

The A-List

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THE A-LIST
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The A-List

by
Zoey Dean



poppy

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*When I'm good, I'm very good,
but when I'm bad I'm better.*

—Mae West

Prologue

The moment Cynthia Baltres peed all over an eight-thousand-dollar Hermès Kelly handbag was the moment that Anna Cabot Percy decided to make Cynthia her best friend.

That had been thirteen years ago, during afternoon tea at the St. Regis Hotel in Manhattan. The two girls' mothers had dragged Anna and Cyn along to a planning session for a charity gala. Before she became Mrs. Alfred Baltres III, Cynthia's mom had been a real estate agent on Long Island. Desperate to prove herself the equal of Jane "To the Manner Born" Percy, she'd focused all her attention on arranging the fund-raiser and missed her daughter's crotch-grabbing, a signal that she needed a trip to the ladies' room.

Cynthia never did take well to being ignored. As Anna stared in disbelief, Cynthia had hopped off her chair, squatted above her mother's purse, and let 'er rip. Mrs. Baltres turned the same shade of red as her fur-trimmed Versace pantsuit, grasped her doused handbag like it was a long-dead carp, and yanked her daughter off to the loo.

Anna, who would have spontaneously combusted

before she'd ever urinate in public, had been very impressed. That her own mother, clad in vintage Chanel, continued to sip tea as a waiter mopped up didn't surprise Anna at all. At age five, she'd already learned her first lesson from the *This Is How We Do Things* Big Book, East Coast WASP edition: One simply didn't see what one did not choose to see.

There, in the storied tearoom of the St. Regis, little Anna had a vision of her destiny: She'd grow up to be just like her mother—perfectly genteel . . . and perfectly boring. The thought depressed her as much as a five-year-old with an eight-digit trust fund could be depressed. Life had to be more fun if you were shocking and bad. And if anyone could teach her those traits, it was Cynthia Baltres.

In the long run, though, genes had trumped desire, meaning that the friendship had taken but the badness hadn't. Thirteen years later, Anna had yet to do one truly nasty thing. She got excellent grades, preferred literature to movies, did charity work but rarely talked about it, and dated the right boys from the right families.

Sadly, though, the right boys from the right families had thus far generated about as much heat in Anna as Lady Chatterley's husband. But hope ("the thing with feathers," as her favorite poet, Emily Dickinson, so eloquently put it) still perched on her soul, singing within Anna's heart that someday the *wrong* boy would make her cry, "Don't stop!" and really mean it.

Ironically, Anna thought she already knew the boy: Scott Rowley. He'd moved to New York from Boston when

he was fifteen, after his parents' divorce. Dad had gotten the Beacon Hill manse, the art collection, and the predictably nubile mistress. Mom had gotten the New York brownstone, the summer place on Block Island, and Scott.

Anna had loved Scott from the first moment she'd seen him leaning against a tree outside of Trinity, her school, reading *The Onion* and laughing aloud. But it soon became apparent that Anna's leggy, patrician blond beauty didn't register on Scott's sexual oscilloscope. He went for the exotic: a dreadlocked art student from Brazil, the black-hair-past-her-butt daughter of the Indonesian ambassador to the United Nations, a gorgeous five-foot-nine Ethiopian girl with a shaved head. The only thing that had eased the sting of Anna's unrequited love was her realization that Scott never hooked up with anyone born north of the equator.

That is, until three weeks ago, when he'd hooked up with her best friend, Cyn.

Though not traditionally beautiful, there was just something about Cyn. Men of all ages sniffed after her. Her mouth was thin and her nose had a slight bump in it, which she refused to "fix" since, she said, she was not "broken." Her hair was naturally dark brown, but she dyed it raven black and wore it in a choppy, sexy, messy style that drew attention to her startling celery-green eyes. Clothes hung perfectly on her skinny slimhipped body. She could pull off styles that made other girls look ridiculous.

(Anna was well aware that Cynthia had, in fact, started

the trend of wearing boys' boxer shorts when she'd worn a pair to Paris Hilton's birthday party with a vintage CBGB T-shirt and red cowboy boots. By the next afternoon, it was nearly impossible to purchase a pair of guys' boxer shorts on the island of Manhattan.)

On top of that, Cynthia was up for anything. On a moment's notice she'd fly to Bora-Bora in some guy's private jet. Once she'd gone to the opera with her parents and spent the entire second act of *La Bohème* making out in the limo with a middle-aged man she'd met in the lobby—she never did get his name. Another time she'd gone to a party in SoHo where she'd pretended that she was French and ended up going home with a semi-famous painter who, after painting a nude of her, had threatened to kill himself if she wouldn't sleep with him. She hadn't, and he hadn't, but still. Anna loved to hear about Cyn's exploits; she got vicarious thrills without having to take any of the risks.

From Anna's point of view, Cyn really was All That. But even with her recently acquired rose tattoo midway between her navel and her pearly gates, Anna had been certain that Cyn was still not exotic enough for Scott. Anna had been wrong.

She'd meant to tell Cyn a thousand times that she loved Scott. But since Anna knew Scott would never love her back, divulging this seemed silly. And Anna Percy was not a silly girl.

Now it was too late.

Things had been going so well, too. Anna had been

accepted early decision to Yale. Her spring internship at a new literary journal meant she could fulfill her credits without having to take any more high school classes. Then, the day after Cyn-and-Scott had burst onto the scene, Anna's nineteen-year-old sister, Susan, had invited Anna to a party in a SoHo loft. Susan, who'd just broken up with her latest boyfriend, hated going to parties alone. She'd begged.

Anna had reluctantly agreed. At the party she'd been surprised to find herself actually having a decent time, chatting in the kitchen with a *Time Out: New York* photographer, when she realized she hadn't seen Susan in a while. She excused herself to look for her sister and found her passed out in the rooftop hot tub, naked except for a Randolph Duke mohair duster that floated around her like furry pond scum.

Anna gave Susan mouth-to-mouth, called 911, and saved her sister's life. But Susan didn't take well to Anna's methodology ("Could you have made any bigger of a scene out of it, Anna?"). Neither did Jane Percy, who shipped Susan back to rehab for the second time in a year and then took off for Italy to visit a twenty-eight-year-old sculptor whose work she was acquiring. She explained to Anna that remaining in New York would just be too trying. Besides, she was sure that Anna could fend for herself for a few weeks, what with two live-ins and a day staff of four to assist her.

Anna might have done it—stayed alone in Manhattan. But then she'd gotten word that there'd be no spring

internship for her. The literary journal had burned through its start-up capital and folded after its second issue.

Jane had suggested that if Anna called her father in Los Angeles to tell him that she was going to Europe, he'd make a trip east. She was sure Susan would appreciate having her father visit her in rehab, especially since Susan's problems were an obvious result of said father's abandonment so many years ago. Anna agreed to inquire, all the while thinking that it was about as likely as McDonald's serving foie gras. She knew her father wouldn't come. She knew her mother knew it, too, but agreed to make the call because it was the right thing to do.

When the conversation proved fruitless ("I'd love to, Anna, honey, but I'm swamped with work"—exactly what she'd known he'd say), Anna had impetuously broached the idea of going out to Los Angeles to live with him. To her shock, her father had been enthusiastic about the idea. He'd even promised to arrange an internship with the Los Angeles office of a literary agency known for its prizewinning authors.

When, in the middle of that discussion, Cyn had beeped in on call waiting to regale Anna with a story about Scott's Frenching technique, Anna had had an epiphany: Maybe the reason Scott thought Cyn was sexy but didn't think that Anna was sexy was that Anna didn't think of *herself* as sexy. Certainly the reason she didn't have wild and crazy adventures like Cyn was that she never opened herself up to them. The horrible truth was that at not quite eighteen years of age, Anna had

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yet to step outside the box. She'd lived her entire life in the same safe and rarified confines as pretty much every other Upper East Side WASPy prep-school girl. As hard as she'd tried to fight it.

Anna's life didn't begin the rock slide to banality the day Cyn and Scott became Cyn-and-Scott; it had been rolling down that hill for a long time. Her life was boring and predictable, and it was her own fault.

Something had to be done about it. And she was the someone who had to do it. She could change. She *would* change. And not while hiding in the formidable shadow of Cynthia Baltres.

It was time for Anna Percy to "carpe diem," as her Latin teacher would say.

Seize the day.

One

7:14 A.M. , EST

“If you’ve got to do bumper-to-bumper, it’s better in a Mercedes,” Cyn told Anna, and took another long guzzle from the nearly empty bottle of Krug Clos du Mesnil champagne she’d purloined from her parents’ wine cellar. The Percy family driver, Reginald, inched the car along the Van Wyck Expressway and pretended there weren’t two underage girls drinking in the back-seat.

Cyn offered the bottle to Anna. “Go for it. We’re still like a mile from JFK.”

Anna shook her head. “No thanks.” Her tongue felt thick and her lips were sticking to her teeth. “I think I had too much already.”

“Bullshit. It’s New Year’s Eve.”

“Actually, it’s the morning of the day of New Year’s Eve,” Anna said, pleased that she could be so precise in her current condition.

“Out with the old, in with the new, huh?” Cyn threw her head back against the buttery leather. “Do you have any idea how bad life is going to suck without you?”

"I'm sure Scott will help you piss away the time." Anna popped a hand over her mouth. "I meant 'pass.' Pass away the time."

"Speaking of—tonight's the night. Scott Spencer will go where no man has gone before," Cyn said. There was an air of victory in her tone.

Anna was too good a friend to point out that in fact two guys *had* gone there before, because she knew that Cyn had been wasted on both occasions and had decided they didn't count. "I'm happy for you," she said, trying to mean it but failing miserably.

"I hate that I'm so into him. It's easier when you don't care."

Anna laughed. "They're going to stick your butt in the Smithsonian one of these days," Cyn remarked. "Anna Percy, world's oldest living virgin. Anyway, après Scott, I'll call and give you the blow by blow."

Though Anna could certainly learn a thing or two from the Cyn/Scott playback, she opted to spare herself the anguish. "You don't have to."

"Yes, I do. If I don't, it won't seem real. And I'll fly out to visit you soon."

"You'd better." Anna started to gather her things as Reginald slowed the car near the American Airlines terminal.

"Come on. Change your mind," Cyn begged. "If you think you'll be too lonely in your big-ass brownstone all by yourself, you can come live in our big-ass penthouse. There's plenty of room. One of the maids got deported."

For a moment Anna was tempted. Maybe she *was* making a mistake. Then she got a mental picture of Cyn making out with Scott in the hallway of Trinity or Cyn dancing on the bar at Hogs and Heifers (fake IDs came in so handy) while every guy in the place drooled over her. That was Cyn's New York life. Not Anna's. No. She was going.

Reginald pulled the black Mercedes to the curb, stepped out, and opened the door for the girls. They stood together on the sidewalk as hurried travelers pressed past. Cyn hugged Anna as hard as she could. "Don't let some jerk out there break your heart."

"I won't," Anna promised. Her heart had already been broken. And she planned to leave that broken heart far, far behind.

Anna sat in her first-class seat, staring out the window but seeing nothing, lost in thought. Surely there had to be another boy on the planet besides Scott Spencer who could make her feel like her insides were bungee jumping. But it was more than that. It was his sense of humor, and his mind, and—

Stop that, she ordered her brain. Scott Spencer is just a boy. You are not starring in a Jane Austen novel. You are starring in your own life, which from here on in is going to be—

"This must be my lucky day."

Anna turned to see a big moon face under a Funk Daddy baseball cap grinning down at her. She smiled

politely. The guy, who had to be midthirties at least, stuck his briefcase into the overhead bin and then slid his Fubu'd butt into the seat next to her.

He held out a pudgy hand. "Rick Resnick. And you are . . . ?"

"Anais Nin," Anna said sweetly, naming a long-dead favorite writer.

"Annie, it's a pleasure."

With a nod, Anna turned back to the window. She felt a hand on her shoulder. "Tell you what, Annie, I'll get us a couple stiffies and we'll get to know each other. Miss!"

Anna was appalled. Not only was Rick Resnick culturally illiterate, he was also utterly oblivious to her lack of interest. As the DC-10 taxied to the runway, he launched into his unsolicited life story, the rags-to-riches tale of a Brooklyn boy in a garage band who'd grown up to make a mint in the music business. To accentuate a point, he'd touch Anna's hand or leg. Stuck in her window seat, Anna was as captive as she would have been tipped back at the dentist's. Since first class was completely full and Rick Resnick, whom she was starting to think of as The Seatmate from Hell, didn't come with laughing gas, she decided that vodka tonics would have to do.

Anna downed half of her second one as New Jersey passed below and Rick droned on. Maybe this was the first official test of her new life. If she could tell Rick to fuck off, which was exactly what Cyn would have done, she'd be proving to herself that things were going to be different.

Anna had a mental picture of the words *fuck off*. But they simply would not come out of her mouth. She was constitutionally incapable of saying something that rude. Okay, so this wasn't an official test, just something to get through until she could get to her new life. Anna decided to rely on the vodka; if she got sufficiently polluted, maybe she could just tune him out.

Rick Resnick touched Anna's hand again. "So dig it, I'm on the phone with Michael—this was a few years back—and his freakin' chimp starts screechin' in the background. . . ."

Anna looked around; anything was better than eye contact with Rick Resnick. Diagonally across the aisle, a guy stood to pull off his sweatshirt, revealing a V-cut hard body in a Princeton tee. At least six feet tall, with short brown hair and electric-blue eyes, he moved with the easy grace of an athlete. Between the champagne in the limo and the airborne vodka tonics, Anna was looped enough to see two of him. She closed one eye to get a better view.

Princeton Boy took it as a wink. He winked back.

Anna smiled at him—flirtatiously, she hoped, because what the hell.

"Refill?" Rick Resnick's hand was on her knee.

Anna dead-eyed his digits. "Please don't do that."

He gave her knee a little squeeze before withdrawing. "Just being friendly, Annie-bo-bannie."

Annie-bo-bannie? What a tool. She looked up again, more than ready to continue her flirtation with the guy

across the aisle, but he'd sat down and picked up a book. So much for Princeton Charming to the rescue.

New drinks appeared, despite Anna's polite refusal. Rick launched into an endless story about partying with various rock stars, name-dropping shamelessly. The flight attendant offered breakfast. But Anna never ate on planes. It wasn't as if the hot towels and comfy seats somehow made the food edible. She had just managed to zone out when she felt Rick's hand squeeze hers. "Annie-bo-bannie, you are one terrific listener."

As she jerked her hand away, she caught a tight-end view of Princeton Boy on his way to the bathroom. Doubtless he'd seen her hand under Rick's. Great. She threw back the last of her third drink.

Rick was impressed. "Whoa. Who knew you were such a party girl?"

"Paige?"

Anna looked up. Princeton Boy smiled expectantly down at her. Which was like a dream come true. For some girl named Paige.

"Sorry, my name isn't—"

"I'm Jack," said Princeton Boy. "We met at . . . Oh, come on. You must remember. *Paige*."

"Bro', her name is Annie," ever-helpful Rick chimed in.

Not true. But it wasn't Paige, either. Whoever that lucky bitch was.

Anna shook her head. "I'm sorry. I really do think you've mistaken me for someone else."

PB chuckled and shook his head. "I *know* it's you. It

was—what, last October? At Lambda Chi. This drunk-off-his-ass guy had you cornered, and you were too polite to tell him off.”

Anna was about to deny it when the truth dawned; if it hadn't been for alcohol-induced stupidity, she would have caught on sooner. PB had never really met her before. He was concocting this story in an attempt to extricate her from “some drunk-off-his-ass guy” who had her cornered that very minute.

“Oh, right. Of course! Jack . . . Kerouac!” Anna playfully tapped her forehead, as if to say, How could I have forgotten?

She'd given him the name of a famous beatnik writer from the fifties and could tell by his broad grin that he got the joke. “That's me,” PB agreed. “You look great, Paige. How's it going?”

“Yo, let's go to the videotape,” RR interjected. “She told me her name was Annie.”

Anna's eyes stayed on PB. “Actually, I told you that my name was Anaïs Nin.”

“Anaïs. I like it,” PB said.

RR threw up his hands. “What am I, monkey-in-the-freakin'-middle? Buddy, you never saw this chick before in your life. And we're in the middle of a private conversation here.”

PB bent down to meet RR at eye level. “No offense, dude, but she doesn't want to have any kind of conversation with you. Now be cool and trade seats with me, and I won't have to report that Thai stick in your carry-on.”

“Screw you, buddy! I don’t have any—”

Anna smiled politely. “Then why did you offer me some—how did you put it?—‘primo shit,’” she said, hardly believing her own audacity. Yes! Score for Anna!

PB pointed at his empty seat across the aisle. “It’s got your name on it.” RR cursed under his breath but moved. PB slid in next to Anna. A dimple played in his left cheek. “I have a confession to make. I’m not really Jack Kerouac.”

“That’s okay. I’m not really Anaïs Nin—not that my former seatmate would know the difference,” Anna said, gesturing toward RR, who was stumbling to his new seat. “I guess he’s not up on erotic French surrealism.”

PB was duly impressed. “But you are. You don’t look like that kind of girl.”

“What kind of girl do I look like?”

He considered for a moment. “Prep-school-cool enough to drive with your legs crossed.”

“That’ll teach you to judge a book by its cover, Jack.”

“Ben, actually.” He held out his hand. “Birnbaum.”

She took it. “Anna Percy.” He had great hands. She didn’t let go.

That was when Anna had her epiphany: It was happening. It was really happening. Thirteen years of Cynicism had not gone for naught after all. Okay, the witty repartee was fueled by more alcohol than she’d ever consumed before in her life, but just the same . . . she was flirting with Ben Birnbaum. “It was very gallant of you to rescue me, Ben Birnbaum.”

“I felt your death wish clear across the aisle. What else could I do?”

“That palpable, huh?”

Ben cocked his head at her. “I’m shaking the hand of a beautiful, mysterious, and literate girl who just used the word *palpable*.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Very. Plus you didn’t say ‘like’ in the middle of your, like, sentence.”

“And that’s, like, unusual, too?”

“Oh yeah. Beauty and brains. Hot as hell.”

At that moment, for the first time in her life, Anna felt hot. She liked it. A lot. “Want to hear more?”

He nodded.

She leaned closer. “Verisimilitude. Diaphanous. Transcendent.”

He watched her mouth. “Who *are* you?”

“Does it matter?” She passed him her vodka tonic. He took a sip and handed it back to her.

“Yes, it does. Very much so.”

Anna melted into her seat. He was a freshman at Princeton, flying home for a wedding. She told him her home was Manhattan but that she’d be in Los Angeles with her father for a while, doing a six-month internship at the Randall Prescott Literary Agency; then it was off to Yale in the autumn. The flight attendant announced some loser movie, and people began pulling down their window shades. They kept their conversation going through most of the movie, but all Anna

could think of was how badly she wanted to tear his clothes off.

Ben brushed her hair off her face. "I want to be alone with you."

Suddenly he stood up and stepped into the aisle. His eyes flicked from Anna to the bathroom. In other words, Follow me.

This, Anna figured, *this* is the true official test of my new life.

She followed him.

The door shut behind Anna, and Ben lifted her onto the sink. They kissed until Anna couldn't breathe and then, just as Anna was beginning to truly forget herself . . .

Knock-knock-knock. Followed by a really loud, really pissed-off voice.

"THIS IS THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT. IT IS AGAINST FEDERAL REGULATIONS FOR THE LAVATORY TO BE OCCUPIED BY MORE THAN ONE PERSON AT A TIME. OPEN THIS DOOR IMMEDIATELY!"

Anna jumped off the sink, smoothing her hair and straightening her clothes. Before she could reach for the interior handle, the flight attendant had popped open the door with some supersecret device. With turquoise eye shadow and helmet hair, she looked exactly like Miss Corrigan, Anna's hated third-grade teacher.

Just as Anna and Ben stepped out into the aisle, the movie ended. Miss Corrigan gave them a quick once-over punctuated by a brisk about-face. Her

silence underscored her contempt. Everyone in first class was staring at them. Rick, grinning smugly, stood with two flight attendants and one livid copilot.

The copilot shook Rick's hand. "Thank you for reporting this, sir." He turned to Ben and Anna. "Back in your seats. Now."

Anna wished a hole would open in the floor of the plane so that she could fall through and float away. No such luck. Her face burned as they sat down again. She could barely make eye contact with Ben.

"Hey, don't worry about it," Ben said as he gently took her chin in his hand and pulled her head toward him. "Look at it this way. We added dollar value to a cross-country flight. I'm sure we were more entertaining than that dog of a movie."

"I'd rather not be their entertainment. God. Maybe I can hire a hypnotist to erase it from my memory."

Ben chuckled. "You, Anna Percy, are unlike any girl I have ever known."

Since the moment they'd met, she'd been unlike any girl she'd ever known herself to be, either. But he had no way of knowing that.

Ben gazed into her eyes. "I don't want to say good-bye to you when we land."

Neither do I . . .

"I'll give you my cell number," Anna offered, in as breezy a tone as she could muster. She jotted it down on a cocktail napkin that had somehow found its way into her purse.

"I just got a crazy idea," Ben said as he stuck the napkin in his pocket. "Why don't you come with me to the wedding?"

Anna laughed. "You can't be serious."

"C'mon. It's Jackson Sharpe's wedding. It'll be a blast."

"No one invites someone they just met to a—" Anna stopped and hit mental rewind. "Wait. Did you just say Jackson Sharpe? The movie star Jackson Sharpe? He's one of the few actors I actually respect."

"I'll tell him you said so. Or you could come along and tell him yourself."

In Anna Percy's seventeen years and eight months on the planet, she'd done things that most girls could only dream of. Chatted with royalty at Wimbledon. Sat next to Christina Onassis at a fund-raiser for the Whitney. Met with the president's daughter at a symposium on high school students and geopolitics. But it all paled in comparison to the prospect of attending Jackson Sharpe's wedding on the arm of Ben Birnbaum, as the new Anna Percy.

So she said yes.

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A poppy is a beautiful blooming red flower (like the one on the spine of this book). It is also the name of the new home of your favorite series.

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