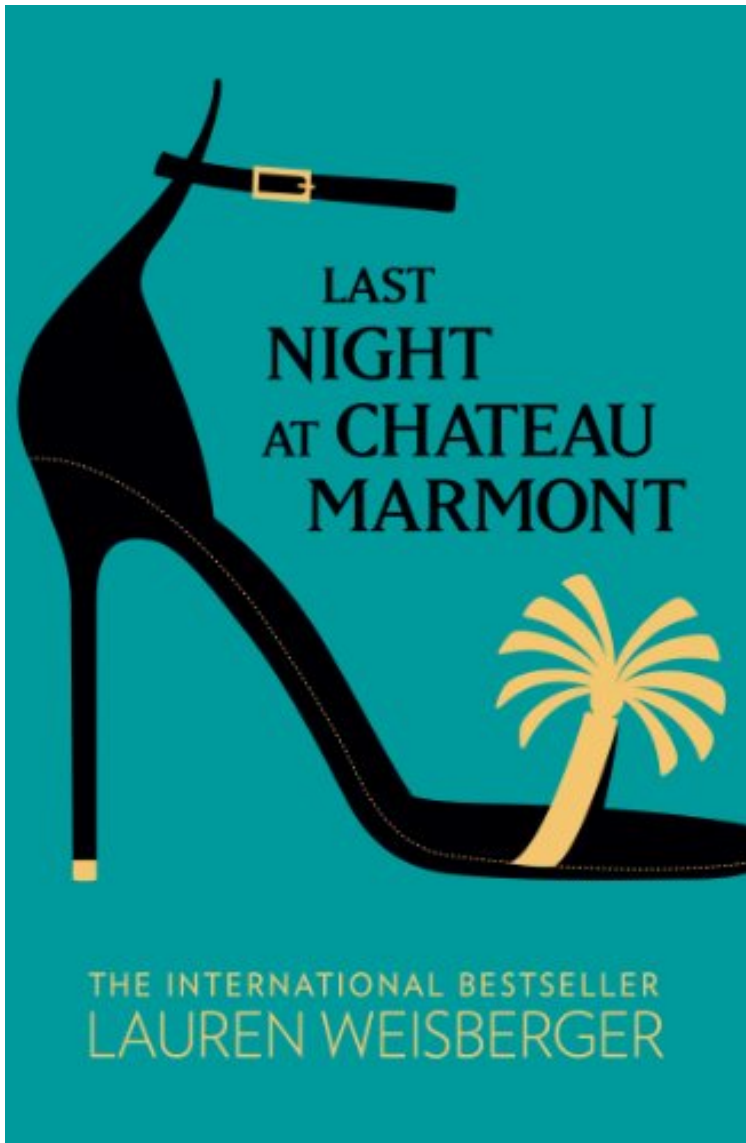


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Last Night at Chateau Marmont



Par Lauren Weisberger
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA novel from the million copy bestselling author of The Devil Wears Prada.Heartbreak, headlines and Hermes welcome to Brooke's new worldBrooke and Julian live a happy life in New York she's the breadwinner working two jobs and he's the struggling musician husband. Then Julian is discovered by a Sony exec and becomes an overnight success and their life changes for ever.Soon they are moving in exclusive circles, dining at the glitziest restaurants, attending the most outrageous parties in town and jetting off to the trendiest hotspots in LA.But Julian's new-found fame means that Brooke must face the savage attentions of the ruthless paparazzi. And when a scandalous picture hits the front pages, Brooke's world is turned upside down. Can her marriage survive the events of that fateful night at Chateau Marmont?

It's time for Brooke to decide if she's going to sink or swim. When the subway finally screeched into the Franklin Street station, Brooke was nearly sick with anxiety. She checked her watch for the tenth time in as many minutes and tried to remind herself that it wasn't the end of the world; her best friend, Nola, would forgive her, had to forgive her, even if she was inexcusably late. She made her way through the rush-hour throngs of commuters toward the door, instinctively holding her breath in the midst of so many bodies, and allowed herself to be pushed toward the stairwell. On autopilot now, Brooke and her fellow riders each pulled their cell phones from their purses and jacket pockets, filed silently into a straight line and, zombielike, marched like choreographed soldiers up the right side of the cement stairs while staring blankly at the tiny screens in their palms. *Shit!* she heard an overweight woman up ahead call out, and in a moment she knew why. The rain hit her forcefully and without warning the instant she emerged from the stairwell. What had been a chilly but decent enough March evening only twenty minutes earlier had deteriorated into a freezing, thundering misery, where the winds whipped the rain down and made it utterly impossible to stay dry. *Dammit!* she added to the cacophony of expletives people were shouting all around her as they struggled to pull umbrellas from their briefcases or arrange newspapers over their heads. Since she'd run home to change after work, Brooke had nothing but a tiny (and admittedly cute) silver clutch to shield herself from the onslaught. *Good-bye, hair,* she thought as she began to sprint the three blocks to the restaurant. *Ill miss you, eye makeup. Nice knowing you, gorgeous new suede boots that ate up half my weekly salary.* Brooke was drenched by the time she reached Sotto, the tiny, unpretentious neighborhood joint where she and Nola met two or three times a month. The pasta wasn't the best in the city probably not even the best on the block and the space wasn't anything all that special, but Sotto had other charms, more important ones: reasonably priced wine by the full carafe, a killer tiramisu, and a downright hot Italian matron who, simply because they'd been coming for so long, always saved Brooke and Nola the most private table in the back. *Hey, Luca.* Brooke greeted the owner as she shrugged off her wool peacoat, trying not to shake water everywhere. *Is she here yet?* Luca immediately put his hand over the phone receiver and pointed with a pencil over his shoulder. *The usual. What's the occasion for the sexy dress, cara mia? You want to dry off first?* She smoothed her fitted, short-sleeved black jersey dress with both palms and prayed that Luca was right, that the dress was sexy and she looked okay. She'd come to think of that dress as her Gig Uniform; paired with either heels, sandals, or boots, depending on the weather, she wore it to nearly every one of Julian's performances. *Im so late already. Is she all whiny and mad?* Brooke asked, scrunching handfuls of her hair in a desperate attempt to save it from the imminent frizz attack. *Shes a half carafe in and hasn't put the mobile down yet. You better get back there.* They exchanged a triple cheek-kiss Brooke had protested the full three kisses in the beginning but Luca insisted before Brooke took a deep breath and walked back to their table. Nola was tucked neatly into the banquette, her suit jacket flung across the back bench and her navy cashmere shell showing off tightly toned arms and contrasting nicely with her gorgeous olive skin. Her shoulder-length layered cut was stylish and sexy, her blond highlights glowed under the restaurant's soft lights, and her makeup looked dewy and fresh. No one would ever know from looking at her that Nola had just clocked in twelve hours on a trading desk screaming into a headset. Brooke and Nola didn't meet until second semester senior year at Cornell, although Brooke like the rest of the student body recognized Nola and was equal parts terrified of and fascinated by her. Compared to her hoodie-and-Ugg-wearing fellow students, the model-thin Nola favored high-heeled boots and blazers and never, ever tied her hair in a ponytail. She'd grown up in elite prep schools in New York, London, Hong Kong, and Dubai, places her investment banker father worked, and had enjoyed the requisite freedom that goes along with being the only child of extremely busy parents. How she ended up at Cornell instead of Cambridge or Georgetown or the Sorbonne was anyone's guess, but it didn't take a lot of imagination to see she wasn't particularly impressed by it all. When the rest of them were busy rushing sororities, meeting for lunch at the Ivy Room, and getting drunk at various Collegetown bars, Nola kept to herself. There were glimpses into her life: the well-known affair with the archaeology professor, the frequent appearances of sexy, mysterious men on campus who vanished soon thereafter but for the most part, Nola attended her classes, aced everything she took, and hightailed it back to Manhattan the moment Friday afternoon rolled around. When the two girls found themselves assigned to workshop each others short stories in a creative writing elective their senior year, Brooke was so intimidated she could barely speak. Nola, as usual, didn't appear particularly pleased or upset, but when she returned Brooke's first submission a week later a fictional piece on a character struggling to adapt to her Peace Corps assignment in Congo it was filled with thoughtful, insightful commentary and suggestions. Then, on the last page, after scrawling out her lengthy and serious feedback, Nola had written, *P.S. Consider sex scene in*

Congo? and Brooke had laughed so hard she had to excuse herself from class to calm down. After class Nola invited Brooke to a little coffee place in the basement of one of the academic buildings, a place none of Brookers friends ever hung out, and within a couple weeks Brooke was going to New York with Nola on weekends. Even after all these years, Nola was too fabulous for words, but it helped Brooke knowing that her friend sobbed during news segments featuring soldiers coming home from war, was secretly obsessed with one day having a perfect white picket fence in the suburbs despite being openly derisive about it, and had a pathological fear of small, yappy dogs (Walter, Brookers dog, not included). Perfect, perfect. No, I think sitting at the bar is just fine, Nola said into the phone, rolling her eyes at Brooke. No, no need to make a reservation for dinner, lets just play it by ear. Okay, sounds good. See you then. She clicked her phone shut and immediately grabbed the red wine, refreshing her own glass before remembering Brooke and filling hers too. Do you hate me? Brooke asked as she arranged her coat on the chair next to her and tossed her wet clutch beside her. She took a long, deep drink of wine and savored the feeling of the alcohol sliding over her tongue. Why? Just because Ive been sitting here alone for thirty minutes? I know, I know, Im really sorry.

Hellish day at work. Two of the full-time nutritionists called in sick today which if you ask me sounds suspicious and the rest of us had to cover their rotations. Of course, if we met sometime in my neighborhood, maybe I could get there on time. . . . Nola held up her hand. Point taken. I do appreciate you coming all the way down here. Dinner in Midtown West just isnt appealing. Who were you just on with? Was that Daniel? Daniel? Nola looked baffled. She stared at the ceiling as she appeared to rack her brain. Daniel, Daniel . . . oh! Nah, Im over him. I brought him to a work thing early last week and he was weird. Super awkward. No, that was setting up tomorrows Match dot-com date. Second one this week. How did I get so pathetic? She sighed. Please. Youre not No, really. Its pathetic that Im almost thirty and still think of my college boyfriend as my only real relationship. It is also pathetic that I belong to multiple online dating sites and date men from all of them. But what is most pathetic what is bordering on inexcusable is how willing I am to admit this to anyone who will listen. Brooke took another sip. Im hardly anyone who will listen. You know what I mean, Nola said. If you were the only one privy to my humiliation, I could live with that. But its as though Ive become so inured to the Good word. Thanks. It was on my word-a-day calendar this morning. So, really, Im so inured to the indignity of it all that I have no filter anymore. Just yesterday I spent a solid fifteen minutes trying to explain to one of Goldmans most senior vice presidents the difference in men on Match versus those on Nerve. Its unforgivable. So, whats the story with the guy tomorrow? Brooke asked, trying to change the subject. It was impossible to keep track of Nolas man situation from week to week. Not just which one a challenge itself but whether she desperately wanted a boyfriend to settle down with or loathed commitment and wanted only to be single and fabulous and sleep around. It changed on a dime, with no warning, and left Brooke constantly trying to remember whether this weeks guy was so amazing or a total disaster. Nola lowered her lashes and arranged her glossed lips into her signature pout, the one that managed to say, Im fragile, Im sweet, and I want you to ravish me all at the same time. Clearly, she was planning a long response to this question. Save it for the men, my friend. Doesnt work on me, Brooke lied. Nola wasnt traditionally pretty, but it didnt much matter. She put herself together so beautifully and emanated such confidence that men and women alike regularly fell under her spell. This one sounds promising, she said wistfully. Im sure its only a matter of time until he reveals some sort of colossal deal breaker, but until then, I think hes perfect. So, whats he like? Brooke pressed. Mmm, lets see. He was on the ski racing team in college, which is why I clicked on him in the first place, and he even did two seasons as an instructor, first in Park City and then in Zermatt. Perfection so far. Nola nodded. Yep. Hes just about six foot, fit build or so he claims sandy blond hair, and green eyes. He just moved to the city a few months ago and doesnt know a lot of people. Youll change that. Yeah, I guess. . . . She pouted. But . . . Whats the problem? Brooke refreshed both their glasses and nodded to the waiter when he asked if theyd both like their usual orders. Well, its the job thing. He lists his profession as artist. She pronounced this word as though she were saying pornographer. So? So? So what the hell does that mean. Artist? Um, I think it could mean a lot of things. Painter, sculptor, musician, actor, wri Nola touched her hand to her forehead. Please. It can mean one thing only and we both know it: unemployed. Everyones unemployed now. Its practically chic. Oh, come on. I can live with recession-related unemployment. But an artiste? Tough to stomach. Nola! Thats ridiculous. There are plenty of people loads of them, thousands, probably millions who support themselves with their art. I mean, look at Julian. Hes a musician. Should I never have gone out with him? Nola opened her mouth to say something but changed her mind. There was an awkward moment of silence. What were you going to say? Brooke asked. Nothing, its nothing. Youre right. No, really. What were you just about to say? Just say

it. Nola twirled her wineglass by the stem and looked like she'd rather be anywhere but there. Im not saying that Julian isnt really talented, but . . . But what? Brooke leaned in so close that Nola was forced to meet her eyes. But Im not sure I would call him a musician. He was someones assistant when you met. Now you support him. Yes, he was an intern when we met, Brooke said, barely even attempting to hide her irritation. He was interning at Sony to learn the music industry, see how it works. And guess what? Its only because of the relationships he built there that anyone paid him any attention in the first place. If he hadnt been there every day, trying to make himself indispensable, do you think the head of AR wouldve taken two hours of his time to watch him perform? I know, its just that. How can you say hes not doing anything? Is that really what you think? Im not sure if you realize this, but he has spent the last eight months locked away in a Midtown recording studio making an album. And not just some vanity project, by the way; Sony actually signed him as an artist theres that word again and paid him an advance. If you dont think thats proper employment, I really dont know what to tell you. Nola held her hands up in defeat and hung her head. Yes, of course. Youre right. You dont sound convinced. Brooke began chewing on her thumbnail. Any relief she'd felt from the wine had completely vanished. Nola pushed her salad around with a fork. Well, dont they give out, like, a ton of recording contracts to anyone showing a modicum of talent, figuring itll only take one big hit to pay for all the smaller flops? Brooke was surprised by her friends knowledge of the music industry. Julian always explained that very theory when he downplayed his label deal and tried to, in his words, manage expectations about what such a deal really meant. Still, coming from Nola, it somehow sounded worse. A modicum of talent? Brooke could only whisper the words. Is that what you think of him? Of course thats not what I think of him. Dont take it so personally. Its just hard, as your friend, to watch you kill yourself working to support him for so many years now. Especially when the odds are so low that anything will come of it. Well, I appreciate your concern for my well-being, but you should know it was my choice to take on the extra private school consulting work to help support us. I dont do it out of the kindness of my heart, I do it because I actually believe in him and his talent, and I know even if no one else seems to think so that he has a brilliant career ahead of him. Brooke had been ecstatic beyond description possibly even more than Julian when he'd called her with the initial offer from Sony eight months earlier. Two hundred fifty thousand dollars was more than they'd collectively made in the previous five years, and Julian would have the freedom to do with it what he wanted. How could she have possibly foreseen that such a massive infusion of cash would put them in even greater debt than they already were? From that advance Julian needed to pay for studio time, hire high-priced producers and sound engineers, and cover the entire cost of his equipment, travel, and backup band. The money was gone in a few short months, long before they could use so much as a single dollar toward rent, utilities, or even a celebratory dinner. And once all those funds were being used to help Julian make a name for himself, it didnt make sense not to see the project through. They'd already spent thirty thousand dollars of their own money the entirety of their savings that had once been earmarked for a down payment on an apartment and they were burning through more credit every single day. The scariest part of the whole thing was what Nola had so brutally spelled out: the chances of Julian ever making good on all that time and money even with the Sony name behind him were almost nil. I just hope he knows how lucky he is to have a wife like you, Nola said, more softly now. I can tell you, I sure wouldnt be so supportive. Which is probably why Im destined to be single forever . . . Thankfully their pasta dishes arrived and the conversation shifted to safer topics: how fattening was the meat sauce, whether or not Nola should ask for a raise at work, how much Brooke disliked her in-laws. When Brooke motioned for the check without ordering the tiramisu or even a coffee, Nola looked concerned. Youre not upset with me, are you? she asked, putting her credit card in the leather folder. No, Brooke lied. Ive just had a long day. Where are you headed now? No aprs-dinner drink? Julians actually got a . . . hes performing, Brooke said, changing her mind at the last second. She'd rather not have mentioned his gig at all, but it felt strange lying to Nola. Oh, fun! Nola said brightly, draining the last of her wine. Want company? They both knew she didnt really want to go, which was okay, because Brooke didnt really want her to go. Her friend and her husband got along just fine, and that was good enough. She appreciated Nolas protectiveness and knew it came from a good place, but it was hard thinking your best friend was constantly judging your husband and he was always coming up short. Trent is in town actually, Brooke said. Hes here on a rotation of some sort, so Im meeting him there. Ah, good old Trent. Hows he liking med school? Hes done actually; hes an intern now. Julian says he loves L.A., which is surprising born-and-bred New Yorkers never like L.A. Nola stood up and put her suit jacket back on. Is he dating anyone? If I remember correctly, hes boring as hell but perfectly cute. . . . He just got engaged, actually. To a fellow gastro intern, a girl named Fern. Intern Fern, the gastro specialist. Id

rather not imagine what their conversation entails. Nola scrunched up her face in disgust. Thanks for that visual. And to think, he could've been all yours. . . . Mmmm. I just want to make sure I still get proper credit for introducing you to your husband. If you hadn't gone out with the Trent man that night, you'd still just be another Julian groupie. Brooke laughed and kissed her friend on the cheek. She fished two twenties out of her wallet and handed them to Nola. I've got to run. If I don't get on the train in the next thirty seconds, I'm going to be late. Talk tomorrow? She grabbed her coat and clutch, offered a quick wave to Luca on the way out, and bolted through the door. Even after all these years, Brooke shuddered when she thought how close she and Julian came to missing each other. It was June 2001, a mere month after she'd graduated from college, and Brooke was finding it almost impossible to acclimate to her new sixty-hour workweek, split almost evenly between her nutrition grad coursework, logging internship hours, and a make-ends-meet barista stint at a neighborhood coffee joint. While she'd had no illusions about the difficulty of working twelve hours a day for \$22,000 or so, she'd thought she hadn't been able to predict the sum strain of long workdays, insufficient salary, too little sleep, and the logistics of sharing a seven-hundred-square-foot Murray Hill one-bedroom with Nola and another of their friends. Which is why, when Nola implored Brooke to join her for live music on a Sunday night, she'd flatly refused. Come on, Brookie, you need to get out of the apartment, Nola had argued while pulling on a tight black tank top. There's some jazz quartet performing and they're supposed to be really good, and Benny and Simone said they'd save us seats. Five-dollar cover and two-for-one drinks. What can you possibly not like about that? I'm just too tired. Brooke sighed, clicking listlessly through the channels from the girls' living room futon. I still have to write a paper, and I have to be at work in eleven hours. Oh, save the drama. You're twenty-two, for chrissake. Suck it up and go get dressed. We're leaving in ten. It's pouring outside and Ten minutes, not one second longer, or you're not my friend anymore. By the time the girls had made it to Rue B's in the East Village and tucked themselves into a too-small table with friends from school, Brooke was regretting her weakness. Why did she always cave to Nola? Why on earth was she packed into a smoky, crowded bar, drinking a watery vodka tonic and waiting to see a jazz quartet she'd never heard of? She didn't even particularly like jazz. Or, for that matter, any live music, unless it happened to be a Dave Matthews or Bruce Springsteen concert where she could merrily sing along to all the songs. This was clearly not that kind of night. Which is why she felt a mixture of both irritation and relief when the leggy, blond bartender banged a spoon on a water glass. Hey, guys! Hey, y'all, can I have your attention for a minute? She wiped her free hand on her jeans and patiently waited for the crowd to quiet down. I know you're all excited to hear the Tribesmen tonight, but we just got word that they're stuck in traffic on the LIE and aren't going to make it in time. Rousing boos and jeers ensued. I know, I know, it sucks. Overtaken tractor trailer, complete standstill, blah, blah, blah. How about a free round as an apology? called out a middle-aged man sitting in the back while holding up his drink. The bartender laughed. Sorry. But if anyone wants to come on up here and entertain us . . . She looked directly at the man, who just shook his head. Seriously, we've got a perfectly good piano. Anyone play? The room was silent as everyone glanced around at each other. Hey, Brooke, don't you play? Nola whispered loud enough for their table to hear. Brooke rolled her eyes. I got kicked out of the band in sixth grade because I couldn't learn to read sheet music. Who gets kicked out of the middle school band? The bartender was not giving up easily. Come on, folks! It's freaking pouring outside, and we're all in the mood to hear a little music. I'll cave and throw in free pitchers for the room if someone can entertain us for a few minutes. I play a little. Brooke followed the voice to a scruffy-looking guy sitting alone at the bar. He was in jeans and a plain white T-shirt and a knit hat even though it was summer. She hadn't noticed him before but decided he might be reasonably cute if he showered, shaved, and lost the hat. By all means . . . The bartender swept her arms toward the piano. What's your name? Julian. Well, Julian, she's all yours. She resumed her position behind the bar as Julian climbed onto the piano bench. He played a few notes, messing around with the timing and rhythm, and the audience lost interest pretty quickly and went back to their conversations. Even when he did quietly play an entire song (something ballad-y she didn't recognize), the music was more like background noise. But after ten minutes he played the intro notes to Hallelujah, and he started to sing the lyrics in a surprisingly clear, strong voice. The room fell silent. Brooke had heard the song before, having been briefly obsessed with Leonard Cohen, and had loved it, but the full-body chills were brand-new. She scanned the room. Were other people feeling this way? Julian's hands moved effortlessly across the keys as he somehow infused each word with intense feeling. Only when he'd murmured the final drawn-out hallelujah did the crowd react: they clapped, whistled, screamed, and almost uniformly jumped out of their seats. Julian appeared embarrassed, sheepish, and after an almost imperceptible bow, he began to walk back to his bar stool. Damn, he's good, breathed a

young girl to her date at the table behind them, her eyes fixed on the piano player. Encore! called an attractive woman who clutched her husband's hand. The husband nodded and echoed her call. Within seconds, the cheering had doubled in volume and the entire room was demanding a second song. The bartender grabbed Julian's hand and pulled him back toward the microphone. Pretty amazing, isn't he, guys? she yelled, beaming with pride at her new discovery. What do you say we convince Julian here to play us one more? Brooke turned to Nola, feeling more excited than she had in ages. Do you think he's going to play something else? Would you ever believe that some nobody sitting at a random bar on a random Sunday night the guy who's there to hear someone else perform can sing like that? Nola smiled at her and leaned in to make herself heard above the crowd. He is really talented. Too bad he looks like that. Brooke felt as though she'd been personally insulted. Looks like what? I like that whole scruffy thing he has going on. And with a voice like that, I think he's going to be a star one day. Not a chance. He's talented, but so are a million other people who are more outgoing and a whole lot better-looking. He's cute, Brooke said a little indignantly. He's East Village gig cute. Not international-rock-star cute. Before she could leap to Julian's defense, he returned to the bench and began to play again. This time it was a cover of Let's Get It On, and again, somehow, he managed to sound even better than Marvin Gaye—a deeper, sexier voice, a slightly slower rhythm, and an expression on his face of intense concentration. Brooke was so lost in the experience she barely noticed that her friends had resumed their chitchat as the promised free pitcher of beer made its way around their table. They poured and swallowed and poured some more, but Brooke couldn't take her eyes off the disheveled guy at the piano. When he walked out of the bar twenty minutes later, bowing his head to his appreciative audience and offering the smallest hint of a smile, Brooke seriously considered following him. She'd never done anything like it in her life, but it felt right. Should I go introduce myself? she asked everyone at the table, leaning far enough forward that conversation couldn't continue. To whom? Nola asked. To Julian! This was exasperating. Didn't anyone else realize he'd already stepped outside and would soon disappear forever? Julian, the piano man? Benny asked. Nola rolled her eyes and took a swig of beer. What are you going to do? Chase him down and tell him that you can overlook his potential homelessness as long as he'll make sweet love to you atop his piano? Benny began to sing. Well, it's nine o'clock on a Saturday, regular crowd shuffles in. . . . There's a scruffy man sitting next to me, making love to our friend Brooke, Nola finished, laughing. They clinked beer mugs. You're both hysterical, Brooke said as she stood. No way! You're not following him, are you? Benny, go with her. Piano Man could be a serial killer, Nola said. I'm not following him, Brooke said. But she did make her way to the bar and, after digging her nails into her palms and changing her mind five times, she finally worked up the courage to ask the bartender if she knew anything else about the mystery performer. The woman didn't look up as she mixed a batch of mojitos. I've seen him in here before, usually when we have a blues or classic rock band playing, but he never talks to anyone. Always alone, if that's what you're asking. . . . No, no, I, uh. . . . no, it's not that at all. Just curious, she stammered, feeling like an idiot. Brooke had turned back toward the table when the bartender called out, Told me he plays a regular gig at a bar on the Upper East Side, a place called Tricks or Ricks, something like that. Tuesdays. Hope that helps. Brooke could count on one hand the number of times she'd gone to see live acts. She had never tracked down and followed a strange guy; and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes waiting for friends or dates to arrive, she didn't spend a lot of time solo in bars. Yet none of this stopped her from making a half dozen phone calls to find the right place and, after another three weeks working up her nerve, actually getting on the subway one scorching hot Tuesday night in July and walking in the front door of Nicks Bar and Lounge. Once she sat down, finding one of the last seats in the very back corner, she knew it had been worthwhile. The bar was one of a hundred just like it lining Second Avenue, but the crowd was surprisingly mixed. Instead of the usual Upper East Side mob of recent college grads who liked downing beer after loosening their brand-new Brooks Brothers ties, the group tonight seemed an almost odd mix of NYU students who'd made the trek uptown, couples in their thirties who sipped martinis and held hands, and hordes of Converse-wearing hipsters rarely seen in such concentrations outside the East Village or Brooklyn. Soon Nicks was packed beyond capacity, every seat filled and probably another fifty or sixty people standing behind the tables, all there for only one reason. It shocked Brooke to realize that the way she'd felt when she heard Julian play a month earlier at Rue B's wasn't unique. Dozens of people already knew about him and were willing to travel from all over the city to see him perform. By the time Julian claimed his seat at the piano and began his checks to make sure the sound was okay, the crowd was buzzing with anticipation. When he began, the room seemed to settle into the rhythm, some people swaying ever so slightly, some with their eyes closed, all with their bodies leaning in toward the stage. Brooke, who had

never before understood what it meant to get lost in the music, felt her entire body relax. Whether it was the red wine or the sexy crooning or the foreign feeling of being in a crowd of complete strangers, Brooke was addicted. She went to Nicks every Tuesday for rest of the summer. She never invited anyone to join her; when her roommates pressed her on where she went each week, she invented a very believable story about a book club with school friends. Just being there, watching him and hearing the music, she began to feel like she knew him. Up until then, music had been a side note, nothing more than a distraction on the treadmill, a fun dance song at a party, a way to kill time on long drives. But this? This was incredible. Without so much as a hello, Julians music could affect her mood and change her mind and make her feel things that were completely outside the realm of her daily routine. Until those solo nights at Nicks, her weeks had all looked the same: first work, then the all-too-rare happy hour with the same group of college friends and the same nosy roommates. She was happy enough, but at times it felt suffocating. Now Julian was all hers, and the fact that they never exchanged so much as a glance didnt bother her in the least. She was perfectly content just to watch him. He made the rounds a bit reluctantly, it appeared to her after each performance, shaking hands and modestly accepting the praise everyone lavished on him, but Brooke never once considered approaching him. It was two weeks after September 11, 2001, when Nola convinced her to go on a blind date with a guy she'd met at a work function. All their friends had either fled NYC to see family or rekindled relationships with exes, and the city was still pinned by acrid smoke and an overwhelming grief. Nola had hunkered down with some new guy, spending nearly every night at his apartment, and Brooke was feeling unsettled and lonely. A blind date? Really? Brooke asked, barely looking up from her computer. Hes a sweetheart, Nola said one night while they sat side by side on the couch watching SNL. Hes not going to be your future husband, but hes super nice, and hes cute enough, and hell take you somewhere good. If you stop being such a frigid bitch, he might even hook up with you. Nola! Im just saying. You could use it, you know. And while were on the topic, a shower and a manicure wouldnt kill you either. Brooke held out her hands and noticed, for the first time, bitten-down nails and raggedy cuticles. They really did look gross. What is he, one of your discards? she asked. Nola sniffed. He is! You totally hooked up with him and now youre passing him along to me. Thats vile, Nol. And I have to say, surprising. Even youre not usually that bad. Save it, Nola said with a massive roll of her eyes. I met him a couple weeks ago at some work fund-raiser; he was there with one of my colleagues. So you did hook up with him. No! I may have hooked up with my colleague. Brooke groaned and covered her eyes. but thats not important. I remember his friend was cute and single. A med student, I think, but honestly, youre not really at a point to be discriminatory about such things. So long as hes breathing . . . Thanks, friend. So youll go? Brooke grabbed for the clicker back again. If it will make you shut up right now, Ill consider it, she said. Four days later Brooke found herself sitting at an outdoor Italian caf on MacDougal Street. Trent was, as Nola promised, a perfectly sweet guy. Reasonably cute, extremely polite, nicely dressed, and boring as hell. Their conversation was more bland than the linguini with tomato and basil he ordered for them both, and his earnestness left her with the overwhelming desire to plunge a fork into her eyes. Yet for a reason she didnt understand, when he suggested they move on to a nearby bar, she agreed. Really? he asked, sounding every bit as surprised as she felt. Yeah, why not? And really, she thought, why not? Its not like she had any other prospects or even the expectation of watching a movie with Nola later that night. The next day she would have to start outlining a fifteen-page paper that was due in two weeks; besides that, her most exciting plans were the laundry, the gym, and a four-hour shift at the coffee shop. What exactly was she rushing home to? Great, I have just the place in mind. Trent sweetly insisted on paying the check and, finally, they were off. They'd only walked two blocks when Trent crossed in front of her and pulled open the door to a notoriously raucous NYU bar. It was possibly the last place in downtown Manhattan anyone would take a date he wasn't planning to roofie, but Brooke was pleased they'd be going somewhere loud enough to prevent any real conversation. She'd have a beer, maybe two, listen to some good eighties on the jukebox, and be under her covers by midnight alone. It took a couple seconds for her eyes to adjust, though she immediately recognized Julians voice. When she finally focused on the front stage, she stared in disbelief: he sat in his familiar pose at the piano, fingers flying and mouth pressed against the microphone, singing her favorite of his originals: The woman sits alone in a room / Alone in a house like a silent tomb / The man counts every jewel in his crown / What cant be saved is measured in pounds. She wasn't sure how long she stood rooted in the doorway, instantly and completely absorbed in his performance, but it was long enough for Trent to comment. Pretty great, isnt he? Come on, I see a couple seats over there. He took her arm and Brooke allowed herself to be pulled through the crowd. She arranged herself in the chair Trent pointed to and had barely placed her purse on the table when the song ended and

Julian announced he'd be taking a break. She was vaguely aware that Trent was speaking to her, but between the noise of the bar and the vigil she was keeping on Julian's whereabouts, she didn't hear what he was saying. It happened so fast she could barely process it. One second Julian was unhooking his harmonica from its piano-top stand and the next he was standing over their table, smiling. As usual, he was wearing a plain white T-shirt and jeans with a knit cap, this one an eggplant color. There was a light sheen of sweat on his face and forearms. Hey, buddy, glad you could make it, Julian said, clapping Trent on the shoulder. Yeah, me too. Looks like we missed the first set. Someone had just abandoned a chair at the next table, and Trent pulled it over for Julian. Take a load off. Julian hesitated, glanced at Brooke with a small smile, and sat. Julian Alter, he said, offering his hand. Brooke was about to respond when Trent spoke over her. Christ, I'm such an idiot! Who taught me my manners, you know? Julian, this is my, uh, this is Brooke. Brooke . . . Greene, she said, pleased with Trent for demonstrating in front of Julian how little they knew each other. She and Julian shook hands, which seemed like an awkward gesture in a crowded college bar, but Brooke felt only excitement. She examined him more closely as he and Trent exchanged jokes about some guy they both knew. Julian was probably only a couple years older than her, but something made him look more knowing, experienced, although Brooke couldn't pinpoint exactly what. His nose was too prominent and his chin a touch weak, and his pale skin even more noticeable now, at the very end of summer, when everyone else had a season's worth of vitamin D. His eyes, while green, were unremarkable, even murky, with fine lines that crinkled around them when he smiled. Had she not heard him sing so many times, seen him throw his head back and call out lyrics in a voice so rich and filled with meaning, had she just ran into him like this, wearing that knit cap and clutching a beer in a loud, anonymous bar, she never would have looked twice, nor thought him the least bit attractive. But tonight, she could barely breathe. The two guys chatted for a few minutes while Brooke sat back and watched. It was Julian, not Trent, who noticed she didn't have a drink. Can I get you guys a beer? he asked, looking around for a waitress. Trent immediately stood up. I'll get them. We just got here and no one's come by yet. Brooke, what would you like? She murmured the name of the first beer that came to mind, and Julian held up what looked like an empty water cup. Can you get me a Sprite? Brooke felt a stab of panic when Trent left. What on earth were they going to talk about? Anything, she reminded herself, anything but the fact that she'd followed him all over the city. Julian turned to her and smiled. Trent's a good guy, huh? Brooke shrugged. Yeah, he seems nice. We just met tonight. I barely even know him. Ah, the always-fun blind date. Do you think you'll go out with him again? No, Brooke said without any emotion whatsoever. She was convinced she was in shock; she barely knew what she was saying. Julian laughed and Brooke laughed with him. Why not? he asked. Brooke shrugged. No reason in particular. He seems perfectly pleasant. Just a little boring. She hadn't meant to say that, but she couldn't think straight. Julian's face broke in a massive smile, one so bright and beaming that Brooke forgot to feel embarrassed. That's my cousin you're calling boring. He laughed. Ohmigod, I didn't mean it like that. He seems really, uh, great. It just . . . The more she stammered, the more amused he appeared. Oh, please. He interrupted her, placing his wide, warm hand on her forearm. You're absolutely, exactly correct. He's a really great guy, honestly, as sweet as they come, but no one's ever described him as the life of the party. There was a moment of silence as Brooke racked her brain for something appropriate to say next. It didn't much matter what it was, so long as she managed to keep her fan status under wraps. I've seen you play before, she announced, before clapping her hand over her mouth in reflexive shock. He peered at her. Oh yeah? Where? Every Tuesday night at Nick's. Any chance of not appearing downright stalkerish had just come to a crashing end. Really? He seemed puzzled but pleased. She nodded. Why? Brooke briefly considered lying and telling him that her best friend lived nearby or that she went every week with a group for happy hour, but for a reason she herself didn't entirely understand, she was completely truthful. I was there that night at Rue B's when the jazz quartet canceled and you did that impromptu performance. I thought you, uh, I thought it was awesome, so I asked the bartender for your name and found out you had a regular gig. Now I try to go whenever I can. She forced herself to look up, convinced he'd be staring at her with horror, and possibly fear, but Julian's expression revealed nothing, and his silence only made her more determined to fill it. Which is why it was so weird when Trent brought me here tonight . . . such a weird coincidence . . . She let her words trail off awkwardly and was filled with instant regret at all that she had just revealed. When she worked up the nerve to meet his eyes once again, Julian was shaking his head. You must be creeped out, she said with a nervous laugh. I promise I'll never show up at your apartment or your day job. I mean, not that I know where your apartment is, or if you even have a day job. Of course, I'm sure music is your day job, your real job, as it should. The hand was back on her forearm and Julian met her eye. I see you there every week, he said. Huh? He nodded and smiled again,

this time shaking his head a little as if to say, I can't believe I'm admitting this. Yeah. You always sit in the far back corner, near the pool table, and you're always alone. Last week you were wearing a blue dress, and it had white flowers or something sewn on the bottom, and you were reading a magazine but you put it away right as I came on. Brooke remembered the sundress, a gift from her mom to wear at her graduation brunch.

Only four months earlier it had felt so stylish; wearing it around the city now made her feel girlishly unsophisticated. The blue did make her red hair look even more fiery, so that was good, but it really did nothing for her hips or legs. So engrossed was she in trying to remember how she'd looked that night, she hadn't noticed Trent return to the table until he pushed a bottle of Bud Light her way. What'd I miss? he asked, sliding into his seat. Sure is crowded tonight. Julian, dude, you know how to pack 'em in. Julian clinked his cup with Trent's bottle and took a long drink. Thanks, buddy. I'll get you back after the show. He nodded to Brooke with what she swore and prayed was a knowing look and walked toward the stage. She didn't know then that he would ask Trent for his permission to call her, or that their first phone conversation would make her feel like she was flying, or that their first date would be a defining night in her life. She never would have predicted that they would fall into bed together less than three weeks later after a handful of marathon dates she had never wanted to end, or that they would save up for nearly two years to drive cross-country together or get engaged while listening to live music at a divey little place in the West Village with a plain gold band he'd paid for entirely on his own, or get married at his parents' gorgeous seaside Hampton's home because really, what were they proving by refusing a place like that? All she knew for sure that night was that she desperately wanted to see him again, that she would be at Nick's in two nights come hell or high water, and that no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop smiling.

2010 Lauren Weisberger Presentation de l'auteur
A novel from the million copy bestselling author of *The Devil Wears Prada*. Heartbreak, headlines and Hermes welcome to Brooke's new world. Brooke and Julian live a happy life in New York she's the breadwinner working two jobs and he's the struggling musician husband. Then Julian is discovered by a Sony exec and becomes an overnight success and their life changes for ever. Soon they are moving in exclusive circles, dining at the glitziest restaurants, attending the most outrageous parties in town and jetting off to the trendiest hotspots in LA. But Julian's new-found fame means that Brooke must face the savage attentions of the ruthless paparazzi. And when a scandalous picture hits the front pages, Brooke's world is turned upside down. Can her marriage survive the events of that fateful night at Chateau Marmont? It's time for Brooke to decide if she's going to sink or swim