

"I loved it! Susanna's a treat!" MEG CABOT



*Susanna*

*Hits*  
**HOLLYWOOD**



*by*

MARY

HOGAN





SIMON AND SCHUSTER

To my very own Hollywood hottie . . .  
you know who you are.

**SIMON AND SCHUSTER**

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# ONE

This *cannot* be happening to me. The Trips – my three baby bros – are tripping *out*. Sam is wearing a bowl of apple sauce on his head. Evan’s just sat on his sagging, stinking diaper and shoved a Cheerio up his nose. Henry heard Oprah say, ‘Thanks so much!’ on the TV and now he’s repeating it over and over with a lisp.

‘Thank*th tho* mut*th*.’

‘Mom!’ I shout. Though I know she can’t hear me. She’s taking one of her marathon showers. Not that I blame her. I’d lock myself in the bathroom, too, if I had two-year-old triplets, and one of them had a loaded diaper toxic enough to melt the tattoos off Tommy Lee.

At this particular time, however, I don’t care that my mother needs a moment to herself. Do *my* needs count for nothing? Isn’t a mother supposed to be there for her offspring? Even if, as she told me, ‘My hair is full of spit-up and my deodorant stopped working three days ago.’ She didn’t reek *that* bad, and I need her now. *Right* now. Nell

Wickham – the glamorous whack-job editor of *Scene* magazine, a woman obsessed with her pores, her carbs, her reign as celebrity Buzz Queen, a Brit who brought me into her queendom last summer as a teen intern and taught me everything a good servant should know – just rang from the lobby of our building to say she’s on her way up.

Good God, is that a slice of pizza upside-down on the floor?

‘Thankth *tho*—’

‘Henry! Go play with Pooh Bear!’ I say, turning off the television and shoving my dirty socks under the couch cushions. Then my eyes dart over to the window in our train wreck of an apartment. Suddenly, it seems like a brilliant idea to dash five flights down the fire escape and run off through the icy streets of New York City barefoot. What’s a little frostbite, and a night spent in a psychiatric facility for observation, when one of the most stylish women on this side of the Atlantic is about to see the pathetic state of my home life?

Nell knocks on the door. Hard.

It’s no use. She knows I’m here. She already heard me ask, ‘Who is it?’ over the intercom when she rang our apartment. Which is one of the few things that sucks about living in New York. You can’t peer through your curtains, see your boss pull into the driveway, and hide

behind the couch. I guess you could refuse to *ever* answer the intercom buzzer, but then you'd never get packages from UPS or flowers from your boyfriend. Not that I have a boyfriend. If I did, I'd definitely answer the door. Just in case.

Hearing the knock, Henry screams, '*Thanta Clawth?*'

My heart is thudding. Frantically, I smooth my straggly hair. It's normally curly, chest-length and chestnut brown. At this moment, it's flat, shoulder-length, and the colour of mud. There's no time to change out of my sweatpants, either. Taking a deep breath, I attempt a *modelesque* indifference as I open the door and face the woman who made my life a living hell last summer.

'Oh, hi,' I say, casually.

'You don't,' Nell gasps, her British accent in full bellow.

'I don't what?'

'Have a lift.'

Poking my head outside the door, I see the 'Out of Service' notice taped to the elevator doors in our Super's illegible scrawl.

'Good news!' I chirp. 'You can skip the gym today.'

Nell growls. Without waiting to be invited in, she staggers past me. I feel the cold February air on the soft hair of her mink coat. I smell her customized perfume. The memories from last summer come flooding back. Instantly,

I'm the ugly stepsister trying to cram my humungous big toe into a pointy Manolo Blahnik glass slipper Nell pulled from the fashion closet. Shaking them off, I saunter into our apartment.

'Can I get you a drink?' I ask, breezily. 'Green tea?' I add, remembering her preference.

'Yes,' she says. 'Tea.' Then, she flops down on our couch.

'Ooh. *Thoft*.'

Sam appears at the edge of the couch and pets Nell's mink. She glares at him like he's a pit bull.

'Sam, go play with your brothers,' I command.

He doesn't budge. Instead, Evan toddles over, his lethal diaper now almost touching the floor. Evan now has *two* Cheerios up his nose – one for each nostril.

'*Thock*,' he says, pulling one of my dirty white socks from beneath the couch cushion. Before I have a chance to grab it from him, Evan flings it at Nell's face. It lands diagonally across her blonde head, making her look like the walking wounded with a filthy home-made bandage wrapped around her skull. Evan and Sam erupt in hysterical laughter. It *is* funny. Especially when the Cheerios fly out of Evan's nose and land millimetres from Nell's gazillion-dollar mink. Sam's apple sauce bowl falls from his head and hits the floor with a *splat*.



Who knew my brothers were the Three Stooges reincarnated?

‘Yo, Mom!’ I call loudly, plucking the sock from Nell’s head just as Evan pulls the other one out from the couch. Thankfully, I’m able to grab it before he throws.

‘*Thockth*,’ he squeals at me, reaching his hands in the air. Then my other two brothers do the same.

‘*Thockth*!’

‘*Thockth*!’

Since when do all three brothers lisp? Is it possible that three two-year-olds would conspire to deliberately make my family look like hillbillies in front of the terminally chic Nell Wickham?

‘It’s the nanny’s day off,’ I lie.

Smiling a fake smile, Nell removes Sam’s hand from her mink and holds it up like a dead fish.

‘Cute boys,’ she says, unconvincingly. ‘And so many of them.’

I’m tempted to explain how fertility treatments can sometimes go awry, and how three babies only *seem* like thirty, and how cute they are when they’re running around the apartment naked after their baths, and how I *normally* wear really cool clothes after school, and how I have no idea how that slice of pizza ended up face-down on the floor.

Instead, forcing my voice to sound sunny, I ask, 'What brings you here this afternoon?'

Nell blinks. 'I have an appointment to meet your parents.'

'That's *tomorrow*.'

'Tomorrow?' Her left eyebrow arches.

'Yes. Carmen called last week to confirm.'

Nell sits up and gently shoves The Trips away from her coat. All three are now petting it.

She sighs. 'Carmen left for her holiday yesterday. I'm absolutely adrift without her.'

Adrift? You *adrift* yourself over here without giving me a chance to hide the chaos I live in?!

Expecting Nell to stand and sheepishly apologise for showing up on the wrong day, I step back. I give her room to rise up and sweep her minked self right out our front door and down the stairs. Instead, she stands and takes her coat *off*.

'On a padded hanger,' she says, handing it to me. 'Or wood.'

My mouth, I notice, is open. The Trips are now encircling me. Henry rests his head on Nell's mink and says, '*Thleepy*.'

'How's that tea coming, Susan?'

Behind Nell's back, I roll my eyes. Six months, and

nothing has changed. Nell still can't get my name right, I'm still her servant, and my continuing internship at *Scene* is still the best thing that's ever happened to me.

'Coming right up,' I say.

Nell moves down to the clean end of the couch and makes herself comfy.

Ha, ha! I say to myself on the way to the hall closet. There is no clean section of our couch!

'I smell poop, Susanna! Did you check the diapers?'

Building on the hillbilly theme, my mother – finally out of the shower – shouts from her bedroom. I half expect her to appear with a piece of straw hanging out her mouth and a blackened tooth.

'Poop!' Evan squeals joyfully, clapping his hands.

Her hair wrapped in a fraying towel, her body wrapped in my father's plaid flannel robe, Mom marches into the living room. Is it possible that I never noticed my mother wears mismatched slippers? One brown, one navy blue?

'Look who's come to tea,' I say.

'Oh, my,' Mom replies.

Nell rises and floats towards her.

'You must be Susan's mother,' Nell says, reaching both hands out.

I wait for my mom to tell her my name is *Susanna*, which Nell *knows*, but refuses to acknowledge for some

insane, narcissistic reason, but Mom doesn't. She holds Dad's robe closed with one hand, and shakes Nell's hand with the other.

'Nell's a day early,' I say. Though it's like, *so* obvious.

'My secretary is on holiday and I'm deaf, dumb and blind without her,' Nell says. 'Can you ever forgive me for popping in like this?'

No, I want to say firmly, we can't.

My mother springs into action. 'Don't worry about a thing, Nell. We're happy to have you any time. Have a seat. Make yourself at home. Give me two minutes to get dressed. Susanna, hang up Nell's coat and put the kids in the playpen in the bedroom.'

Whirling around, my mother disappears. Nell sits as I hang her coat over my down jacket. The closest we come to a padded hanger. I then herd my three brothers into the back bedroom.

'Back in a moment,' Henry says to Nell, in a freakishly perfect imitation of Oprah Winfrey.

When I come back into the living room, Nell has draped herself elegantly on the couch and my mother is heating the kettle on the stove. Somehow, Mom even picked up the pizza slice and cleaned the apple sauce blob and Cheerios. I've never loved her more in my life.

'We simply adored having Susan work with us at

*Scene* last summer,' Nell says when Mom joins her. I sit across from Nell and stare, remembering how they actually adored my ability to carry six venti skim lattes into a staff meeting without dropping any Splenda sweetener packets. Not to mention assuring Nell that her freshly collagened lips didn't look like two water balloons – which they did – and wrestling a cockroach the size of a small pony – which it was. Ah, but who can forget how I, Susanna Barringer – budding celebrity reporter extraordinaire – wrangled an invite to Randall Sanders' (sigh) movie premiere? So what if life in celebville turned out to be different than I expected? I happen to know that life in Nellville is pure *fantasyland*. Like her delusion last summer that Vince Vaughn might fall for her. Dream on! From Jen to Nell? Nell is hot enough for a middle-aged stick figure, but I totally lied about not seeing her pores.

'The trip to Los Angeles will be a great opportunity for our girl,' Nell continues.

I smile, toss my hair and attempt to style my sweats by raising one elastic leg up to my knee.

'She'll be working with our photographer, Keith Franklin.'

My heart flutters at the mention of Keith's name. Keith Franklin and Randall Sanders at the same event? I should

get an Oscar for acting cool around two of the hottest hotties ever.

Before Nell has the chance to gaze down at my bare feet and shriek, I hide my need for a pedi by curling my toes under my feet. It hurts like mad, and looks like the result of a spinal cord injury, but I know Nell – she'd rather I was mangled than badly groomed.

'Sue is a valued member of the *Scene* team,' Nell says.

I blush and tuck my ragged fingernails out of sight, too.

Mom says, 'I have a few concerns.'

Instantly, Nell spits out, 'Of course, we'll get someone else if you have reservations.'

Someone else?! Are you off your trolley! I've been looking forward to this trip since last summer! How many fifteen-year-old New York high-schoolers get the chance to fly to California to cover the Academy Awards for *Scene* magazine?! Well, not *cover* exactly. More like *assist*. Probably, a lot like assist in getting venti skim lattes without dropping any Splenda packets. But, who cares! The Academy Awards! A valued member of the *Scene* team! A weekend in Hollywood! Working with Keith Franklin. The chance to see stars! Leo, Orlando, Keira! Maybe even (double sigh) the Randy Man himself. Will he remember me? Will he say hello from the red carpet? Will Ran—

‘Well, Susanna?’

Mom and Nell are staring at me. I haven’t heard a word they’ve said.

‘Hmm,’ I say, trying to look thoughtful.

Mom says, ‘If you have to think about it, I can’t let you go.’

‘Yes! Yes! The answer is yes!’

‘Yes?’ Mom is incredulous. ‘You’ll have trouble catching up on your schoolwork if I let you take Monday off.’

‘No!’ I leap to my unpedicured feet. ‘It’s all planned out. My teachers know about it. I’m doing extra credit. It’s only one school day. I’ll be fine.’

The kettle whistles. Nell asks, ‘Actually, do you have white tea, Susie? With low-carb honey?’

Reluctant to leave my mother alone with the woman who outed me as a virgin at a staff meeting, I walk my feet into the kitchen, but leave my ears in the living room.

‘I promise to take good care of her,’ I hear Nell say. Yeah right, I laugh. Nell can’t even take care of an *appointment*.

Turning off the whistling kettle, and searching through our tea bag selection, I see black, green, orange pekoe. Is white tea just black tea with tons of milk? Do they even make low-carb honey? Are the bees genetic mutants?

Through the open archway between our kitchen and

the living room, I hear my mother give the final okay for my trip. Whew! In three days, I'll be jetting off to the coast to assist *Scene's* dreamy photographer, Keith Franklin, with the most exciting event of the year. I can take care of myself.

'Never mind about the tea, Susan,' Nell calls into the kitchen, standing. 'I'd better get back to the office. I have a faint memory that I'm supposed to meet with Jack Black's manager. Or, is it Jack *Nicholson's*?'

Mom laughs. But, of course, Nell is serious.

'A driver will pick you up early Saturday morning,' Nell says to me before leaving. 'Remember to bring light clothes. It's seventy degrees out there.'

My whole body tingles. *Hollywood*. Oscar night. How lucky can a girl get?

'I'll be ready,' I say.

I've been ready to show the world what I can do all my life.



## TWO

The alarm rings at five in the morning. Not that I need an alarm clock. I'm totally awake. I hardly slept at all last night. In fact, it still *looks* like night in my bedroom. The air vibrates with night-time particles. The silence is both eerie and exhilarating, like I'm in some forbidden time zone between two days.

Quickly, I put on the clothes I laid out last night.

*Ping!*

My computer lets me know I have an instant message. Of course, I know who it is.

'U up?' I type.

'No,' Amelia types back.

I laugh. She writes, 'Kiss Jake G 4 me?'

'If I must.'

'U MUST!'

Since last summer, Mel – my smart, kind, volunteers-to-cheer-up-terminally-ill-patients best friend – has worked up a healthy celebrity obsession. Nothing like mine, of