

K I S K I S S



N O V E L

**COME WITH ME
YOU'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF EVERYTHING
IN NEW YORK**

with

**SALLY
BEA
JIL
CELINE
JANE**

**WELCOME - ENJOY - HAVE FUN - RELAX
BE INTRIGUED AND IN LOVE**

ON THE

TOP
Floor

**Five women from New York, each in her own
way,
fight daily to make it to the Top Floor
both personally and professionally.**

Sally, 30, with her perfect looks, has managed to snare a top job. She thinks love is a waste of time and all she cares about is professional and social success. She would love to seduce her charismatic and attractive boss. But unfortunately she has a competitor in the form of the once-mousy Bea.

Jil, Sally's wan assistant, spends hot nights with the successful, sought-after artist Michael while simultaneously being in love with Jesse, a sweet, cuddly, teddy bear of a man from her hometown of Bath, Maine.

Jane, Bea's mother, thinks she has to steer her daughter off the wrong life path she finds her on, where a successful career is all that matters to hard-working Bea.

Celine, Bea's cousin, becomes the assistant of the cold and arrogant Harry. Celine struggles against the force of his attractiveness, which she becomes increasingly powerless to resist.

And then there's New York, with its gloss, lights, scenes, fashion, galleries, art and high society, with its magnetic pull that draws everyone into the never-ending struggle to attain that oh-so-desirable Top Floor of life

K I S K I S S

TOP
Floor

N O V E L

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»Alles, was die Seele durcheinanderrüttelt, ist Glück.«
(»Everything that rattles the soul is happiness.«)

Arthur Schnitzler

WEEK ONE

SALLY

Sally did everything she possibly could to look fantastic at age 30: slim, 5 foot 9, toned body, sleek muscles, long thick blonde hair, slightly tan complexion. Her image was so beautiful and perfect that she could hardly pull herself away from the mirror in the morning. But a glance at the clock reminded her to put an end to this admiration session. Even with those looks, her boss would not be happy if she showed up late in the office.

Sally had been working at a well-known advertising firm in Manhattan for two years, where she had quickly climbed the corporate ladder. She didn't worry too much about whether it was because of her looks or her abilities. Sometimes she felt a little guilty when her colleague Beatrice was passed over once again, despite the fact that her suggestions were often very creative and intriguing. But Beatrice's looks were anything but attention grabbing. It's her own fault, Sally thought, not everyone can be as lucky to be born looking like me. And even if you're not that lucky, you don't have to let yourself go, either.

One last look in the mirror, and, wow, the blue Cerutti suit fit like a second skin, as if made for her. But now it was time to go. A long day lay ahead of her: meetings, a quick lunch during her manicure, presentation of the new project, a workout at the hippest gym in the city, then a small dinner and a detox drink, and finally to bed, no later than 10 pm. She really couldn't afford dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep.

BEA

The shrill 7 o'clock alarm was ringing in Beatrice's ears. »It's hard to believe that the day is already starting again,« Beatrice grumbled from under her two thick pillows. Hadn't she just fallen asleep, and now she had to get out of her nice warm bed again?

Outside it was still dark. But too bad, she had to pull herself together for an important meeting which she had been preparing for, for weeks. So eyes wide open – time to go. She heaved herself up and dragged herself into the bathroom. The next shock: the glance at the mirror. Her dark, unruly hair stood even more on end than usual. A thick sleep wrinkle dominated her cheek, and yesterday's mascara had migrated under her big brown eyes during the night. Well, that was a sight to behold! So what – it was time to start the renovation process to at least try to limit the damage. Off to the shower to scrub her hair and face, tie her wet hair back into a tight ponytail, and apply lots of cream to her face in the silent hope that it would dominate the wrinkle.

Time to get out of the bathroom, Beatrice thought to herself, as the next shock would surely take place in front of her closet. And right she was; that's exactly what happened. The sight of her drab business suits, which looked like they were from the last century, did not exactly lift her mood. Yeah, whatever, I'll wear the blue pantsuit. A firm decision with no ifs or buts is always best, she thought to herself, and before the poor pantsuit knew what hit it Beatrice had squeezed herself into it. Now, I just have to

pull up the zipper, if those five extra pounds have nothing against it.

Damn, now the phone too. Who could be calling at this ridiculous hour? Beatrice quickly reached for the peace destroyer only to hear her mother's lovely voice. »Bea dearest, do you have a minute?« »No, mother, I don't. I'm completely stressed out,« Beatrice replied. »Oh, that's a pity, so early in the morning. I was just reading the newspaper, and there's such a good review of the new staging of Puccini's opera ›La Bohème‹ at the Metropolitan. I thought we could go there together. What do you think?« »Mother, I don't feel like seeing any opera right now. I have to hurry, otherwise I'll be late!« Beatrice exclaimed. »But dear, it's not just any opera.« Those were her mother's last words as Beatrice hung up on her. She really has some nerve; doesn't she realize that there are people who belong to the working population?

With a slightly guilty conscience she hurried back to the mirror to acknowledge that either the pantsuit belonged in the trash or she had to lose at least five pounds. She chose the first option. Half an hour later she rushed off to the office as she had done every weekday until then.

SALLY AND JIL

»Hi James,« Sally chirped to the doorman, who looked delectable in his black tailcoat. But there really was no time for that. She hurried to the elevator of the 28-story building and a few minutes later she was at the very top, in her elegant office overlooking the Hudson River. A lot of work was needed to make it here. Nobody understood quite how much, and she herself had forgotten or repressed most of it. Did she have a guilty conscience? Yes, once in a while, but more and more rarely. That would only hold her back from her life and her career and possibly also lead to sleepless nights, which at their worst would affect her beauty.

A knock at the door tore her away from her thoughts. Jil, her assistant, rushed in: tall, slim, pale, always looking a bit overtired. »Good morning, Sally, here are your documents for today's meeting. I went over everything again. I'll be really happy if you're satisfied.« »Thank you, Jil, I'll take a look right away. Be so kind as to bring me a green tea.« »No problem, Sally.« Jil continued: »I wanted to remind you of today's meeting in an hour.« »Thank you, Jil, I know.« Unfortunately Bea will also be there, Sally thought, slightly disgusted. Jil left the room again. Poor girl, Sally thought, just too little sleep. Somehow she doesn't have her life under control. OK, time to get to work. What? The tea was already on her desk? Great, and with that Sally dove into her documents to apply the finishing touches to the presentation due in an hour.

BEA IN THE CAB

My God, every morning the same stupid traffic. You really should have a helicopter in this city, but she, of course, was nowhere near that level. She was lucky to have her own office on the third floor, following a promotion she got as a reward for a very successful project that had lasted months, on which she had worked day and night. Years of toiling in an open-plan cubicle were over but not forgotten.

Beatrice thought of her mother, who had never known this kind of life. Here was a woman who had married very young, who had loved Beatrice's father very much, and jetted throughout the world with him for professional reasons – studying art here and photography there – who took everything and also nothing at all seriously. The main thing was that they should always be together and never apart. What rare creatures: still in love, and that after 30 years! It was completely unnatural to concentrate only on husband and children. And at what cost to herself? She, Beatrice, did not want such a life, nor had she even ever had the choice. She didn't know anyone of her generation who wasn't interested in education, job, a career. Nevertheless, she thought repeatedly of her mother's smiling face for brief moments at a time. Who reads reviews of the latest opera in the morning? It was simply ridiculous to start the day that way, but also somehow nice.

A sudden stop by the taxi driver tore her away from her thoughts: Oh, finally arrived, just get out quickly because the meeting with Geoffrey and Sally was in an hour. This was the opportunity to present her ideas for a cosmetics company. She paid quickly, gave a short thank you, and

already was in the building, where James was still standing at his usual spot, wishing her a good morning. »Thank you, I hope you're doing well.« »Yes, Ma'am, everything's fine, hopefully with you too?« »Oh, James, no time as usual, so much to do, have to get going, unfortunately.« Beatrice disappeared into the elevator, not all the way to the top, but at least to the third floor.

JANE

»Bea, are you still there?« But she was gone. Oh, the poor girl was stressed out again. But you don't have to be so unfriendly, though, Jane thought to herself, somewhat shocked, as she gazed proudly at her huge garden, which was landscaped several times a week by her fantastic gardener, José. José had emigrated from Mexico years ago; Jane didn't know how or when, she was just glad that her garden looked the way it did. Besides, to her he seemed totally happy – he even sang while he worked. Oh no, once more she was being distracted by unnecessary thoughts; my goodness, now she was getting stressed out too!

A glance at her hands reminded her of her appointment at 10 am with Melanie, the best manicurist in town, the one with the endless waiting list. She didn't care to imagine what would happen if she were late. Afterwards lunch with Carolyn at her urgent request, and then an appointment with Dr. Hatwick, the most famous psychiatrist far and wide. She hurried up the marble steps of her house to throw herself into her latest Armani clothing acquisition. My God, where are the car keys? Such stress, I'm already bathed in sweat! »Lucia,« she called out to her cleaning lady, »take Buddy out (her three-year-old Newfoundland) please be so kind! Unfortunately I don't have time, too many important appointments!«

She was already outside, giving Buddy, who lounged sleepily at the entrance door and hardly noticed her, a quick pat. »Hey there, chubby one, take good care of everything!« A glance at the clock made her get quickly into her car. »Bea is stressed – and what about me?« she

muttered, roaring out of the driveway in her stylish Porsche 911.

TEAM MEETING

Everyone was on time at the mahogany conference table in a huge room with floor-length windows and a view of the Hudson River. Where are Geoffrey and that Beatrice, Sally thought to herself impatiently. At that moment, they entered together ... together! I don't believe it: Coincidence or on purpose? Sally felt herself getting warm, as if she were having a menopausal hot flash. Just the way that Beatrice shows up here. Far too fat in a tight, faded pantsuit. Bea gave her a quick glance and, thank God, sat down far away from her and Geoffrey. Yes, that's where she belongs, Sally thought, at the end of the table, and already her focus had switched from Beatrice to Geoffrey. No, for real, how great does he look, Sally thought to herself. Dark blue Armani suit, snow-white shirt, and with it a Merlot-colored Hermes tie. His thick hair was perfectly coiffed but without looking purposely styled. His green eyes calmly studied those present.

Beatrice, on the other hand, seemed unsettled and insecure, with red spots on her face, glancing nervously at those assembled. Sally's hot flash vanished suddenly at the sight. Instead she was feeling rather compassionate. Then she heard Geoffrey's calm, matter-of-fact voice: "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, today we're going to begin with the proposals for the new advertising campaign for Henssler & Co., the world's largest cosmetics company, and we're also introducing a new concept for a vegetarian fast food chain. »Sally, why don't you get us started!« He looked at her kindly. »Sure, Geoffrey,« and already Sally was eagerly presenting her proposal, an anti-aging campaign for women over forty, that senseless fight against aging,

with a concept to unconditionally, once and for all, win the battle against wrinkles with said products.

Sally presented in detail and with precision, using many visuals; she was completely in her element, like a fish in water. Bea watched Sally with fascination as she presented self-confidently, without a hint of insecurity, and with tremendous power of persuasion, as if there was only her and her suggestion and nothing and no one else. In contrast, Bea always had her doubts and reservations. With Sally, on the other hand, there was no hint of that. Unbelievable! She could only learn from her, and that's what she intended to do. She wasn't going to let herself be intimidated. Why should she? Also, she found the proposal for the new cosmetics line somewhat conventional and a little boring. It didn't exactly knock you off your feet.

Sally then started with her presentation of the vegetarian fast food chain, to which she had given a new name, »Dreamy Vegetarian«, for the middle-aged customer. She also presented this concept flawlessly. In the end, she was very proud of herself. Her glance towards Geoffrey spoke volumes. Bea suddenly heard her name from far away.

»Bea, could you please start now.« »I - oh - OK. I'll start.« My God, it was her turn! Beads of sweat stood out on her forehead, but a quick look at Geoffrey calmed her down a bit, which she couldn't really explain. »So, the line of cosmetics that Sally just introduced, which is aimed more at middle-aged women fighting aging, is totally interesting, but I chose another customer group, the younger generation. They need their own new, younger product line. I'm calling it »The Yellow Line«, and to introduce it to younger people, I thought of yellow cosmetics boxes distributed to high schools, colleges, and universities. This distribution could initially take place over a span of three

months, and then these products would only be available in specific stores or online."

Sally had turned a little pale. Her poisonous glare was directed at Bea, this Bea with no trace of nervousness, and on top of that she was presenting this great, interesting idea. Next she glanced at Geoffrey, whose face betrayed nothing, neither enthusiasm nor rejection. Bea wasn't aware of any of this. She presented great visuals and concept sketches of what the product should look like. The Yellow Box looked delicious, irresistible, just killer! That stupid cow! Sally took the floor in a desperate attempt to avert the worst. »Well, I have my doubts, Bea, because distributing products for free for three months is a big investment.« »That's what I thought too at first, and then I calculated the costs,« Bea replied eagerly, and presented her cost estimates on a slide. Unfortunately, this showed that the costs were relatively low compared to other promotions. Sally gave up and hoped that Geoffrey would reject this proposal. But her hopes were not to be realized.

RENDEVOUS WITH HARRY

Sally left the office in a huff to treat herself to a quick lunch. That little go-getter Bea and her idea of this new advertising campaign would actually be well received by the client. What's more, her boss Geoffrey was also thrilled with it, even though Beatrice looked ridiculous in her ancient pantsuit. And then there was that high ponytail for an important business meeting. Unacceptable! How can one show up like that? Does Geoffrey still have all his marbles? This chubby woman – hard to believe. He's been staring at me for years, but today he was mesmerized by the scruffy Beatrice. Sure, her ideas were presented damn well and even quite self-confidently. She herself couldn't have done any better. Also, well structured and exactly what the customer needed. Crap, a plan had to be made; before you know it, she moves up the floors, and before I even know what hit me she'll be standing right in front of me. Unimaginable. A nightmare!

Oops, she almost slammed her forehead against the window of the super chic lunch restaurant, Charly. That's all she needed – to be going back to the office with a bump on her head. What a shitty day, she cursed inwardly, and promptly tripped into the arms of Harry, a former friend from college. »Harry, I can't believe it, haven't seen you in ages, what are you doing here in New York?« Harry – tall, dark hair, cold gray eyes – smiled joyfully at her. »Hi Sally – my God, that was a long time ago. You look even more gorgeous than you did then!« Suddenly this shitty day has turned into a dream day, Sally thought to herself, and gave Harry her most beautiful smile, showing her shiny white teeth. "Hey, Harry, hard to believe it's you,« she said as

they embraced warmly. »Are you alone here?« Harry asked. »Yes, and you?« Sally asked sultrily. Harry nodded, took her hand, and already a pretty waitress was coming to lead them to their table.

Harry and Sally had met at Princeton University. At the time Sally was sitting in a marketing lecture. Bored, her gaze wandered through the lecture hall, and like an eagle discovering its prey, landed on the handsome Harry, who was listening attentively to the lecture and taking no notice of her. »That'll change quickly,« thought Sally to herself with an inward smile, stretching out her slender, slightly tanned legs and trying to concentrate on the monotonous lecture. And that's indeed what happened. They were very similar, inside and out.

SINGLE LUNCH

Beatrice felt like jumping high into the air in the elevator that was to take her from the 28th floor to the ground floor. And yet this day had started out so stressful and annoying. But now she felt like hugging everyone. What a day! Her boss Geoffrey was thrilled with her presentation. She never expected that. He thought her ideas were right on target and perfectly suited to the new client, Henssler & Co., who wanted to launch a new product on the market. All that work was not for nothing, she thought to herself. And once again she could see her boss's calm, warm eyes in her mind's eye, as he listened attentively to her presentation and looked at her admiringly, somehow. Or had she just imagined that? Well, with the five pounds too many on her hips and her gray suit right out of the Stone Age, it must surely be a fantasy.

On the other hand, he himself looked spick and span. Beautifully dressed, the upper buttons of his shirt casually open, revealing his lightly tan skin. On his narrow, masculine wrist he wore a cool watch (she didn't know much about brands). His fine hands rested on the table. Everything about him radiated calm and serenity. Stop it, Beatrice! You're not going to fall for your boss, she admonished herself. And before she knew it the elevator had dropped her on the ground floor and down to earth.

She quickly got out. She didn't have much time left for lunch, just enough for a quick sandwich at the snack bar opposite Charly, the in-restaurant. »Hi,« said the server behind the counter, a nice young student who was financing his studies by working here at lunchtime. »What can I get

you today?» «Oh, I'll have a tuna sandwich and a water (she'd have much preferred the cheeseburger, but the memory of that morning in front of the closet held her back). »All right, here you go, that's six dollars.« »Thanks, keep the change,« said Beatrice and took her sandwich to stand at one of the four bar tables overlooking Charly's.

There she saw a stylish couple sitting at the window, talking excitedly. Oh, that's Sally! Of course, she knows only cool men and has the time and money to eat lunch there. Yes, Sally looked damn good and was super-successful. Beatrice had a sneaky suspicion that she might have something going on with Geoffrey, just because of the very familiar way Sally always spoke to and looked at him. Today at the meeting it seemed to Beatrice that Sally's glances in her direction weren't exactly friendly. Her eyes had looked cold and disapproving. Beatrice only noticed it in the background, as she was fully concentrated on her presentation. But now at lunch she realized in what a hostile way Sally had stared at her. Normally she would never even take any notice of me, Beatrice thought to herself.

Some months ago we met by chance in the elevator. The doors were just beginning to close. She saw me rushing to the elevator and graciously held the door open. I was in my crumpled suit per usual, she was in a super-chic light beige silk outfit. She looked me over from top to bottom. Then she turned to the elevator buttons and asked with a fake smile: »Third floor for you, right?« »Yes, that's right,« I mumbled, »thank you,« and before I knew it I was at my floor, and she continued to glide up. We didn't exchange another word at the time, just »Have a nice day!«

Now, enough of Sally! Bea urgently had to get back to the office. Geoffrey wanted some more tweaks, which she was

supposed to discuss with him tomorrow. What a date he would be; the best date. Her heart was beating a little faster at the thought of him. She took one last look at the two of them, who were still sitting at lunch and apparently had all the time in the world. She, however, had to go, and before she knew it she was back at her desk and deep in her work.

SALLY AND HARRY

Sally ate an exquisite steak tartare with a glass of delicious detox water. Actually, Champagne would be appropriate to celebrate the chance meeting with her old college friend Harry after such a long time. »So, Harry, what brings you to New York, the city that never sleeps? I thought you were at Hambrecht & Co., that famous marketing firm in San Francisco.« She took a sip of water and looked at him with a smile. "Yeah, Sally, I was there for three years, but then this offer came from Lambert & Company to become a partner. I couldn't resist, even though San Francisco is certainly a city worth living in. But since I had no other ties there - honestly, I hardly had time for friends, not to mention a relationship - few personal contacts - just no time. Actually, I only miss my psychiatrist. He really was damn good.« He sipped at his glass of water. »And how are you, Sally dear?" He raised one of his bushy eyebrows questioningly and looked at her intensely with his clear, somewhat cold eyes.

Actually, he wasn't very interested in those around him, really not at all. Once he sat waiting in a doctor's office, where the following saying hung on the wall: »The measure of all things is humanity.« He found this sentence so surprising. It seemed strange to him to dedicate one's life to serving humanity. Were there really people out there who didn't just think of themselves, who put money and career ambitions aside to serve humanity? For him, people were a means to an end. He would never have become a doctor. He liked people far too little for that. That's what appealed to him about Sally: she was cast in the same mold as him. Sally laughed, a little embarrassed. »Yeah, I'm fine,