

Chapter One: The Invitation

Gail Wilson-St-Laurent-Feldman,

Head buyer at Henri Bendel

Cordially invites you to a party in honor of Paz Ferrara,

A sparkling new talent in the high fashion world.

To be held at Ms. Wilson-St.-Laurent-Feldman's home,

10 Charles Street, Apartment 1A, New York City

Monday, June 15, 8 p.m.

Stilettos optional.

Her ocean-blue eyes dancing with mischief, Alexandria St. Laurent accepted a cocktail napkin and a pen from Brian or Benjamin or whatever his name was. She knelt carefully in her white, wooden-heeled Tod's pumps, set the napkin on her mother's antique coffee table, and, her long, flaxen hair rippling over one shoulder, promptly scrawled out a fake phone number.

"Thanks, Alexa," Bennett or Barry gushed as she stood up, adjusting the tulle hem of her peach-colored skirt. "I can't believe I lost my cell today." His beady brown eyes twinkled hopefully as he fiddled with his silk necktie. It was printed with tiny question marks, which gave Alexa a headache if she stared at them too long. "But I'm glad I found *you* here."

“Well,” Alexa murmured, her glossed lips curling up in a wry smile. The grand living room, its tall windows thrown open to offer a glittering view of the Empire State Building, was teeming with black-clad, diamond-studded guests. And, out of everyone, this winner — the son of some senator, or so he said — had skulked up to Alexa while her friends were off getting drinks. “My mother invited me, so I wouldn’t miss it.”

On cue, Alexa heard her frosty-blonde, oft-married mother give a high-pitched laugh from across the room. *Ugh*. In all-too typical fashion, Mommie Dearest had actually *mailed* Alexa the friggin’ invitation instead of picking up the phone, like any other parent with a functioning heart would have done. Alexa hadn’t even planned to show tonight, but she’d felt so carefree after handing in her AP Biology final that morning — her very last exam as a high school senior — that she’d decided *some* sort of celebrating was in order. After all, her graduation from New Jersey’s Oakridge High School was less than a week away — that coming Sunday, to be exact. At the thought, Alexa felt a rush of excitement that had nothing to do with the boy in front of her.

“One saketini for the mademoiselle!”

Finally! Alexa glanced over Bartholomew’s shoulder with a grateful grin. Her on-again-off-again (currently on-again) best friend in the world, Holly Jacobson, was making her way across the room in her gold-beaded ballet flats, holding up two martini glasses filled with berry-colored liquid. Holly’s boyfriend of over a year, Tyler Davis, trailed behind her, munching off of a cheese plate.

Alexa gave a silent prayer of thanks that she’d had the foresight to bring Holly and Tyler along tonight — though inviting Holly had been pretty much a no-brainer. Alexa and Holly had met in the second grade, right after Alexa had moved to New Jersey

from her native Paris. After eleven years of whispered secrets, swapped lip liners, vicious fights, stolen crushes, and drama-filled trips to South Beach and Paris, the girls' friendship was stronger than ever. And no matter what, it seemed Holly was always there to rescue Alexa whenever Alexa needed her most.

Like right now.

"I'm really sorry, but my friends are waiting for me," Alexa swiftly told Boris, who offered a meek "I'll call you?" as Alexa hurried off into the buzzing crowd.

"You're a lifesaver," Alexa whispered, kissing Holly's freckled cheek. She took the saketini from her friend's hand, and snatched a sliver of Gouda off Tyler's plate.

"That guy was hitting on me so hard he was practically breaking a sweat."

"Which guy?" Tyler inquired, his mouth full.

"You mean Bryce Thompson?" Holly asked, squinting her gray-green eyes in the direction of the boy Alexa had abandoned, and giving him a friendly wave. "But he's so nice! I chatted with him when we first got here. Did you know his dad's a senator?"

"*Bryce* — that's it," Alexa said, snapping her manicured fingers. She fought the urge to roll her eyes; only naive, wouldn't-hurt-a-fly Holly Jacobson would fall for that senator line *and* bother to remember his name. Alexa had to love the girl for it, though.

"Hol, were you flirting behind my back?" Tyler teased, sliding one toned arm around Holly's waist and kissing the top of her head. Holly laughed, turning to peck Tyler on the lips, and Alexa sipped at her sour-sweet saketini in order to avoid gagging. Sure, she was happy that boy-shy Holly had snagged herself tall, golden-haired lacrosse star Tyler Davis as a boyfriend. Alexa had even moved past the weirdness she'd once felt about the relationship (back in ancient-history-junior-year, *she* had dated Tyler). No. It

was just that Alexa had been breezily, brazenly single for the past four months — and, like any single girl worth her salt, disdained the kind of googly-eyed affection Holly and Tyler were always displaying.

Alexa couldn't even remember the last time she'd kissed a boy — okay, maybe she could, but he'd been this total French slimeball so good riddance to that. Bryce Thompson was far from the first guy Alexa had given a faux phone number to; since declaring herself seriously single in March, she'd had offers from plenty of suitors, but had rejected them all. In May, she'd even gone to the prom alone, giving other girls' dates whiplash as she sauntered through the hotel ballroom in her backless black dress. And she looked forward to starting Columbia in the fall with zero romantic ties — very much unlike Holly and Tyler, who would doubtlessly be *the* athletic It couple at Rutgers come September.

“Anyway, what took you guys so long?” Alexa asked, placing a hand on her slim hip, and effectively putting an end to the cuddle session.

“It was my fault,” Holly giggled, removing her freckly arms from around Tyler's neck, and turning back to Alexa. “I stopped to check out those disgustingly adorable baby pictures of you.” Holly gestured toward the marble mantel, where a row of silver-framed photos featuring Alexa as a deceptively angelic blonde child were displayed.

“Oh, please,” Alexa snorted, shaking her head. “My loving mom only trotted out the photos tonight to appear, you know, less evil than usual — ” Alexa's stomach sank as she noticed Holly's face blanch. “She's right behind me, isn't she?” Alexa whispered.

“Um,” Holly said, tightening her grip on her saketini glass as Tyler began to anxiously brush back his hair. “Good evening, Mrs. St. Laurent, I mean, Feldman, I — ”

“Holly honey, I’ve been begging you for the past eleven years to call me Gail,” Alexa’s mom drawled in her throaty voice, walking around Alexa to plant effusive kisses on the air near Holly’s cheeks. “Besides, I’m getting too old to drag all those names behind me like a dead weight. *Hello, Travis,*” she added, fluttering her false lashes in Tyler’s direction. He colored but didn’t correct her; as Alexa remembered it, Tyler had always been intimidated by her mother. It was kind of hard *not* to be. Even Alexa stiffened in her heavily-perfumed presence.

“Alexandria,” Gail intoned, running a hand over her sleek blonde bun and straightening the lapels of her silk pantsuit. Each time she moved, the chunky black pearls around her neck clunked together, and Alexa felt her teeth clench at the familiar sound. “I know you are *extremely* busy tearing me to shreds, but I wanted to know if you’ve had a chance to meet Paz.”

“Yes, Mother,” Alexa managed through her teeth. “You introduced me to her the minute I walked in, remember?” It was true; while Tyler was parking the car and Bryce Thompson was accosting Holly, Gail had shepherded Alexa over to Paz Ferrara, the petite, raven-haired designer of edgy/sexy bridal gowns who was known for her cutting remarks on *Project Runway*. Even in her broken English, the Portugese-born Paz had come off as coolly dismissive, and, upon learning that Alexa wouldn’t be needing a wedding dress anytime soon, stalked off in her thigh-high leather boots to chat up Michael Kors.

“Well, excuse me for forgetting,” Gail replied, taking a hearty sip of her gin and tonic, which was clearly one of the many factors in her forgetfulness. Truth be told, Alexa was fully expecting her mother to conveniently “forget” her graduation on Sunday.

At least her laid-back French dad, with whom Alexa lived, could be counted on to show up.

Gail cast her eyes over a silent Alexa, Holly, and Tyler, and cleared her throat. “So,” she said, rattling the ice cubes in her glass. Alexa smiled; it was obvious her mom was groping about for something, well, motherly to say. “What are everyone’s plans for the summer?” she finally asked, looking proud of herself. “I know Alexa will be interning at the fashion department of *Vogue*. . .”

“The *photography* department, Mother,” Alexa put in sharply. As deep as Alexa’s love for fashion ran, taking pictures was her true passion, and she couldn’t stand it when her mother conveniently chose to ignore that fact.

“Oh, yes, *that’s* right,” Gail sighed, shaking her head. “You and your camera.”

Despite her annoyance toward her mother, Alexa felt a shiver of anticipation. She planned to spend this week before graduation getting lazy pedicures, but on June 23, she’d move into Columbia student housing in the city, and start work at her favorite magazine. Best of all, Alexa had gotten the plum job all on her own, *without* her mother’s fashionable connections. Though it certainly hadn’t hurt when she’d mentioned Gail’s name during the interview.

“I’ll, uh, be a counselor at sports camp up in the Berkshires,” Holly was saying in her soft, stiff, I’m-speaking-to-a-parent-voice. Tyler, also eternally prim and proper, reported that he’d be coaching the junior lacrosse team in Oakridge. Then, resting a hand on Holly’s shoulder and flashing his toothy grin, he added, “And tomorrow we’re heading off to the Adirondacks on a weeklong camping trip with the Jacobsons.”

Holly’s mouth twisted ever so slightly, and because Alexa knew Holly as well as

she did, she understood her friend was nearing the intersection of Pissed and Annoyed.

“Baby,” Holly told Tyler, clearly trying to keep her tone neutral. “I thought we’d decided — ”

“Camping. How nice,” Gail replied, her upper lip curling, and Alexa met her mother’s gaze in a rare moment of understanding. One of the few points mother and daughter agreed on (besides the fact that Keds, no matter what people said, were never coming back in style) was that tents, insects, and sleeping outdoors were gross. “Oh, look,” Gail added, waving one hand at someone in the distance. “I think I see Heidi. As in, Klum. ‘Ta for now.” With that, she marched off, pearls clanking loudly.

Alexa scowled at her mother’s retreating figure, then turned back to Holly and Tyler, who were now in the middle of a quasi-fight. “But the other night you said you’d think about it,” Tyler was murmuring to Holly, his brow knit. Holly was facing him, her shiny-straight hair sweeping her shoulders as she firmly shook her head back and forth. Alexa got the distinct impression that she was spying on a scene she wasn’t meant to witness.

“Tyler, the last thing I want to do on my *one* free week is help my dad and brother, like, build a fire in the middle of nowhere,” Holly hissed, now having trouble keeping her voice level. “Don’t we spend enough time with my parents?”

Score one for Jacobson, Alexa thought, finishing off her saketini. She almost wanted to jump into the fray and back Holly up, but she thought the better of it. This was clearly Couple Time. “Listen, guys,” she cut in. “I’ll let you finish up your lovers’ spat without me.” Before either of them could protest, Alexa gave Holly’s arm a squeeze and promised to find them later. Walking off, she could still hear their bickering. *Like an old*

married couple, Alexa thought with a smile as she turned into the corridor that led out to the garden. She wouldn't be surprised if Holly and Tyler did tie the knot one day, and had even informed Holly last week, over homemade glasses of sangria in Alexa's backyard, that she fully expected to be the maid of honor.

“No — tell them I will *not* pose half nude with my maid of honor!”

Alexa froze, wondering if she'd heard right. She was pushing open the screen door to her mother's back garden — a place that was tucked away behind twisty-turn-y hallways, and which Gail kept off limits to party guests. Alexa peered outside; enormous tea roses twined around a tall fence and white patio chairs were grouped around a burbling stone fountain. A tall, lithe girl with super-short, purple-streaked black hair sat in one of the chairs with her back to Alexa. She was clad in a strapless burgundy tunic over cropped fishnet leggings and pink patent-leather pumps. A fuschia Helio Kickflip was pressed to her ear.

“I don't care if they're going to make it *classy*,” the girl was saying, one hand toying with the long rope of metallic pink beads around her neck. Her low, throaty voice sounded incredibly familiar, but Alexa couldn't place it. “*Maxim* is never *classy*. *Vanity Fair*, I'd do in, like, a second, but never that sleazy frat-boy bible — ”

Alexa hadn't even realized she was giggling until the girl spun around, her kohl-lined eyes narrowed in suspicion. In that heart-dropping instant, Alexa realized who she was, and her mouth fell open.

It was Margaux Eklundstrom, indie-movie princess. Just last week, Alexa and Holly had seen Margaux in the artsy black-and-white film *Grit and Gravel*, and just yesterday, Alexa had read an article on the website thesuperficial.com about the actress's

upcoming zillion-dollar wedding to a hotshot young screenwriter. Margaux was also the big sister of Jonah Eklundstrom, the impossibly dreamy, blue-eyed young actor who'd won an Oscar for playing a gay boxer — but was *totally* straight in real life.

HOLLYWOOD'S FAVORITE SIBLINGS! the headline in Alexa's latest *Us Weekly* blared, and Alexa had admired the photos of a sassily-dressed Margaux stalking the red carpet and of a shirtless Jonah jogging at LA's Runyon Canyon. Yes, Alexa's mother had connections to celebrity designers and models, but what was someone like *Margaux Eklundstrom* doing at her party?

And, more importantly, had she brought her brother?

"I didn't know you were out here —" Alexa began as Margaux leapt to her feet, looking surprisingly sheepish.

"Elaine, I'll call you back," Margaux said into her phone, then snapped it shut. "Oh God, I'm SO sorry," she told Alexa, her eyes — a darker blue version of her brother's — widening. "I wasn't sure if I was allowed in here or not, I kind of stumbled on it trying to get cell service, but if your mother doesn't want —"

"Wait," Alexa said, slightly amused at how rambly the hotshot movie star sounded. "How did you know I'm Gail's daughter?" She couldn't help the sharpness in her tone when she spoke her mother's name.

Margaux lifted one bare, moon-pale shoulder. "Number one, you look like a younger, prettier, and more natural version of her, and number two, I checked out those photos of you inside." She grinned crookedly, clearly pleased with her logical deductions.

Alexa felt a rush of affection; celeb or not, she liked this girl already.

"And sorry you had to hear me railing at my manager like a spoiled brat,"

Margaux added, sinking back into the chair and crossing her mile-long legs. “I’m getting married this Friday and she’s goddamn convinced that it can further my *career* somehow.” To indicate her disgust, Margaux stuck out her tongue, which had a round steel little ball in its center. Alexa, who always wished she’d had the guts to pierce her belly button, was both impressed and jealous.

“I hate it when people try to foist their expectations on you,” Alexa said, thinking of her mother, and how she’d always assumed that Alexa would pursue a career in fashion.

Margaux blinked at Alexa, her face lighting up. “Ex-*actly*,” she said. “Hey, have a seat over here.” She motioned to the empty chair beside her. “You smoke? They’re clove.” The tiny skulls on her white-gold charm bracelet jangled as she reached into the black seashell clutch at her feet. With a small jolt, Alexa recognized it as the Heatherette “Margaux,” which had been designed in honor of the actress.

“No thanks,” Alexa replied as she settled into the chair. “I decided to officially quit after my last trip to Paris.” Paris was also where Alexa had had her most recent brush with celebrity, so it was no wonder she was now able to feel chill around an A-lister like Margaux.

“Cool,” Margaux said, lighting her cigarette and casting an approving glance at Alexa. “You seem like a girl who always does her own thing. I’m trying to learn how to be more like that from Kabbalah. I know Madonna’s kind of made it passé, but *I* still think it’s totally inspiring.” She gestured excitedly to the red string tied around her delicate wrist. “You should stop by the Centre for Shabbat services if you’re ever in LA.”

“Um, sure,” Alexa said, biting back a laugh; she found the whole Hollywood-Kabbalah obsession kind of funny. “What’s it like, living LA?” she added. “I was there only once, with my dad, when I was eight.” All that Alexa remembered of the sun-splashed, plastic-fantastic West Coast city was putting her tiny sandaled feet inside Marilyn Monroe’s dainty footprints at the Grauman’s Chinese Theatre. Even that brief visit had felt somehow enchanted. Alexa wanted to ask Margaux what it was like to be in movies, but *that* question would definitely be filed under “insanely dorky.”

“It’s nothing like living in New York, for one,” Margaux replied, exhaling a perfect “O” of sweet-smelling smoke. She glanced up at the cloudy night sky, and the blinking lights of tall buildings in the distance. “There’s more. . . space or something. There’s the desert, the blooming flowers, the hills. That’s where I live — in Hollywood Hills. My wedding’s gonna be at home.”

I know, Alexa almost said, but she held her tongue again. She had seen the photos of a pale blue mansion perched high up in the hills, a stone’s throw from the fabled Hollywood sign. “Sounds divine,” was all Alexa said, meaning it completely.

Margaux sighed and gave Alexa a rueful smile. “Yeah. I’m not *that* homesick, though. Everyone out there’s kind of self-obsessed and faker than their boobs.”

“Well, in case you haven’t noticed, there’s *plenty* of self-obsession in New York,” Alexa replied, and felt a warm glow when Margaux burst out laughing. It was bizarre, but kind of thrilling, to be bantering with a girl Alexa had so recently seen up on a flickering movie screen. “Which leads me to ask,” Alexa went on, feigning nonchalance. “What brings you to this gathering?” Imagining LA — the white sweep of beaches, the air perfumed by fresh oranges, the constant presence of movie stars — Alexa wondered

why anyone would want to leave.

“Paz Ferrara designed my wedding gown,” Margaux replied, rolling her eyes. “Had to show up to pay my respects — or so my agent said.” When her Kickflip buzzed, she looked at the caller ID and grimaced, not answering. “Speak of the devil,” she groaned. “It’s only six in LA so everyone’s getting their work done now. I’ll tell you something,” Margaux went on, waving smoke away from Alexa. “I’m fed up with the wedding *gar-bage*. At this point I’m sick of every soul who’s involved with it, except for my fiancé, Paul, of course.” She took a long drag off her cigarette, then tilted her head toward Alexa. “Hey, you want to come?”

“Uh, where?” Alexa asked, feeling as if she’d missed something.

“To my *wedding*, silly!” Margaux laughed. “This Friday — it’ll be so fun.”

Alexa took a deep breath, trying to quell the giddiness building in her. *She’s probably joking, Lex. Calm down. She’s insane.*

“I’m serious,” Margaux insisted as if she’d heard Alexa’s thoughts, and Alexa felt her stomach do a somersault. “I know it’s not a *formal* invitation or anything — not that I believe in that old-fashioned shit anyway. Paul and I just made a podcast and mailed out iPods to everyone we love.” Margaux shrugged, as if this were an everyday occurrence. “But I swear on a stack of screenplays,” she went on, lifting her right hand. “I’d love to have you there. You could make a little vacay out of it. Why the hell not?” Speech over, Margaux crossed her arms over her chest and stared Alexa down — in a friendly way, of course

“But . . . but it’s kind of last-minute, isn’t it?” Alexa asked when she finally found her voice. Her fingers had started to tremble, a sure sign that she was inching beyond

nervous into fully freaked out. She wondered how to subtly pull her cell phone out of her clutch and start texting Holly. She knew how she'd begin the message: *Promise u im not lying but* —

“Sweetie-pie, nothing’s last minute in La-La Land,” Margaux chuckled, and flipped open her phone. “Just to confirm I’ll call Vikram — that’s my wedding planner, he’s a genius —but in the end, I’m the bridezilla, so what I say goes, right?” She shot Alexa a devilish grin.

“Right,” Alexa murmured as the full impact of what Margaux was saying began to sink in. Alexa, in the City of Angels. In a convertible, blonde hair flying as she zipped down Santa Monica Boulevard, past streams of green palm trees, toward the sapphire Pacific. Alexa, at a celebrity wedding: pastel satin sun dresses rustling, pointy heels balancing on the grass, a surfer boy with sun-kissed hair offering her a dance . . . Warmth raced through Alexa like electricity. She felt the pull of the West Coast tempting her, seducing her.

“Hang on,” Margaux was saying, frowning down at her cell. “The only possibly sucky thing is that the Beverly Hills Hotel, the W, *and* the Roosevelt are all filled up with my social-climbing friends and Paul’s, like, two hundred relatives.”

Alexa opened her mouth to say she’d be cool with sleeping on the beach — which didn’t *technically* count as camping — but Margaux was already pressing a button on her cell and bringing the phone to her ear. “Jonah?” Margaux asked after a minute, and Alexa suffered a mini heart attack, clutching the arm of the bench for support. *The* Jonah? It couldn’t be. Maybe Margaux knew others. Maybe Jonah was a popular name in LA. Then Margaux glanced at Alexa and mouthed “*My brother,*” and Alexa nodded casually,

her pulse pounding, as if the brother in question lived down the block or worked at the local Starbucks.

“Baby Bear!” Margaux was squealing into the phone. “I met this *amazing* girl in NYC. She totally has your sense of humor, and she’s *blonde*, which I know you love.” Margaux shot a wicked look at Alexa, who drew in a sharp breath. Jonah Eklundstrom *had* famously dated blonde waif actress Charity Durst. Still, that didn’t mean anything. “Anyway,” Margaux went on. “I invited her to my big day — you don’t care if she crashes at your guesthouse, right?”

Since Margaux was facing away from her, Alexa pinched the skin of her upper arm hard, just to be sure.

“Thought so,” Margaux said, giving Alexa the thumbs-up sign. “Uh-huh, I’ll tell her about the party at The Standard, too. Down, boy. She’s hot, but I bet she’s picky.” At this, Margaux winked at Alexa, who managed to smile back shakily.

I’m going to stay with Jonah Eklundstrom.

Clasping her hands in her lap, Alexa repeated this fact to herself, like a mantra. Fantasies of a Hollywood hook-up floated through her head — what would it be like to gaze into those deep blue eyes up close, to run her hand along that warm, rough jawline? — but Alexa knew they were just that: fantasies. She’d been burned in the past, after all. Gorgeous, famous, make-women-faint-famous Jonah Eklundstrom probably had, like, a harem of girlfriends at his beck and call. And while Alexa knew she could compete with the sparkliest of starlets, realistically, she doubted she’d register as more than a blip on Jonah’s high-end radar.

But maybe he’d flirt with her one day when she was coming out of the guest

house in her orange-and-gold Shoshanna bikini.

“All right, Baby Bear — don’t stay out *too* late tonight, ‘kay? I know you have read-throughs all this week. I’ll call you when I’m back tomorrow.” Margaux clicked off, then turned to beam at Alexa. “Done, and done. Oh, and that party at The Standard — it’s tomorrow night around six. My brother and I are throwing it for some industry friends. You should come, if you’ll be in town by then.”

If she’d be in town? Alexa was speechless. She had one whole, blissful week off before graduation — and she certainly no longer intended to spend it in Oakridge, getting pedicures at Suzy’s Salon.

Cheesy as it was, Alexa let herself think it: *California, here I come.*

After Margaux had entered Alexa’s number — Alexa made sure to give her real one this time — into her cell, she stood up, and Alexa rose as well. “I’ll text you my brother’s address from the airport,” Margaux promised. “I’m headed to JFK now — I need to catch a midnight plane back home.” She put her cigarette out on the heel of her pump, then glanced up. “How moronic of me,” she added. “I’m Margaux.” She stuck out her left hand, her ginormous pink diamond ring catching the moonlight.

Alexa shook her head, bemused. Clearly, they’d skipped a step in the let’s-be-friends-game. “Alexa,” she replied, returning Margaux’s handshake. “And I know who you are.”

“I knew you knew,” Margaux replied, her eyes sparkling. “But I appreciated your attempt to hide it.”

Their high heels clicking on the pavement, the two girls made their way back to the garden door, and the sounds of the party drifted out toward them, as if from another

planet. As a dizzy, elated Alexa was about to reenter the apartment, Margaux tapped her elbow.

“Hey, Alexa?” she said with a crooked grin. “If I didn’t mention it, feel free to bring a date.”

“A date,” Alexa echoed. Her first, breathless thought was of Jonah, but she brushed off the ridiculous notion. Then Alexa had another idea. A brilliant one. She felt her face breaking into a smile. “Okay. I know exactly who to ask.”