

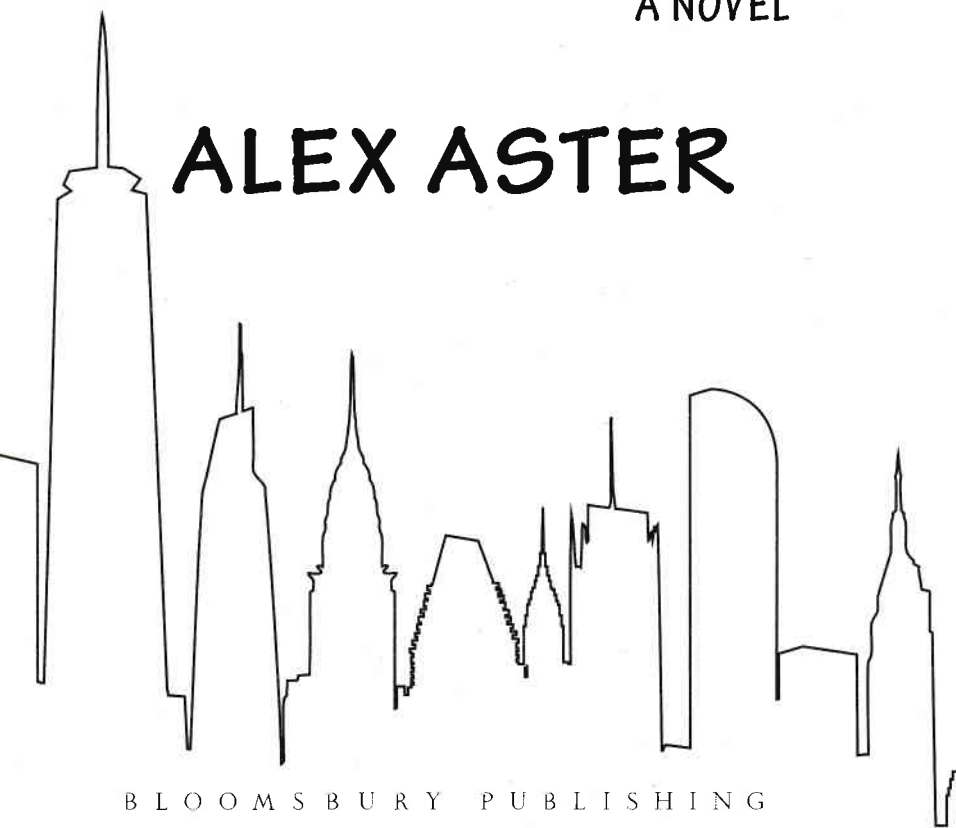
LBRIS

We know  
books

# SUMMER IN THE CITY

A NOVEL

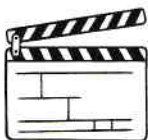
ALEX ASTER



BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING

LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

## 1



IN NEW YORK CITY, EVERY WEEKEND IS A CHANCE TO LIVE IN A MOVIE. DRINKS on a rooftop in the shadow of a skyline cut like it was custom-made for you, glittering just for that highly saturated and Facetuned-within-an-inch-of-itself picture you're about to post. Dinner seated next to a celebrity who doesn't touch any of their food and loudly discusses gossip about a movie star that might make you choke on your gin and tonic. A party with drugs that look like pieces of candy, spread across a marble table in a penthouse that has back rooms for the staff and a Pilates studio as big as your studio apartment.

Unless, of course, you're like me, and a perfect Friday night looks less like mooching your way into the periphery of a table at Marquee, and more like watching Netflix in some ratty shirt that once belonged to your college roommate's ex-boyfriend. A shirt you might have stolen in one of your weaker moments, because you kind of pined for him as much as you pine for that weekly pint of Ben & Jerry's you *swear* you're only going to have a few scoops of, truly believing in your self-control, right up until the spoon bluntly hits the cardboard at the bottom.

"Sorry!"

I suck in my breath like I've been sucker punched, because some

girl wearing stilettos with heels the size of knitting needles just stepped on my toe.

I had my wisdom teeth taken out without anesthetic by a dental student my mother really shouldn't have trusted.

This hurts more.

Just as I'm considering an intelligible string of profanities and wondering if it's possible to press charges against a heel, a gentle hand comes down on my shoulder.

Penelope, my best friend and former college roommate with the great taste in guys but not so great taste in the idea of a good night, sighs, looking down at me with the pitying look of a near-professional partier staring down a newbie. "That's why you don't wear open-toed heels to a club, Elle."

Taking a deep breath, my toe throbbing like a heart going into cardiac arrest, I say, "I don't *have* other heels. And I've never been to a club."

Penelope stares at me for a solid ten seconds before frowning. "You know, I can't decide which of those statements is more tragic."

I give her a look. "We've been here nearly two hours. Soon, I'll turn into a pumpkin. You have fifteen more minutes."

The only way I let Penelope drag me away from the comfort of my foams-like-a-cappuccino comforter was the promise that we would be here an hour, tops, and that we would get fries at the place around the corner that sells them only after midnight. Also, because tonight was supposed to be tamer. Some important business magazine rented the club out to celebrate the companies that made its list of Next Big Exits. Penelope's trying to network with a legendary VC who funds the company at the top of the list, Atomic.

It's technically a work outing.

"Fine, fine." She takes my hand and latches it to the corner of the bar, a captain tying a boat to a dock. The marble is as sticky as you

would imagine. “Stay here,” she orders. Then she seamlessly braids herself within the crowd with the ease of someone who has memorized the mazes of New York City’s dark, sweaty, sticky underground.

I don’t listen. There’s a couple next to me that’s grinding so hard, I wonder if their clothes will just burn away from the friction, escalating into full-on intercourse. And if that would be considered strange in a place like this. I try to make myself as small as I can, while shielding my body, elbows tucked in tight, before diving headfirst into the mess in a desperate attempt to find the bathroom to inspect the damage done to my foot.

As quickly as I’m sucked in, I’m spit out of the crowd, deposited into a far quieter corner of the club.

Quieter—but not much emptier.

There’s a line snaking out of the single bathroom.

*Single.* I frown. Surely a club of this size has more than *one*.

I find a bouncer standing against the wall, scanning the club with the diligence of a Secret Service agent.

“Um, excuse me?” I poke an arm wider than my head. It takes three pokes for the giant to even register my presence. When he does, his eyes narrow, inspecting me like I might be in violation of some club rule.

Do clubs have rules?

Have I broken one in speaking to him?

I swallow. “Is—is there just one?” I ask, pointing toward the bathroom.

He grunts and nods, and I know how to take a hint to get out of a person’s general vicinity, so I back away, back toward the line.

After five minutes, when it hasn’t moved in the slightest, I decide to use my phone’s light to study my toe.

It’s fine. Which really is just a testament to my toe, because I was expecting a hole in it, or at least a broken nail.

Satisfied that I still have all my digits, I sigh and look at the time. Eight minutes. Penelope has eight minutes.

“Having fun?”

The voice comes from so far above me, I’m forced to look up—and up and up—to see the source. Another bouncer. Taller than the other one, decked out in the same all black.

I blink.

Is having fun a rule?

I internally roll my eyes at myself. *Don’t be stupid, Elle.*

Though . . . maybe not so stupid. I can imagine exclusive clubs like these, the ones with a block-long line of gorgeous people in packs waiting in the rain to get in, would kick someone out just for *looking* like they weren’t having fun. Wouldn’t want a sourpuss ruining the mood, right? Maybe the magazine has strict orders to keep the ambience pleasant for all the entrepreneurs in their forties and fifties littering the dance floor, hiding their wedding bands in their pockets?

I shrug inwardly. Who cares? I’m leaving anyway—I glance down at my phone—in seven minutes.

So, I tell the truth. “No.”

He raises an eyebrow. He glances around at the club, then at me, looking genuinely confused. “No?”

Do I look like the type of person who thinks all of this—the floor sticky with alcohol, my long dark hair wet with someone’s drink it accidentally dipped into, sweat sliding down the middle of my chest from all the proximity—is *fun*?

Interesting. The idea I managed to blend into this crowd is a little . . . thrilling? This completely foreign, wild—

The bouncer is still frowning down at me.

I sigh. “Look, if you’re going to kick me out, just do it already. Save the judgment.”

His frown deepens. “Kick you out?”

“Yeah.” I wave him up and down. “Aren’t you, like, a bouncer?”

"You think I work here?"

Now, it's my turn to frown. "You don't?"

His eyes glisten with something. Excitement, maybe. He bends down, so close I can smell the mint in his breath. "What gave me away?"

What, is he a secret type of security? Meant to blend in?

Wow, clubs are weird.

I shrug a bit haughtily, slinking further into my role of a New York party person, the type of twenty-five-year-old who talks to guys in dark corners of clubs. "Well, you're huge, for starters."

He seems to balk at the word "huge." I roll my eyes.

"You're, like, a foot taller than me. In *heels*. And . . ." I motion to his arms and find myself staring. His shoulders are so wide, they look like cliffs. And his arms, his *arms* bulging in his—I clear my throat. "And your outfit. The all black."

He nods slowly, considering.

"If you're supposed to be discreet, you should try to blend in more," I say, high on my own confidence. Now I'm truly playing someone else. Someone who tells total strangers how to do their jobs.

His lips curl into a smile. He dips even lower, until his mouth is nearly at my ear. "Well, between you and me, this is my last night."

"It is?"

He nods. "And *you* could be more discreet as well."

My eyebrows come together. "With what?"

He raises a shoulder. "Everyone knows the types of people who come here, to this club, on nights like these. Who mill around the bathroom, where it's quiet . . . Who come to party with naive tech millionaires."

I'm genuinely confused now. And strangely intrigued. What kind of person does he think I am?

He continues. "Who wear heels like those"—his gaze travels up my legs—"and a skirt like that." His eyes trail up my body, and it's like they're casting flames. Heat pools in my stomach. I've had a couple of

drinks—which might as well have been five, considering the strongest thing I usually drink is Penelope’s kombucha—and the attention is even more intoxicating. How long has it been since someone has looked at me like this? How long since I’ve worn a skirt so short, I’m one wrong move away from showing my underwear?

There’s another reason I agreed to go out with Penelope. This is my last night in New York City. Tomorrow, I’ll be across the country. For good.

*That’s* why I agreed to wear this outfit, to be out past midnight, to have a last chance at my own movie moment.

His eyes linger on my chest before finally finding mine. And I’m nearly knocked off my precarious heels at the intensity there. Pure want.

Like he’s looking for his final chance at a movie moment too.

I’m not sure who moves first—but before I know it, we’re in a stairwell. And I’m pressed against a wall. We’re both breathing too quickly, my neck is craned up, his down.

And this isn’t *me*, and this is a *stranger*, but it’s the closest thing to a movie moment I’ve ever had, so I grasp it and his face, and suddenly, his lips are on mine.

It’s a frenzy.

His mouth is hot against my mouth, my neck, my chest, and then he’s lifting me, with an ease that makes me breathless, and my legs are wrapped around his middle. His giant hands are gripping my ass, and he’s driving his hips into mine, and I’m seeing stars.

One of his hands is beneath my shirt. His rough fingertips gently trace the lace of my bra, then his thumb slips under it, right across—

I pull back, and it’s like I’ve sobered up a bit in the last few moments. Or maybe it’s the fact that the light here is brighter than in the club.

Because I can actually see him now, and he’s *perfect*. Piercing green eyes. Dark hair that’s a little too long, so it curls around his ears. Cheekbones like the panes of an emerald-cut diamond. Probably one



of those models who work at clubs to pay their rent. Maybe it's his last night because he's finally booked something good.

"What do you want?" he demands, deep voice knocking me out of my thoughts.

Still breathless, I manage to say, "What?"

He's breathless too, but his eyes are surprisingly clear as they pin me in place. His hand trails back down my stomach, calluses scraping, making me shiver. "I want to take you home," he says very carefully, like he's making sure I understand every word coming out of his mouth. "What can I do to make that happen?"

He studies my body again, like he can't help himself. I stare too and see that my skirt is just a bundle of fabric around my middle. I gasp and meet his eyes again. He's waiting for my answer, looking at me so closely it's like he's trying to see through me.

"What. Do. You. Want?"

My heels clank as I unlock my legs, landing back on my own two feet, nearly falling over in the process. He steadies me, but I shove away his help. "What do you mean, *what do I want?*"

He shrugs a shoulder. "Everyone wants something." He looks unfazed by the anger building in my expression. "I want you." He motions toward himself. "Am I enough for you? Or . . . is there something else?"

For a moment I'm shocked by his words. I almost want to laugh.

Then I'm furious.

"You want to *pay* me?"

He gives me a look. "No. I don't pay for sex. But"—he sighs—"would you like me to take you to dinner? Or a helicopter ride over the city?" He looks completely serious when he says, "That's what you want, right? Why you're here?"

I blink. Though he's basically describing dating, I don't like what he's insinuating. I don't like that he's painting me as wanting anything from him beyond a good time.

I remember his words from before. About what *kind of person I am*.

A person who could be enticed into someone's bed because of their money.

"So that's what this is? You think you can buy someone's affection? Take them on a fancy date and woo them into your bed?"

He lifts a shoulder. "I can buy anything I want."

I'm seeing red. *Who does this guy think he is?* "Clearly not," I say, before ripping the door open and walking back into the club.

Movie moment officially over.

The sudden blaring of music is temporarily disarming. I nearly trip in these stupid, *stupid* heels before a hand shoots out and steadies me. Penelope.

"I was looking everywhere for you!" she says, face panicked in a two-minutes-away-from-calling-*Dateline* kind of way. "What were you doing in the *stairwell*—"

The door behind us opens again, and the guy every single part of me was just completely pressed against walks through it.

Her eyebrows travel almost all the way to her hairline. "—with the CEO of Atomic . . . ?"

I blink. Turn slowly in the direction of the towering figure who I can still taste in my mouth. "The *what*?"

He looks unfazed. Raises an eyebrow. "Does that change anything?"

I almost do something I would certainly regret later. Would have, but Penelope takes both of my hands in hers, and all I manage to do is get really close to his face and say, "I hope this tech bubble pops and your stupid start-up dies a slow, *painful* death."

We leave before we're escorted out of the party by *actual* bouncers. And it's only outside, under the lights of New York City at 2:00 a.m., a block away from the French fry place, and far enough from where I left my dignity, that I turn to Penelope and say, "I think that jerk called me a gold digger."

## 2

**TWO YEARS LATER**

“YOU KNOW, IT’S PRETTY EASY NOWADAYS TO SELL A COMPANY FOR BILLIONS of dollars. It’s really not that impressive.”

I’m pressing my phone so tightly against my ear that I can hear Penelope sigh, even past the intercom voice telling me that *baggage and other personal items should not be left unattended*, the kid riding their robot suitcase into the bookshelf a few feet away, and the flight attendant at the closest gate berating passengers for flooding the boarding area before their group has been called.

“Keep telling yourself that, Elle,” Penelope finally says.

It’s been years, and the sight of those green eyes, looking at me from that same business magazine that had hosted that party—on the *cover* this time—still fills me with rage. He didn’t even attempt to look pleasant in the picture, staring down the photographer, and now *me*, with an apathy that hints at having been forced into doing the photo shoot.

Below sits a headline that makes me want to break my phone into tiny shards and completely discredits my ability to curse others into oblivion: