

Such Good People – First Chapter
by Amy Blumenfeld

From a thousand feet above ground, the city streets are a grid of magnificent milestones. As April leans her freshly highlighted caramel tresses against the lapel of Peter's blazer, she gazes across rooftops and scattered patches of green intrigued not by the beauty of Chicago's lakefront metropolis, but by the narrative before her. *How fitting, she thinks, to see life scrawled out like a signature from atop the John Hancock building.*

Down below stands the Drake Hotel, where they wed over a decade earlier. A few blocks away is Northwestern's Prentice Women's Hospital, where she delivered all three of their children. Out in the distance are the Garfield Park Conservatory and Notebaert Nature Museum—school field trip destinations where she'd been a parent chaperone. And there on the left, jutting into Lake Michigan along Navy Pier, is the iconic Ferris wheel—site of the sunset jaunt Peter had insisted upon the day they moved to Chicago. Newly engaged, madly in love, and utterly besotted by the romance of driving eight hundred miles in a U-Haul to plant roots in an unfamiliar town, Peter believed riding a gigantic circle would be their perfect opening ceremony. "We'll have highs and we'll have lows," he'd said, pulling her close as they ascended into the sky, "but we'll sit side by side and take in the view together."

As they peer out the restaurant's floor-to-ceiling glass panes awaiting their table, Peter's familiar scent—Right Guard antiperspirant mixed with a woody cologne she'd impulsively picked up at the Sephora checkout line—wafts through the linen fibers of his jacket. Somehow, the fragrance heightens her senses and enhances the romance of the moment like a well-curated movie soundtrack. "I can't believe it's really happening," she whispers. Peter kisses her head and wraps his arm around her back, just as he did that night on the Ferris wheel.

"Excuse me, Mr. and Mrs. Nelson?" comes a voice from behind. April and Peter pivot to find a young waiter with clasped hands and enviable posture pointing to a two-top in the corner of the room. "Your reservation is ready. Please, follow me."

April places her suede purse beside a small bud vase and the waiter chivalrously holds the back of an upholstered armchair as she descends into the seat. "Swanky!" she mouths to Peter from across the table and bounces her eyebrows up and down.

Peter grins. She knows he appreciates her steadfast unaffectedness and how she remains the same grounded girl from Brooklyn's Avenue J despite their many years of midwestern comfort.

The waiter hands a leather-bound wine list to Peter, clears his throat, and deferentially offers a slight bow. "I'll be back in a moment with your dinner menus, but, um, I'd just like to say, it's truly an honor, sir."

Peter immediately stands and extends his right hand. "Aw, thanks. The pleasure is all mine . . ." he pauses, searching for a name tag on the waiter's lapel, "Justin."

"So, I, uh, I just wanted to let you know, sir, that it would be a thrill for me, really, if, say, you ever need a clerk or an intern or someone to get your coffee or file papers or pick up

your dry cleaning . . .” He chuckles as his shoulders rise to his earlobes. “You’re an inspiration, Mr. Nelson.”

“Oh, come on now, that’s very kind. Let’s just take it a step at a time, shall we? The chickens haven’t hatched quite yet, if you know what I mean,” Peter says, knocking his knuckles against his forehead. “There *is* that minor issue of winning the election, so first things first. But I appreciate the support.” He punctuates this with an elongated wink.

April knows being on the receiving end of sycophantic gestures is nothing new for Peter. He has garnered respect and admiration from others his entire life. In fact, the very first anecdote Peter’s parents ever shared with April was how they recognized his leadership skills in second grade when he acquired sixty-five signatures from fellow students to petition the school board to sell cocoa with marshmallows in the cafeteria. He successfully argued that if faculty members at their Newton, Massachusetts elementary school could enjoy a cup of coffee in the teachers’ lounge, then students were entitled to a warm beverage during the bitterly cold New England winters, too. The “Cocoa in the Caf” story had become family lore, and his parents got plenty of mileage from it at cocktail parties. But April is confident that for Peter, getting those signatures wasn’t about being a leader or yearning to be seen and heard; it was purely about righting a perceived wrong and giving a marginalized group their due. It was all about empathy and action. No ego. That was his pixie dust at age seven, and it has remained to this day.

“Well, best of luck, sir. I’ll be rooting for you.” The waiter beams and then shifts his glance to April. “I’ll go fetch those dinner menus now.”

April takes a long sip of water until the waiter is out of earshot. She knows Peter’s a gem and deserving of the admiration as well as the promising recent polls, yet she can’t resist the urge to gently rib him.

“Well, I’d say you’ve attained a solid C-list reality star status, Mr. Nelson.” She smiles, raising her glass to toast. “I wouldn’t put you on the B-list quite yet, but you’re getting there.”

Peter lets out a lengthy sigh. “This whole thing is completely surreal, you know? Good surreal, but still surreal.” He fidgets with the utensils at his place setting and adjusts them into perfect alignment.

“Oh, honey, I’m so proud of you,” April says, sliding her arm past the oil and vinegar bottles and reaching for his hand. “No one deserves this more than you.” She interlaces her fingers with her husband’s and rubs her thumb back and forth against his skin.

April can feel him staring at the burgundy polish on her nails and watches as his eyes drift over to the delicate diamond band encircling her finger. He smiles at her ring, his mind seemingly lost in his internal world, but she knows exactly what he’s thinking.

“Man, was it pouring rain when I found this puppy.” He chuckles, caressing the stones with the pad of his thumb.

April nods. She’s heard the story about a million times. It was one of his favorites to tell—how the rain assaulted the sidewalk when he emerged from the subway station in New York’s diamond district, how he sought refuge in a jewelry store near the corner of 47th Street and 6th Avenue to stay dry, how the chatty woman behind the counter pumped him for details

about his bride, and how he acquiesced, despite his typically private nature. He didn't intend for the truth to sound so melodramatic. He certainly wasn't one for histrionics. But the facts were the facts. "I moved to New York to change the world," he told the clerk. "But it turns out, my world changed because I moved to New York." He pulled one of the clerk's business cards from a stack on the glass counter, flipped it over, and quickly jotted down those exact words. He knew they'd be perfect for the moment he got down on bended knee. This was the story he told April every year on the anniversary of their engagement. She could recite it verbatim.

"You know what, babe," Peter says, enfolding April's hands between his own, "tonight's about us. The next few months will be absolutely crazy with the election, so let's forget about work, the kids, your parents, everything. It's just you and me, kid. Old school."

April can practically feel her eyes sparkle. "*Old school*," she repeats with a laugh, and marvels at the fact that after all these years her husband still feels like a new addition to her life.

"Champagne?" she asks.

He shakes his head. "Nah. Too soon. It ain't over till it's over."

"Absolutely." She chides herself for overlooking how presumptive a flute of even Prosecco could be for someone as superstitious as Peter. "Why don't you pick?" she suggests, handing him the cocktail list.

While Peter scrutinizes the libations as if they were a front-page article in the *Chicago Tribune*, April gazes at him and lets out a little sigh. This is not an unusual occurrence. With his perfectly styled salt and pepper hair, cleft chin, and trendy tortoiseshell eyeglasses that skew both intellectual and middle-aged hipster, April never tires of her view. She even finds the mild scoliosis that rounds his shoulders and causes a small hump beneath his gingham button-down shirts to be sexy. And that night, like most other times, she gets lost in the scenery.

The waiter makes his way back to their table with two dinner menus tucked beneath his arm. As soon as he begins reciting the specials, April hears the cell phone buzz in her purse. It doesn't play any of the distinctive ring tones she's programmed for her parents' or kids' numbers, so she contemplates letting it go to voicemail. As she reaches into the bag to lower the volume, she notices a 718 area code. She tenses and picks up instantly.

"Hello?" She can feel her heartbeat quicken. As the only child of aging parents, an incoming call from any New York area code is a catalyst for full body perspiration.

"Yes, hi, I am looking for April Zagoda," says the voice at the other end of the line.

April jolts upright in her chair. She hasn't heard her maiden name used in over a decade. Her arms begin to tingle and her free hand forms a tight fist. She rises from her seat and motions to Peter—who is in the midst of asking the waiter to describe the artichoke appetizer—that she will take the call from an empty corner of the restaurant's dining room.

Oh no, this is it. This is the call. She's a nurse or an EMT or, oh Jesus, a coroner . . .

"Are they okay?" April blurts out, her voice cracking as she navigates a maze of tables toward a quiet corner of the restaurant. "Are they okay?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where are they? Are they hurt? Sick? What's wrong?"

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure what you are talking about.”

“My parents!” she exclaims, finding a private spot beside the large picture windows.

“Your parents? Ms. Zagoda, I don’t know anything about . . . I’m not calling regarding your parents. My name is J—”

“Oh, thank goodness,” April sighs, cutting off the caller. She closes her eyes and attempts to recenter herself. “I’m so sorry, let’s start over. How can I help you?”

“Ms. Zagoda, I’m calling from *The New York Times*.”

“*The Times*? Really!” April simultaneously feels a coil of tension release.

Growing up, *The New York Times* was the preeminent news source in April’s household. Her father had the paper delivered to their home and would get his ink-stained hands all over her parents’ white Formica kitchen tabletop. The fingerprints drove her mother crazy, but the routine of watching her dad come home from work, strip down to his sleeveless white ribbed undershirt, put a *Welcome Back Kotter* rerun on TV, and run his fingers along the newsprint was one of her fondest childhood memories. Her parents even kept a stack of Sunday magazines in a round wicker basket on the floor beside the toilet in their tiny, carpeted powder room.

“I’m assuming you’re calling regarding my husband’s election,” April says. The thought of Peter being featured in *The Times* is almost as exciting as an election victory. “Before I put him on though, may I just ask, how did you know? I mean, I didn’t realize people back home cared about local Chicago politics. Is this for the National News page? Did one of Peter’s old colleagues in New York tip you off?”

April knows she’s rambling, but she can’t help it. Journalists make her uneasy.

“So your husband is running for office,” the woman on the other end says matter-of-factly.

“Yes. State’s attorney. Basically, what New York City would call the district attorney. He’s been a litigator forever, as I suspect you already know. He just won the primary so now we’re gearing up for the election.”

“Fascinating.”

“Yes.” April closes her eyes to visualize the bulleted list of publicity talking points Peter’s campaign manager had recently emailed her. “It was sort of unexpected, actually. When our kids were little, we volunteered a bunch. Wanted to meet other young families in our community, so we doled out food at a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving, delivered care packages to homebound elderly, organized a toy drive every December for children at the Ronald McDonald House in Chicago. We even helped clean up an old, abandoned lot and plant grass to create a greenspace and ball field.”

“That’s lovely . . .”

“You know what’s funny? The more we volunteered as a family, the deeper our roots grew in the neighborhood, and the more invested Peter became in local politics. He was elected Alderman in our ward a couple of years ago and is now ready for the next step—state’s attorney. I may be biased, but with his stellar record prosecuting in New York and in Chicago, and his amazing heart, he really is made for this job.”

“Mmmm,” the reporter says. April can hear keyboard typing in the background.

“I’m sure you’d like to speak with my husband. He’s right here, I’ll put him on . . .” April starts walking back across the room to the table where she can see Peter studying the dinner menu.

“Actually, Ms. Zagoda,” the reporter says. “I was calling to speak with you.”

“Me?” she says, still baffled as to why this woman is not referring to her as Mrs. Nelson.

“Yes. I was wondering if you have a comment regarding Rudy DeFranco’s release from prison?”

April stops mid-stride. Acid rises from her gut, as if the mere utterance of Rudy’s name has eroded the lining of her esophagus. She does an about-face and returns to her spot in the corner of the room.

Several seconds of silence follow.

“Ms. Zagoda? Are you there?”

Shut your damn mouth, she cautions herself. Just shut your mouth.

“Ms. Zagoda, do you have anything to say regarding Rudy DeFranco?”

“Who are you? How did you get this number?” April snaps, her friendly demeanor vaporized.

“Ms. Zagoda, it has been many years since Rudy DeFranco was imprisoned for the death of Bailey Jameson. There must be something you have to say now that he is being released.”

How the hell do I gracefully get out of this?

“Ms. Zagoda? I know you are there.”

Breathe in, two, three . . . April shuts her eyes.

“Any comment, Ms. Zagoda?”

Out, two, three . . . Images of Rudy’s face, their childhood neighborhood, the handcuffs, the courtroom all flash across her mind like the grainy old slideshows her grandfather used to project onto his basement walls.

“Ms. Zagoda. How does it make you feel that Rudy DeFranco did time while you—”

April grits her teeth and interjects, “No. Comment.”

“But look at your life and look at his. Ms. Zagoda, you must have something to say.”

“My name is April *Nelson*,” she pauses to let oxygen rise through her nostrils, “and I have no comment.” She exhales and taps her iPhone to end the call.

April gazes out of the large windows overlooking her adopted city while she holds the silent phone against her ear to maintain the appearance that she’s still conversing.

“Compartmentalize,” she whispers aloud, and pledges to maintain a cheerful façade throughout the meal for the sake of her husband’s sanity, as well as her own. Neither one of them can afford to crumble. She visualizes how the next hour will play out. She will order a glass of cabernet. She will listen as Peter speaks excitedly about the final weeks of the campaign. She will mention the beautiful book projects her first-grade students recently completed and acknowledge her good fortune to work at a school that feels more like a cocoon than a full-time job. She will remark how thoughtful it had been of her principal to reschedule the annual meet

the teacher event so April's allegiances to her employer and husband won't conflict the evening before Election Day. And, most of all, she will ignore the blaring siren that has just gone off inside her body. She will disregard the uptick in her pulse, furtively glide her drenched palms along the edge of the tablecloth, and summon the strength to pretend that her marriage, children, career, friendships, and all she holds dear will not break at the same moment as the reporter's story. She can do this, and she will.

April stares out at the skyline—at all those landmarks dotting a map of the beautiful life she has created—and with all that she has, she straightens her posture, attempts another cleansing breath, and returns to her husband at the table.

Dinner is served.