whatsoever. She'd spent her teens, twenties, and the first nine

years of her thirties doing whatever she damn well pleased, and it never mattered.

She'd smoked for a decade. Drank way too much. Ate like a teenage boy. Barely

worked out. Never got more than five hours of sleep a night. And still, despite the fact

that she was only five-five, which was at least four inches shorter than she would have

liked, she'd always been trim, tight, and toned. But now? Still nine months shy of

forty? It was a horror show. The barely noticeable lines around her eyes had become

trenches. Her skin was sallow and gray, no matter how much she spent on exfoliators

or eye creams or face oils. There was hair everywhere, except where it should be. And

her body? It was like a switch had been activated that made her stomach paunch out,

her boobs sag, and her ass start to spread in all the wrong directions.

When she'd shown up, nearly hysterical, at her OB's office, her doctor nodded

knowingly. "Perimenopause," she said. "Normal."

"Normal!" Peyton screeched. "Look at me!"

Certainly accustomed to such outbreaks in her private Upper East Side practice,

Dr. Kate smiled. “Cut down on carbs. Start working out, maybe get a trainer? I can

recommend a great cosmetic derm.”

In the last six months, Peyton had wholly committed herself—and what felt like

half her sizable salary—to self-improvement. What choice did she have? Her career

was based on her appearance. She made standing appointments at the derm and

subjected her face and décolletage and, yes, even the tops of her hands to every

imaginable laser and chemical peel legally available. One did red spots. One did

brown spots. A third did fine lines and wrinkles. Another attacked errant hair. A fifth

did general sallowness. A sixth worked on collagen production. For a short period of

time she’d be pleased with the smoothed, lightened, hairless result. And then before

she could so much as buy a new foundation, it would all come surging back, a

veritable tsunami of wrinkles and spots and stubble.

Peyton wasn’t a quitter. She upped her thrice-yearly Botox to every other month.

That helped. So did the fillers in her cheeks and lips, and the vile-smelling oil she

rubbed into her scalp to stimulate hair growth. Encouraged a bit, she turned to her

body and began training sessions with Kendric, who charged more per hour than a

shrink with a PhD. Despite having the most brutal schedule of anyone she knew—up

at 3 A.M., in the makeup chair by 4:15 A.M., live on air from 5 to 8 A.M., and often hours more

of meetings and researching, Monday through Friday—Peyton would drag herself out

of the office and come straight here, where Kendric would put her through a savage

circuit of bicep curls and dead lifts and cardio. She scored an appointment with a

nutritionist who had traveled the world with Gisele Bündchen and Tom Brady and

committed to eating exactly what the woman demanded. She forced down eighty

ounces of water every day even though it made her pee every twelve minutes; she

dipped her salad greens in the dressing instead of pouring it on top; she eschewed

bread, pasta, cheese, and every other morsel of food that carried even the faintest

suggestion of possible enjoyment.

None of it changed a thing, not one fucking bit. The second she focused on building muscle, her skin went to hell. Whenever she returned to her punishing

regimen of lasers and peels, her gut returned. She was barely eating enough to sustain

her workouts or her trips to the dermatologist, and yet all of that starving was doing

nothing. Zero. The scale didn't move a single pound. The jeans she'd worn comfortably since college still didn't zip. No amount of injected poison or burpees or

cold, hard cash could put so much as a dent into the damage wreaked by turning forty.

Never mind she hadn't even turned forty yet! Her sister, on the other hand, was still

skinny as hell, unwrinkled and fresh, without a modicum of effort.

The treadmill sped up automatically and Peyton switched from ANN to MSNBC,

where Joe and Mika were discussing the new wave of college admissions arrests,

including a doctor father from Beverly Hills who had explicitly offered a free gastric

bypass to the squash coach at one of the UC schools if she would "recruit" his

daughter. *Insane*, Peyton thought, as she increased the speed.

Peyton claimed she never watched the news when she wasn't in the studio, but

that was a lie. She knew every anchor on every station. Got alerts from a half dozen

news websites. Studied up on hirings, firings, and internal scandals. This was one

competitive industry, and if you didn't keep up, you were left behind. She hadn't

gotten to the morning show anchor chair by being lazy or uninformed. *Oh, hell no.*

She'd done stints in Arkansas. South Dakota. Even one summer in Alaska. No one

knew better than Peyton how important it was not to get too complacent. She was

finally national, and not in the middle of the night. Next up was prime time. So long as

she stayed strong and focused.

Ten minutes into her run, Peyton tired of *Morning Joe* and switched over to CNN.

Poppy Harlow was an acquaintance, and she liked checking in with her show in the

mornings. That day Poppy was on location in London, and Don Lemon was at Poppy's

desk in the studio. Peyton was so preoccupied with adjusting the incline and trying not

to hyperventilate that she almost didn't notice Don pressing a finger to his ear before

he said, "Poppy? Just one moment here, we seem to have some breaking news."

Almost immediately, an angry red graphic swirled on the screen, accompanied by a

dramatic drumbeat: BREAKING NEWS. Peyton rolled her eyes. Was this going to be a new

development or an entirely new story? They were all guilty of overusing that

pronouncement. Yes, it got everyone's attention, but polls showed the viewership

growing immune to it. A fire in the Pentagon where officials knew one hundred

percent that it wasn't a suicide bomber *and* no one died? Save it. Record-setting

market close in China? Please. Oil spill off the coast of Indonesia? Next. Anything

short of an assassination attempt on the president or a dirty bomb on the subway didn't

warrant the graphic.

But then Don was back, and he looked riled up. "We're going to take you live to

uptown Manhattan, where my colleague Jamie is on the scene. Jamie, what can you

tell us?"

A young man with a bow tie and a serious expression stared down the camera.

“Well, Don, as you know, this story is still developing. What I can tell you is that the

FBI is here today in a rather large show of force, something they don’t do unless it’s

warranted.”

Wow, thank you for that brilliant analysis! Peyton thought.

Wait. Peyton punched the emergency stop button on the treadmill and squinted at

the screen. Was that *her* building in the background? The camera zoomed in on bow-

tied Jamie, who could barely contain his excitement, and just behind him Peyton saw

her very own doorman, Peter, standing rigidly on the sidewalk.

“What the...,” she murmured, more fascinated than worried. Someone in her

building was about to be *arrested*? She felt a pang of panic but then remembered that

cretin of a plastic surgeon who lived in the penthouse and constantly posted “before”

and “after” pics of women’s breast enlargements on his Instagram page under the

handle @kingofboobs. He would cover their nipples with little pink heart stickers and

then photograph himself cupping their breasts from every angle. He called his patients

“gems,” as in “Bringing you another work of art: We took this Dr. J Gem from saggy

to superhero with 330 ccs.” He would include a headless picture of a woman’s body

that looked perfectly lovely in the “before” picture and like a porn star in the “after.”

Every time Peyton saw him in the elevator or the lobby, he reminded her of his gratis

boob job offer—after all, she was famous—and every time, she forced a smile and

tried not to throw up in her mouth. It had to be him! Sexual harassment, or even all-out

assault.

Was ANN getting scooped? She flipped through the channels, shocked to see Jim,

back in *their* studio, leaning conspiratorially toward the camera.

“Now, bear with us, everyone,” he said in his faux-folksy way that made her want

to reach straight through the television and plunge her thumbs into his eyes. “As you

can imagine, this is a very sensitive subject for all of us here at ANN, one that hits

close to home.”

Jim's left hand went to his left ear as he glanced skyward. An imperceptible nod.

And then it occurred to her: the producers were updating him. Her producers!

Ohmigod, was it Sean in Jim's ear? Why was she on a treadmill when Jim was still on

air? Peyton was so transfixed that she almost missed the action unfolding on the screen

as they flipped back to the external shot. The building's doors—her building's doors—

swung open. Two men in dark suits emerged and looked around. Following them were

two uniformed police officers, one male and one female, and between them was...her

husband.

A small but loud group of reporters began shouting questions. Jim was narrating,

but Peyton couldn't understand what he was saying. She leaned closer to the treadmill

screen. Isaac looked, well, like Isaac. He was wearing a plaid flannel button-down, a

pair of ratty khakis, and those wool running shoes every man, woman, and child in the

top income bracket seemed to own. His hair was sticking straight up and his jaws were

clenched so tightly that his neck muscles bulged. Peyton pressed her hand to her heart

when she saw it: he was in handcuffs.

“As I said before, this one hits close to home. But here at ANN we put you, our

valued audience, first, and have decided to cover the arrest of Isaac Marcus, husband

of our own Peyton Marcus, for what it is: a newsworthy story,” Jim said in a serious

voice. “The FBI has been intimating that a second round of arrests in the college

admissions scandal would be forthcoming, and it looks like today they are making

good on their word.”

“Oh my god,” Peyton said aloud, or screamed, or whispered or merely thought—

she had no idea.

Once again Jim pressed his ear. “Yes, I can now confirm that Isaac Marcus,

husband of ANN’s own Peyton Marcus, is being arrested in conjunction with the

college admissions scandal. While we do not yet have the specific charge or charges,

they will likely be similar to those we’ve seen both in previous years and earlier this

morning—”

Peyton's phone buzzed from its perch on the treadmill's magazine holder.
She

grabbed it and started running for the exit.

It was Sean.

"Can't you shut Jim up?" she hissed into the phone. "Pull the plug already!"

"I'm sorry, P, I really am. He was just about to leave the studio, and then we
got

the second breaking news notice....He just pounced."

"You can't possibly think that Isaac..." Peyton's voice trailed off as she ran
past

the check-in desk and out onto the sidewalk.

"No! But I can't stop Jim from covering this, whatever it is. And I certainly
don't

have to remind you that, executive producer or not, he doesn't listen to me."

Peyton's throat clenched. "I have to go. I have to figure out what's
happening. I

just don't understand...."

"Let me know if I—"

Peyton ran the rest of the way to her building, where the scene from
television

was playing out in real time. She wasn't sure whether it was instinct or
shock or just

plain luck that kept her from screaming out his name, but Isaac spotted her
before any

of the cameras. He leaned in to say something to one of the detectives, who nodded

and indicated to a uniformed NYPD officer to allow Peyton to approach.

“Oh my god, are you okay?” she asked, cursing her own inane question while

wanting to reach out and touch his arm, his face, anything. The same detective who’d

given her permission now sent her a warning look to keep her distance.

Cameras flashed from every direction. She could feel the buzz all around her. *Was*

that Peyton Marcus? Could they possibly be lucky enough to catch this husband and

wife drama unfold live ? Even better, was she really wearing leggings and a sports bra

with no makeup?

Then, somehow, Isaac’s mouth was pressed against her ear, and she could feel his

hot breath as he said, “Do not say anything to anyone. Not. One. Word. Do you

understand?”

Peyton nodded, or she tried to, but the next thing she knew, the detectives

prodded him into the backseat of an SUV and the door slammed shut. The glass was

tinted so dark she couldn’t see inside.

“What can you tell us about the charges against your husband?”

“Did this come as a surprise or did you know this arrest was coming?”

“Do you feel there’s a conflict of interest in your reporting of the story that now

involves your spouse?”

“Any word on next steps, either for Isaac or for you, professionally speaking?”

The questions came rapid-fire from every direction as Peyton stood, frozen. Then,

out of nowhere, a hand on her elbow, which she swatted away until a familiar voice

said, “Mrs. Marcus, this way,” and Peter, her doorman, led her through the crowd and

into the blessedly empty lobby.

She looked at him, uncertain what to do next, how to thank this kind man who

had just saved her from certain hell.

He pressed the button to summon the elevator and held the door open for her

when it arrived. “May I suggest you don’t answer the landline for anyone?” he asked.

“I will ensure no one comes up without your express permission.”

“Thank you,” Peyton whispered, just before the elevators closed. And then she

remembered: Max.

“Max?” she yelled as she threw open the unlocked front door. “Are you here?”

Silence. There was no response, and Peyton was almost relieved to find her daughter’s

room empty. But where was Max and how could she reach her? She sent a first text:

Call me asap, it’s important, and then followed it with a second: *911!!!!* She pressed

redial again but still got her daughter’s voicemail.

What was she supposed to do in this situation? Call her mother? A friend? A

lawyer? Yes, a lawyer. Her college roommate, Nisha, who’d gone on to Yale Law

School and had left the U.S. district attorney’s office to start her own crisis management firm. She was brilliant and a ballbuster, and she would know exactly

what to do. *Stay calm. Call Nisha.* But when Peyton opened her phone, panic rose in

her throat.

There was only one person to call.

Skye picked up on the first ring.

“Are you watching this right now?” Peyton asked.

At first, her sister said nothing. When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet and

serious. “You are so totally and completely fucked.”

3

The Guy Magnet

“Grande vanilla latte, extra hot, no foam, for Max!” a barista called out from

behind the counter. Max jumped up from her overstuffed wing chair and headed to the

pickup station.

“Thanks,” she said, noticing right away how cute he was with his shaggy, shoulder-length hair.

“Oh, hey, you’re a girl,” he said with a smile, revealing dimples.

Max looked herself up and down, as though she, too, needed confirmation. She

blushed.

“Sorry,” he said, noticing her embarrassment.

“No, no, it’s fine,” she mumbled, and practically ran back to her seat. What was

wrong with her? Why couldn’t she have a three-sentence exchange with a cute boy

that she’d never see again? Humiliated, she took a giant gulp of her coffee, which