

Praise for
BY INVITATION ONLY

“Brilliance, wit, and high style abound in *By Invitation Only*, as we get to know the extraordinary Piper and Chapin and how their contrasting personalities draw them into an unbreakable bond of magnetized opposites. With Paris as its runway, this story soars—dynamic, empowering, and unforgettable.”

—PAUL TAZEWELL, 2025 Academy Award winner for
Best Costume Design for *Wicked*

“This book is pure fashion fantasy: runway-worthy gowns, Parisian glamour, and the kind of high-stakes drama you’d expect backstage at a couture show. But what really stole my heart? A heroine who’s smart, grounded, and unapologetic enough to outshine even the chandeliers at the Ritz. I devoured every stylish, swoony moment.”

—JOE ZEE, Professor of Fashion, journalist, and celebrity stylist

“I loved spending a week in Paris with these badass debutantes.
A modern and empowering spin on a century-old tradition.”

—KAREN McCULLAH, screenwriter of *Legally Blonde*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, and *She’s the Man* and author of *The Bachelorette Party*

“Lights, camera, fashion! *By Invitation Only* is big screen ready, with its winning combination of irresistible heroines, glittering gems, and iconic style moments, all set against the shimmering backdrop of the City of Lights.”

—REBECCA SELVA, Chief Creative Officer of Fred Leighton and Kwiat

“Dazzling and cinematic, *By Invitation Only* offers an exquisitely fun look into the worlds of high society and haute couture. A love letter to fashion, this novel is escapist, witty, and delightful!”

—CHRISTIAN SIRIANO, CFDA designer and *Project Runway* mentor

“A dazzling blend of humor, opulence, and heart, following brilliant and beautiful young women as they navigate ambition, romance, and family in a high-stakes world—exactly my kind of story.”

—ABIGAIL HING WEN, *New York Times* bestselling author of
the *Loveboat*, *Taipei* series

“RSVP immediately to *By Invitation Only*! Alexandra Brown Chang’s debut novel is teeming with charm, glitz, romance, and humor.

It is a true confection, but it also has much to say about class structure and privilege.”

—HEATHER HACH HEARNE, screenwriter of *Freaky Friday* and book writer of *Legally Blonde: The Musical*

“A decadent dessert of a book: frothy and fun, with a heapful of heart. In this zingy, swoony affair, Chang offers a glimpse into the world of the mega-rich and famous with scintillating detail and lancing wit.

An exciting new voice to watch in YA.”

—ALEXA DONNE, author of *The Ivies*

“An instant classic! A fairy tale for our modern times, Chang’s debut is a charming coming-of-age story about unexpected friendship, following your dreams, and finding your voice along the way. Escapist, emotive, and exceptionally easy-to-inhale, *By Invitation Only* is one of those books that’s instantly impossible to put down! I want to read this again and again.”

—BECKY CHALSEN, author of *Kismet*

“An electric blend of humor, heart, and glamour with Paris as the backdrop, *By Invitation Only* is the perfect fall book for readers craving romance, friendship, and an escape. RSVP now!”

—EMIKO JEAN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Tokyo Ever After*

“Alexandra Brown Chang’s *By Invitation Only* is a funny and fast-paced YA contemporary set against the backdrop of an elite competition focused on poise, fashion, and philanthropy. It is a charming, honest look at the mother-daughter dynamic that celebrates sisterhood without compromising swoon-worthy entanglements. Together, Chapin and Piper redefine what it means to be young ladies of consequence.”

—KRYSTAL MARQUIS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Davenports*

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For Annabelle, Audrey, and Ames

Playlist

“Paris” by Taylor Swift

“Royals” by Lorde

“Uptown Girl” by Billy Joel

“Dreams” by The Cranberries

“Walking on Sunshine” by Katrina and the Waves

“Just a Girl” by No Doubt

“Butterflies” by Kacey Musgraves

“gold rush” by Taylor Swift

“Head Over Heels” by The Go-Go’s

“Over My Head (Cable Car)” by The Fray

“Liability” by Lorde

“You Get What You Give” by The New Radicals

“The Way It Was” by The Killers

“White Flag” by Clairo

“BIRDS OF A FEATHER” by Billie Eilish

“Wannabe” by The Spice Girls

“get him back!” by Olivia Rodrigo

“You’re So Vain” by Carly Simon

“Bad Reputation” by Joan Jett and the Blackhearts

“Just What I Needed” by The Cars

“You’ve Got the Love” by Florence + the Machine

“so american” by Olivia Rodrigo

“I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)”
by Whitney Houston

“Welcome to New York” by Taylor Swift

Meet *Teen Vogue*'s College Women of the Year

These 22 exceptional students are scientists, entrepreneurs, athletes, content creators, and even elected politicians.

#1. Piper Woo Collins

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

As a rising college freshman, Piper Collins has already accomplished more than most people do in a lifetime. The eighteen-year-old from King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, recently won the grand prize at the annual International Science Fair, a prestigious science and engineering competition, beating more than ten thousand other applicants. Collins's star invention—an eco-friendly, low-cost polymer made of biodegradable orange peels—has the potential to save thousands of farming jobs across the United States while also increasing crop yields by up to 75 percent. Collins's scientific brilliance has powered more than just crops. The high school senior—with an IQ higher than Albert Einstein's—was recently accepted to every Ivy League school. She will attend Columbia University this fall, where she hopes to major in environmental science.

PROLOGUE



Paris, France

“*Merde!*” Amélie bellows, exhaustedly burying her face in her hands as she hangs up the phone. Behind her, the lights of the Champs-Élysées twinkle, the Arc de Triomphe visible through the office window.

Across from Amélie, her assistant, Bardot Sinclair, looks shocked by Amélie’s uncharacteristic outburst. The Storey Ricci scandal has broken her.

“Dior is panicking,” Amélie says. “I don’t blame them: This publicity is terrible. Elizabeth Drake insists we find a debutante to replace Storey, and *she* will be dressed by Dior instead.” “Another girl . . . by this weekend?”

Amélie lets out a groan of frustration. “I spend nine months curating each year’s list. Each girl invited to La Danse is hand-selected. The right family. The right look. The right profile. We

are not an app. I cannot select ‘intelligent, beautiful, special eighteen-year-old’ and press order!” Amélie rises and begins pacing the room.

“These ‘eat the rich’ bores have been braying for my head for years. Where am I going to find somebody deserving, who will give us positive publicity, not some pampered brat who doesn’t recognize how lucky she is, dragging us to hell like Storey Ricci? She doesn’t exist!”

Bardot looks down at her laptop, where TeenVogue.com fills the screen. An Asian American brunette beams. She’s adorable, with obsidian eyes, and creamy skin, yet dressed like a preppy school-girl. She’s begging for a glow-up. Everybody loves a Cinderella story. . . .

Words float up:

Piper Woo Collins . . . rising star . . . IQ higher than Einstein . . . scientific brilliance . . . accepted by every Ivy League school . . . This is her.

Bardot swivels the computer toward Amélie. As Amélie’s expression morphs from thunderous to intrigued, it’s clear: *Piper Woo Collins, your life is about to change forever.*

CHAPTER ONE



Piper

King of Prussia, Pennsylvania

I scroll through the *Teen Vogue* article. Wow. I sound impressive. Too bad it's an exaggeration.

Plus: The fawning article fails to mention that I spent my entire afternoon piercing the ears of surly middle schoolers at Claire's. Sure, biodegradable orange-peel polymers are thrilling and all, but you haven't really lived until you've sliced and diced the lobes of fidgety, Snapchatting twelve-year-olds.

"Earth to Piper," Seb says, snapping me out of my daze. I put down my phone. We're in my living room, snacking on popcorn and watching *My Best Friend's Wedding* for the millionth time. "You look more miserable than Ben Affleck at an awards show." He points at my screen. "This is a huge deal. *Teen* freaking *Vogue*!"

I don't want to burst his bubble. Seb is looking at me with

such love and pride that even a stranger could probably tell we've been BFFs since middle school. So despite the fact I've been drowning in misery for the past day, I can't keep this secret any longer.

"I have to tell you something not great," I blurt out.

"You're having Timothée Chalamet's baby."

"I said *not* great."

He nods knowingly. "Ezra Miller's baby."

"I was awake till two a.m. last night tinkering with polymers while watching nineties rom-coms. Do I *seem* like I'm getting some celebrity strange?"

Seb laughs, and I briefly forget the pangs in my chest that have been plaguing me ever since I got the call yesterday.

"My scholarship has been revoked," I confess. It hurts to say the words out loud. "I'm not going to Columbia."

Seb slams his bag of Sour Patch Kids on the coffee table. Sugar flies everywhere.

"Unacceptable. You've been dreaming of Columbia forever. What the hell happened?"

I catch him up. "Remember how I won that huge grant that covered like sixty percent of my tuition because my research impressed somebody who owns half the planet?"

"Yeah, the microchip dude. Or, wait, was it the space-tourism guy?"

"Different billionaire. Hedge funder who funds scientific endeavors."

"Potato, potahto. All rich people are literally interchangeable. Except Oprah. And TSwift."

“Apparently, the university revoked his son’s fraternity charter and kicked them out of their house on 114th Street.”

“And Fratty McCanceled is your problem because . . . ?”

“Because he was so pissed that he’s pulling *all* funding in protest until the current president steps down.”

Seb looks scandalized. “That’s outrageous! Like, be normal and write a strongly worded letter to the dean. Don’t punish poor kids who can’t afford it.”

I shrug, feeling despondent all over again. “I got a call from the bursar’s office yesterday. ‘Circumstances change, we extend our sincerest regrets, blah blah blah.’ The woman who called me was mortified.”

“But *not* mortified enough to cough up the extra 50K they promised you.”

“I guess not.”

“Does your dad know yet?”

“No.” I shake my head miserably. My dad is an EMT who pulls long shifts to give us a better life. He was so proud when I accepted Columbia’s offer. “He’s gonna be devastated.”

“Deep breaths. We can figure this out.” Seb stands up and starts pacing around the living room. As he does, I notice an alert on his phone: *SCANDAL: STOREY RICCI EXPOSED!* Storey’s tearful face fills his phone screen in miniature—somehow, even while crying, the world’s highest-paid teen model looks better than 99 percent of eighteen-year-olds on the planet. “There has to be some way for you to make up the difference.”

I shake my head. “Short of selling an organ on the black market, it’s not happening. First semester’s tuition is almost due.”

“So that’s it? Presto chango, college bye-bye? You’re national news for getting into every Ivy League school and now you’re just . . . *giving up*? That is not the Piper Woo Collins I know.”

I try not to feel sorry for myself. “I’m not giving up on college. I just don’t have any scholarship options left—they all disappeared after I committed to Columbia. I should have taken the full ride to Cornell.”

“But it’s not Columbia.”

“It’s not Columbia,” I affirm.

We both stare at Julia Roberts on the TV, depressed. Seb sits back down and wraps his arms around me. “I’m sorry, Pipes. You worked harder than anybody. You don’t deserve this.”

I hug him back but don’t say anything. Instead I point to the Storey Ricci headline on his phone to distract myself. “Wait, what did she do?”

Seb grabs his phone and opens the article. There’s a photo of her being led out of a Sephora in handcuffs. “Looks like . . . okay . . . wow. She stole eyeshadow? But she’s got her own makeup line!”

He mutes Julia, then clicks onto a gossip page, and we huddle over the phone together. A glossy reporter in high heels addresses the camera soberly, as if reporting from a war zone. “Since we first broke news of Storey’s arrest this morning, she’s released an apology video on Instagram. The video has created quite the stir, with over ten million likes.” Storey’s glowing face takes over the screen.

“I would like to apologize first and foremost to the House of Dior,” Storey says as a lone tear slides down her poreless cheek.

“Being the face of Dior is the honor of a lifetime, and this transgression does not reflect who I am. I didn’t want to be seen buying products from a competitor, so I had a momentary lapse in judgment that I immediately regretted. I want everybody to know that I value nothing more than diversity, equity, inclusion, and a business’s right to detain shoplifters.” Storey takes a tremulous sigh, as if to center herself. “Finally, to my adoring fans, I adore you even more. Thank you for your support, and I look forward to seeing you outside the Ritz Paris for La Danse des Débutantes, where I will be happy to sign autographs. Love to you all.”

“What a bunch of useless buzzwords,” I say, tossing my phone. “Anybody who says they love DEI definitely doesn’t have any of it in their own life. She just doesn’t want to get canceled. And what’s this Danse des Débutantes thing?”

Seb gasps as if I’ve scalded him. “How are we best friends? You cannot call La Danse des Débutantes a *thing*. It is the primo debutante ball. It is a debutante ball on steroids. It is the *ne plus ultra* of debutante balls.”

“AP Latin for the win,” I joke. “Okay, it’s fancy. I get it.”

Seb clutches me by the hands. “Piper, you so do not. La Danse is a once-in-a-lifetime event. People would die to be invited. Paris! Couture! Celebrities!”

“Archaic! Elitist! Horrifying!” I shoot back.

Seb drops my hands, looking grumpy. “There’s nothing wrong with a little fashion diversion in this ongoing hellscape. Besides, La Danse is very into charity these days. They don’t only select poor little rich girls.” He pauses for dramatic

effect. “They select poor little rich girls *who give back*.”

We share a giggle.

“Why are you so obsessed with La Danse?” I ask.

“Because of the insane opulence,” Seb says. “La Danse is the last throwback to a golden era—”

“Where only straight cis white dudes had rights?”

“Where glamour still meant something! The gowns these girls wear put the Oscars to shame. It makes the Met Gala look like a middle school Halloween party.”

He shoves his phone into my face. I catch the hashtag he’s searched: #LaDanse. It has scores of videos with millions of views.

“So it’s not just you into this?”

“Oh please. Trying to cancel La Danse is so boring. When you find out about it, how could you *not* be obsessed?”

“Welcome to La Danse,” a girl intones, before images quickly flash, displaying snippets of impossibly gorgeous teenagers in impossibly expensive gowns. They pose in front of luxury cars, try on diamond necklaces, sip from gold-leaf lattes in ornate sitting rooms. I spy some familiar faces: mostly a few recognizable nepo babies who followed in their parents’ footsteps and are now actresses, singers, or models themselves.

“For the past seventy-two years, top French fashion houses, including Dior, Chanel, and Givenchy, have competed to dress young women making their societal debuts,” the TikTok expertly narrates. “Widely known as the teenage Met Gala, and listed by *Forbes* as one of the ten hottest parties of the year, La Danse hosts sixteen debutantes from around the globe every year in Paris.”

Despite my deep disdain for the very concept of a debutante

ball, the glamour is admittedly seductive. I stare as the images flash by, wondering what it must be like to have access to so much luxury . . . so much privilege . . . so much *money*.

I couldn't be prouder of my dad, but for a fleeting, disloyal moment, I think: *Oh, to care solely about which couture gown to be photographed in, not how to finance your entire future.*

"Okay, so if they're all exclusive and into *giving back*"—I stifle a snicker—"why is Storey Ricci still invited?"

"I mean. She's *Storey Ricci*. I doubt the La Danse people even care. They're Teflon."

Suddenly there's an aggressive *knock-knock-knock* at the door. Seb and I look at each other, frozen. The only thing worse than somebody calling instead of texting is somebody stopping by in person unannounced. I swing open the front door, confused by the sight greeting me in our apartment's hallway.

The delivery guy looks like he walked straight out of Halloween City, the discount costume store at the King of Prussia Mall. Upon closer inspection of this guy's attire—a classic footman's outfit that makes him resemble an extra from the live-action *Cinderella*—I feel severely underdressed in my black camo leggings and pink Champion hoodie. This man takes Oscar Wilde's quote "You can never be overdressed or overeducated" to a new extreme. He hoists an oversized card-stock envelope out of his bag.

"Mademoiselle Collins, your invitation has arrived," the courier dramatically intones, committing to the bit.

Yeah. This guy definitely does Revolutionary War reenactments on the weekends.

I take the heavy envelope, feeling its heft. My full name,

Piper Woo Collins, is inked on the front in perfect calligraphy.

I'm confused. I look back at Seb.

"Seb, was this you?"

He shakes his head no, wide-eyed.

Now the delivery guy is confused too. "You are Piper, right?"

"Unfortunately."

He breaks character. "Look. I gotta get a signature from you so I can justify what they're paying me. So can you just . . ." He thrusts a digital signing machine in my face, and, not sure what else to do, I add my signature. "Okay, cool. Thanks."

We make eye contact again, unsure what to do. He bows. Weirdly, so do I. I smile, preparing to thank him.

"You have a kernel stuck in your teeth," he deadpans as he walks away.

Okay, rude.

I fish out the kernel before inspecting my prize. What is this thing? There's no return address.

"The hell is that?" Seb asks.

I hold up the envelope. "I think I just got invited to the Hunger Games."

Seb laughs. "Do me a favor and choose Hemsworth." He stares at the envelope like it's a lottery ticket. "Piper, I have *a feeling* about this," he says dramatically.

"A feeling I'm part of a Rian Johnson murder mystery?"

"Open it! Stop leaving me in suspense."

I gingerly open the envelope as Seb bangs his fists against the table, mimicking a drumroll. I pull out the card-stock letter, staring dumbly.

BY INVITATION ONLY

La Danse des Débutantes

MADAME AMÉLIE BOUCHON
CORDIALLY REQUESTS
THE HONOUR OF YOUR PRESENCE
AT LA DANSE DES DÉBUTANTES.

THE FIRST OF MAY
HALF AFTER EIGHT O'CLOCK
HÔTEL RITZ PARIS
PARIS, FRANCE

I hold up the invitation, stunned. Seb snatches it out of my hands.

“Piper, is this a joke?”

I’m too dazed to reply.

“This is insane,” Seb says, practically hyperventilating. “It’s La Danse. You’re going to *la fucking danse!*”

I examine the invitation once again. I notice a small, handwritten note stuck inside the envelope. I pull it out and read it to Seb:

Piper, we are beyond thrilled to invite you.

Congratulations on your scientific achievements.

You are an inspiration to girls everywhere.

Sincerely,

Bardot Sinclair

Amélie Bouchon Communications

A phone number is listed at the bottom.

“Bardot Sinclair. That sounds fancy.”

“It does!” Seb replies gleefully. “It all does!”

“How is this possible?” I ask, still dazed. “Why would they pick me, out of all the high school seniors in the world? The farthest I’ve ever traveled is Toronto.”

“The polymer! The International Science Fair prize! *Teen Vogue*! Who cares? I’m so excited for you!” Seb yells. “And for *me*. Imagine the clout I’m gonna get from this. Caleb is so gonna regret rejecting my promposal.”

I pull out a second piece of card stock from the envelope. It lists the debutantes set to make their societal debuts at La Danse.

STOREY RICCI

CHAPIN BUCKINGHAM

LOTTIE STUART-JONES

VALERIA AGUILAR

LUCIA AGUILAR

CHLOE HUGHES

MARGARITA VASQUEZ

PEACH DAVIS

ZELLA DE PERIGNON

KARINA NEMEROV

MCRAE LAWRENCE

SEA REILLY

ANANYA SANWALKA

TREVI GRAHAM

BY INVITATION ONLY

NIHAT FAROU

IMOGEN WANG

Finally, at the bottom of the page, handwritten in calligraphed ink:

PIPER WOO COLLINS

This is overwhelming. “They already wrote my name in. See?” I point. “Right under Imogen Wang. That’s me.”

“Ooh, Imogen Wang,” Seb said. “Her parents founded the biggest telecommunications firm in China.”

“How do you *know* this stuff?”

“TikTok. Obviously.”

I stare at the cards. “You don’t think it’s a little presumptuous? How do they know I’m free next week? What if I have plans?”

“To do what? Go to Costco?”

“I have school!”

“For La Danse, you skip it. Besides, Piper, you *have* to go. Making your debut at La Danse is literally once in a lifetime. It’s once in a billion lifetimes. Nobody gets to experience this.”

I push the cards away, suddenly feeling repulsed. “Why would any girl want to be paraded around like a piece of meat? Even the British royal family canceled debutante balls. It’s weird!”

“You gotta get over that,” Seb declares. “This isn’t some Jane Austen marriage market, with rich bachelors plucking middle-class girls out of obscurity. These chicks wear Cartier like it’s Claire’s—no offense.”

“None taken,” I mutter.

“It’s about fashion and fun and partying in Paris! And making new friends! And dancing!”

“I’m a terrible dancer.”

He reverses course. “Or maybe it’s not about dancing!” Seb looks increasingly desperate. “Do it for me? You know I live for this high society shit.”

“I drive a Toyota. They *own* Toyota. People like these have yacht captains on speed dial. We don’t mix. This is not my scene.”

“How do you know something’s not for you until you try it?”

“What if I have to curtsy? I’d fall flat on my face.”

“Sure, sure. Counterpoint: You meet a prince from a country that no longer technically has a royal family, and you become a princess in exile. I’m just saying.”

“I thought this wasn’t a marriage market.”

“Can I help it if a gorgeous prince falls head over heels for your wit and charm and Mensa-level genius?”

We explode into giggles. Seb grabs the cards, and we retreat for the couch again, collapsing onto the cushions.

“I wouldn’t even know what to do at La Danse,” I admit, letting my guard down. I pull a blanket around me, self-protective.

“You’ll figure it out. You can take classes or whatever.”

“Classes?” I quip. “Should I go on Yelp and search ‘Debutante class for billionaires near me’?”

He laughs. “I meant in Paris. Just go and learn on the fly!”

I pause for a moment, thinking this through—I would have the opportunity to visit Paris and travel outside North America for the first time. That wouldn’t be the worst thing. . . .

But what if I fail? What if everybody laughs at me? What if the girls all band together and reject me like an impermeable cellular membrane, keeping me out, unable to penetrate their circle of friendship?

He studies my face. "Oh. I get it."

"Get what?"

"You're scared."

"I'm not scared."

He nods, sympathetic. "You know what, you're right. Tell them you need to work a double shift at Claire's that weekend."

I narrow my eyes. "You're trying to reverse-psychology me."

"I'm not!" he says innocently. "I'm being mindful of my best friend's mental health. You should decline. Put it behind you and definitely don't wonder what magical experiences you missed or think about it ever again. Two roads diverged and all."

"Okay." I pick up the card. "There's a phone number at the bottom."

"Just do it. Rip off the Band-Aid. Tell them you decline."

"Maybe I will," I say, ready to call his bluff.

Seb's bravado wavers as I begin dialing France. "Or maybe you hear her out, you know?" he says in a rush.

I laugh, hanging up. "So you *were* trying to reverse-psychology me."

"Piper, you are the bravest, coolest girl I know. You've been working your ass off for years, and you've had a real shit run of luck. You deserve this. Go to Paris, party for a week, and *have fun*. Please."

Seb is as serious as a heart attack. Tears come to my eyes.

He's right: It's been an especially grim several years. My mom's breast cancer . . . our family's tight finances after her death . . . the college-application grind. I try to stay cheerful and press forward, but it's been a lot. Before Mom died, I felt as if I was in control of everything. Work hard, study hard, reap rewards.

But since losing her, I feel like I've been spinning plates, desperately trying to keep control of the uncontrollable.

"Hey," he whispers, wiping my tears away. "Don't cry. Crying will age you. And then you'll need to waste your minuscule college-scholarship money on preventative Botox in your twenties."

I start laughing through the tears. "Get out of here, you weirdo."

He stands up and gives me a big hug. "Promise me you won't call Brigitte Bardot back until *after* you spend all night maniacally googling how your life is about to explode into unicorn goodness, okay?"

After Seb leaves, I can't stop staring at the envelope.

I'm not a very dramatic person. I'm sensible ol' Piper. Dependable. Sturdy.

But I can't help feeling like this is about to change everything.

CHAPTER TWO



Chapin *Upper East Side, New York City*

I stare at myself in the private dressing room at Bergdorf Goodman, horrified. I'm wearing a voluminous cocktail dress that my mother insisted I try on. I leave for Paris tomorrow and—true to form—Mom worried my already-bursting suitcase wasn't full enough.

Ugh. I look like a meringue cream puff.

I exit the dressing room to find my mother. Her eyes brim with excited tears. She carefully dots them away, not wanting to ruin her makeup. I'm reminded of the tremulous, wonder-filled look on her face when she was nominated for Best Actress for *Breaking News* (before she lost to Meryl Streep and had to hide her fury).

"Oh, Chapin. My darling. You look perfect!"

I turn away so she can't see my stupid, grateful smile. Compliments from Mom are rarer and more valuable than musgravite gemstones—which is really saying something.

She clasps her hands together, delighted. "You're so beautiful, darling."

But my mother's beatific countenance evaporates when she clocks my feet.

"Are you wearing . . . *sneakers*?"

I look down at my favorite pair of Nikes. They're limited-edition lime-green Dunks. Nowhere near as valuable as an elusive Australian gemstone beloved by collectors . . . but freaking awesome nonetheless.

"Yeah! These were a collab with—"

"I don't give a damn if they're from Manolo Blahnik—you cannot wear sneakers in Paris in front of Amélie Bouchon. God, Chapin. Common sense." I flush, humiliated.

She sighs at the stricken expression on my face. "Please don't be dramatic. I just want you to be thoughtful."

I wince, desperate to please her, as always. "Sorry."

"You're fine, honey." She stares at me, sizing me up. I see a flash of regret flit across her face. She suddenly steps forward to engulf me in a hug, a cloud of Le Labo perfume surrounding me. It's a familiar dance: hurt my feelings, apologize, hurt my feelings, apologize. I lean into her hug, taking the scraps.

Better than being ignored altogether, right? Half my friends barely see their parents, who are constantly schlepping between various vacation houses and leaving them to nannies they've long outgrown. At least my mom likes to spend time with me,

even if it is 25 percent bonding, 75 percent me disappointing her no matter how hard I try.

The sales assistant hurries back into the dressing room, smiling eagerly. “She looks ah-mazing.” She’s barely even spoken to me all afternoon, instead gluing her eyes firmly to my mother. I’m used to it. When Ella Somerset is around, I’m invisible. “Which ones will she take?”

Some of the items were winners, bringing a smile to Mom’s face. But otherwise, the dressing area is full of clothing that Mom has rejected: *too slutty, too common, too boring, too poor.* (Her words, obviously.) When I exited in one sleek black pantsuit she’d selected for consideration, she shuddered. “You look like a waiter.”

“We’re only taking a few things today,” Mom says apologetically, waving her hand toward a rack by the door. Her notion of “a few things” is predictably twisted. The “yes” rack holds about fourteen different frilly dresses, jumpsuits, bouclé jackets, pussy-bow blouses, and trousers, most in pastel colors so vomitous I want to offset them with a face tattoo for some edge.

I smirk at the notion of permanently marking myself, fantasizing about a huge Old English neck tattoo saying “HARD-CORE.” Ella would have a coronary.

Mom looks at me, suspicious. I smile back winningly.

“Now for the shoes!” Mom says, clapping her hands together. My glee fades. Time for more torture.

After another hour of shopping, we finally drive back to the apartment in the Escalade, where we sit side by side. Mom’s weighed down with the bags of clothes she picked out for me.

I'm now the not-so-proud owner of several pairs of designer stilettos and pumps that look like they were stolen from Miss America's closet circa 1998.

"So are you excited?" she asks. "You're going to have the best time, lovebug."

I nod, even though I'm only half excited. But I know what she wants to hear. "Yeah, I figure—"

She interrupts me, poking me in the back,. "Please don't slouch in front of Amélie." I straighten my back.

"A little more." She thrusts her shoulders back, her elegant neck elongating. In profile, my mom looks like a Greek goddess. It's not hard to imagine her as Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world, men risking their lives and sanity for the merest hint of a glimpse of her. "See? Like this?"

I imitate her perfectly.

She sighs imperceptibly but manages a smile, patting my hand.

I stare out the window as we drive up Madison Avenue, nursing hurt feelings. The anonymity of New York City is a marvel. Here, nobody cares that you live in an Upper East Side penthouse filled with your parents' Grammys, Emmys, and Oscars. Money and power and fame are a given. Next. What do *you* bring to the table?

I know what it looks like from Instagram. It seems like I have it all. Movie-star mom, rock-star dad, a wardrobe that rivals the *Vogue* fashion closet. Last year *Vogue* actually interviewed me (*me!*) for *73 Questions*. They called my family "the closest thing America has to royalty beside the Kennedys" and said I'm

“queen of my tony private school.” Which: *Queen* is a bit dramatic, but yeah, the social part’s easy.

So why do I feel like such a colossal failure all the time?

When I was younger, I thought my mom was the most beautiful, glamorous, wonderful person in the entire world. Of course, it wasn’t just me who thought that: Mom has had the entire world in thrall for two decades. For somebody who made her bones as America’s Sweetheart—carefree, hilarious, effortlessly charming—in private she’s moody, mercurial, and intense as hell. Sometimes she’s the best mom on the planet (especially, let’s be real, to my brother Dalton, who basically walks on water in her eyes). But the rest of the time she’s a bitch on wheels. She doesn’t do anything by half, and that includes painstakingly curating my life to fit the perfect image she’s determined to present to the world.

Believe me, you do not want to grow up as the daughter of Ella Somerset. Maybe if she’d given me her last name instead of Dad’s, it would have conditioned me to live up to her expectations.

“Are you still pouting?” she asks, poking my leg as the Escalade turns onto East Seventy-Seventh Street. “C’mon. Cheer up, buttercup. You’re going to have the best time!” I smile halfheartedly and she brightens, mollified.

“Now remember, we’re aiming to win Debutante of the Year—”

“It’s not *winning* Debutante of the Year. It’s being *named* Debutante of the Year.”

“Sure, but there can only be one. And that’s you.”

Normally I let this sort of thing go, but all week I've been in *A Mood*. Probably because of my Columbia rejection. *Not a rejection, a wait list*, in my brother Dalton's words, but it's hard to break free of Mom's binary thinking. If you don't win, you lose. Besides: He already goes to Columbia, so of course he's optimistic they'll eventually let me in too.

Mom doesn't know about Columbia—and what's worse is she'll probably celebrate it. I got into USC, which was her alma mater before she quit halfway through sophomore year after NBC picked up her pilot. She's always complaining that Dalton didn't follow in her footsteps, which gives me the tiniest hint of glee, because otherwise Dalton would get off completely scot-free. (It's okay, he deserves it; he's the best brother on the planet and was basically engineered in a lab of awesomeness.) But when it comes to college, it won't matter that Columbia was *my* dream—all that'll matter is it wasn't hers.

I'm not trying to be a brat. USC is a perfectly good school. A great school! But I spent years literally torturing myself with AP classes, SAT tutors, and Columbia application events. I sent handwritten thank-you cards to so many people, I was one note away from mailing the receptionist and janitor. Trying to get into Columbia has been killing me. If I'd known USC was endgame, I would have waltzed through Spence and not given myself a stress-induced ulcer.

I've been trying to stay even-keeled, as always, but I suddenly can't stop myself. "It's not like it matters who gets Deb of the Year. It's all pointless bullshit."

Mom swivels toward me, horrified. Her driver, Ephram,

eyes me from the front seat apprehensively. He's seen Ella Somerset make mincemeat of lesser targets. "Okay, you've been a complete jerk to me all week." I flinch. She's not wrong. But the insult still hurts.

"I'm not a jerk," I mutter.

"I had all sorts of invites for next week. I could be off the coast of Sardinia with Jeff and Lauren on their yacht!"

So go, then. Who's stopping you?

"Chapin, honey. This is our magical mommy-daughter time. But, frankly, I'm not looking forward to it very much if you're going to keep up this sullen attitude. This is *not* like you." She roots in her purse, pulling out a compact to check her reflection. She turns her head from side to side, admiring herself. "My sister always told me girls were harder in their teens, but I never believed it until now."

Don't fight back. Remember why you're doing this ball in the first place. It means the world to her.

"I'm sorry," I offer dutifully. "I know La Danse is very important to you."

They're not just empty words. La Danse *is* important to her. I really *do* desperately want to make her happy. Because when my mother is happy, it's like God herself is shining on you.

She turns to face me, gearing up for a patented "Ella Somerset speech," as Dalton and I call it: the kind where she acts like she's accepting an Academy Award even though she's just choosing between red or white wine at dinner.

"Lovebug, you don't know how lucky you are. Your father and I left behind everything—our families, our friends, our

sanity—and we made it here. To the top.” Our car comes to a stop in front of our building, right at the corner of Seventy-Fifth and Park. “My parents were carrot farmers. I grew up with nothing. We had to spend months saving up just to buy a new pair of shoes or a pretty dress. But you’ve never known anything but abundance. Look around. You have the world at your feet. *Our* world. This is where we belong.” Two older female tourists stand in front of our building, no doubt hoping for a selfie with Ella. I wonder how many hours they’ve been waiting.

I start to exit the car, but Mom touches my arm. Her thin hand is cold against my skin. “I give you everything and I don’t ask much. But this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The sort of thing I endlessly dreamed about when I was a girl. Please don’t embarrass me. Take this seriously. You’re so talented. You could win if you just *try*, for once.”

I look into her piercing blue eyes, my heart aching for her approval, and I think: *If I ever have kids, I will be nothing like you.*

“Okay, Mom,” I say. “I won’t let you down.”

She squeezes my arm gently. “That’s my girl.”