

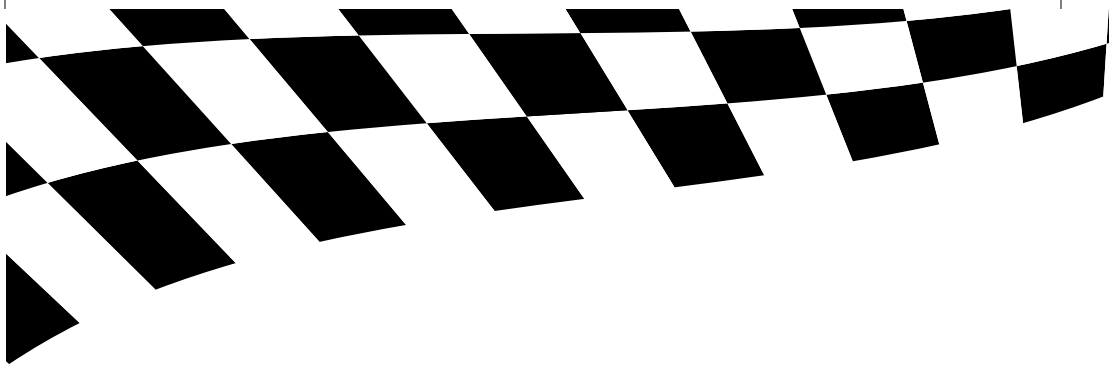




*Also by Madge Maril*

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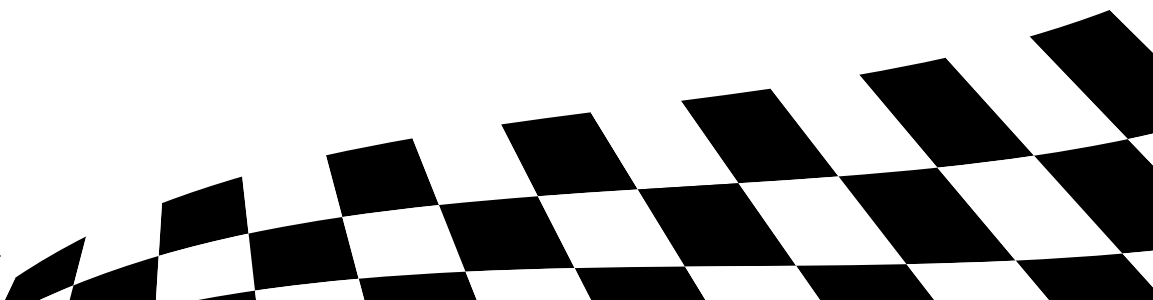
# THE PADDOCK CLUB

*Madge Maril*

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*For Luke, my husband and favorite chess partner*



# THE PADDOCK CLUB





Chapter 1  
**EN PASSANT**

NEW YORK CITY

I'm not a good person. What I am, though, is a good woman.

You know what I mean—the difference. There's an art to being a woman in this world, those little winks, the pencil skirts, the mauve eyeshadow. Saying sorry when you're not sorry, styling your hair within an inch of its life, choosing silence so you can be invisible, so you can do whatever you want. I think I was fourteen the first time I realized that this body would require *work*. My grandma was perched on her restaurant's fake marble countertop, short legs swinging, the heels of her nonslip shoes banging softly against the purple cabinet doors. I was in front of her, my chin in her hand as she applied eyeliner to my water line.

"This freaking hurts," I whined.

"I know," she replied calmly. "If you hand me the makeup remover, I can take it off. Your choice."

Waterfield High School's fall dance was that night, and I had a

date with a soft-spoken writer in my class who all the guys called Nosferatu. “No. I’m okay,” I promised Grandma, and when she smiled knowingly at me, I felt like I’d made the right choice: getting stabbed in the eyeball by a sharpened pencil so a boy nicknamed *Nosferatu* wouldn’t look away from me. You don’t often notice those rites of passage in the moment, when life dunks into the darkness of one long tunnel before you’re out on the other side, brand-new. But when Grandma let me borrow her stop-sign-red lipstick—Revlon’s Fire and Ice—I felt like I’d just become myself.

And then, at the dance, I learned the second most important lesson of my life. When I overheard Nosferatu trash-talking my handmade dress to his snobby creative writing club friends, I didn’t tell him that it’d taken approximately five thousand hours to painstakingly sew hot-pink sequins to cotton. Or that girls with red hair can wear pink. Or that it’s really shitty to talk about my *lack of strong female role models* like I’m Bambi and he’s a guidance counselor.

I kept my Fire-and-Ice lips slammed shut and walked away, silently. All the way home. He’d hurt me, so I hurt him back, and that felt even better than lipstick.

And now, in a strange way, that’s kind of my job.

“This is ridiculous. How can the hotel cancel our Sugar Scrub Couples Massage? Don’t they realize we’re flying twenty hours to get there?” grumbles my date, Winston. This isn’t new. He’s a grumbler. And he’s been grumbling since he checked his email—during this black-tie wedding cocktail hour, notably. In Manhattan, where you really have to overextend yourself to be noticeably rude. “I’ve had this planned for a *week*, Cat. A week! I need to fucking *relax*.”

And if I have to listen to another billionaire monologue about how nobody wants to work anymore, I’ll need to dump my pinot

noir on their head. “That’s a shame,” I start. Just three words, and that low, fizzly excitement is building in my chest, my toes curling as much as they can in my death-trap heels. “But Winston, what if this is a sign?”

It takes a good five seconds for my words to breach his glazed-over face, knock around that big blond head of his, then compute. His eyes flicker nervously between me, his phone, then back to me again. “Do you not want the sugar scrub? We could do just a massage, once the hotel gets off their lazy—”

“It isn’t really that. You agreed that we weren’t a long-term thing.” I’ve dropped my voice to a low, sympathetic register. It masks most of my giddiness. “Maybe it’s our time to part ways?”

Winston’s face has gone pale. “Are you breaking up with me at my best friend’s wedding?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You—you can’t. That is so.” Winston gulps for air. “Bitchy.”

Against all odds, I stop myself from giggling. “Oh, wow.”

Let the record show that the groom, Bernard Baudelaire, isn’t Winston’s best friend. I don’t even think Winston has friends, period. But Bernard *is* a Formula 1 driver—which would’ve been exciting to younger me, who grew up glued to the television screen on race weekends, a bowl of cereal in my lap, Dad and the guys from the garage yelling happily around me. But to Winston, this is just a public embarrassment. Like his own mother or an honest job, my date hasn’t seen anyone in this wedding since he and Bernard attended some aristocratic French boarding school together. You know, the good old days.

The person who *has* seen the happy couple in the last decade is the maid of honor, Prestly, a lovely if not slightly Machiavellian venture capitalist who’d hired me to date and subsequently dump Winston right here. Right now.

Since he'd insisted on coming to this wedding after cheating on her, a member of the bridal party.

I cast Winston a sad look from beneath my heavy black lashes. "I can get my own ride home. Good—"

"But what about the trip?" he says, clearly not ready to call it quits. "It's over Valentine's Day, Cat. Who else is going to go with me?"

I drag in a breath. "Winston. Today is Valentine's Day."

"It is?"

"Yes."

"But it's always on the last day of February."

"I think you're thinking about Leap Day."

"Leap what?"

I give up. "Don't tell me you're getting attached."

Winston's throat bobs with panic. *Don't tell me you're getting attached* is exactly what he'd texted Prestly after she'd discovered his online dating profile. Sure, a bit on the nose, kind of a giveaway, but Prestly had offered to pay double my usual black-tie-wedding-breakup rate, and I've got sisters going to college. And maybe he's too stupid to remember how he dumped his girlfriend of three years, anyway, since he grumbles, "That's kind of mean," as he goes for his ice water.

I watch, biting back a bright red smile. It isn't that I'm heartless. If Winston were anyone else, I wouldn't be dumping him at a wedding. But he's him, and I'm me, and the petulant anger blossoming across his face? Ruining this billionaire's picture-perfect night on the Upper East Side and upcoming *White Lotus* vacation? This is my job.

I'm a cat burglar.

And I steal time from horrible men.

"I can see you're angry. I should go." As I stand, Winston's eyes

follow my body up, lingering on the black tulle dress fluttering down my waist. It's from Maria Grazia Chiuri's first ready-to-wear collection with Dior, where the designer had sent her WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS T-shirt down the runway. Winston might've noticed the bad omen if he actually knew fashion history like he'd told me he did—I know, a ridiculous lie, but he brags about knowing every “rich person” niche, from naval history to women's wear. He's so misogynistic, he's looped back around to sartorial hypervigilance.

“Happy hour isn't over yet,” he says. “Don't you want to stay for the ceremony?”

I arch an ice-blonde brow. Wella T18, the toner that you are. “Win, dear, the couple is two hours late and half the people in here are already smashed off their faces. I don't think there's going to *be* a wedding.”

“What about . . . saying goodbye in the bathroom? We never did, you know.” He leans forward suggestively, the squeak of his chair loud against the tasteful piano music. “Seal the deal.”

Wordlessly, I stare at Winston, wondering what would happen if I pointed out how entitled he is. Would his head explode? Spontaneously transform into a whale and a bowl of petunias? We haven't even gotten close to sleeping together—I don't ever sleep with my marks, ew—and he still booked us a *couples massage*. But men like Winston don't realize they have a Madonna-Whore Complex, of course; that would require critical thinking and self-awareness.

“I think I'm okay,” I say, smiling. “Hope you have the life that you deserve, Win.”

“Hey. Seriously? No? You know you're just an influencer, right? Anyone would want to date me! Hey, I'm talking to—”

Ignoring him, I double-check that I've got my clutch and head downstairs, away from the happy hour floor. Once I'm safely at

the top of a ridiculously grand marble staircase—and pretty sure Winston isn't going to airport-run after me—I slip out my phone to text his ex. I don't expect Prestly to see my message until later, since hello, wedding, but I like confirming when I've done the deed. A little present for the maid of honor.

It's done. He tried to proposition me after I dumped him. 😊 Sorry you ever met him. Last quarter of the payment is due by midnight. xC

As soon as I hit send, her typing bubble pops up.

NOOO. EWWW.

Then—

Thank you for everything.

I usually stop replying to a client once I've sent their final receipt and/or apologized for their misfortune—ironically, I'm the person who can't get attached. Nor do I want to. At the end of the day, as much as I love helping womankind, I will not be splitting margaritas and queso with a venture capitalist named Prestly. This is where our lives go in two separate directions. She goes back to funding data-torture software named after *Lord of the Rings* villains, and I go back to funneling her money into charity, my family, and good clothes.

But I am lucky. To get to do this at all. To be someone who women thank. Stop and think about it long enough, and everyone

agrees that the world is weird and nonsensical and, by all philosophical accounts, supremely fucked-up. I get to right a few wrongs while I'm still here. That's real wealth.

Then another text from Prestly pops up on my phone screen and yes, right, here's why I don't stop for sentimentality.

Hey, actually, have you left  
the venue yet???

My internal alarms ring. There's something foreboding about those three question marks. Also, the word "actually" in the middle of a sentence. Frowning, I head outside to find a car, as if physically walking away will keep my clutch from vibrating against my hip. I don't know why Prestly wants to know where I am. But it isn't like she's triple-texting me to ditch this disaster wedding to grab a drink with her, either. I need to go.

I slip past the apathetic doormen, into an alleyway tucked around the venue's sleek marble exterior. It's wet and cold and safe, and I tap through my apps for a ride home. This week, "home" is a cheap short-term studio in Jersey—convenient.

I'm swiping away yet another notification from Prestly when I notice that I have company.

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to. My spine tingles with the sudden knowledge that I'm not alone, goose bumps followed by an interior somersault, and I'm glancing over my shoulder before my street smarts can kick in. The alleyway's dim lighting makes the stranger register in pieces—dark, wavy hair pushed behind his tan ears. A rich black suit, only a few steps darker than his ink-brown eyes. High cheekbones. A strong nose. And his mouth. It's full, astonishingly pink, and stuck in a frown that either says

*need more champagne to survive or why did I waste Valentine's Day on this.* Clearly, he's another wedding attendee hiding from the impending car crash.

Then he looks up from his phone, seemingly noticing me for the first time. I give him a polite smile.

He doesn't return it.

My smile drops.

He looks at me for another half second, the glow of his phone screen shading his tanned olive face with sharp contours. I wait for him to look back down, but he doesn't. And there is something about his eyes—something familiar. He has that same look as the perpetually bedraggled celebrities I had crushes on when I was eighteen and starry-eyed: older, smarter, and rougher despite the tuxedo, just missing a half-burnt cigarette and a dog-eared poetry chapbook.

"Are you all right?" he says, with a voice ripped straight from a Nick Cave album. *Exceedingly* baritone, very sad, nebulously accented. Yup. Cue the chapbook.

"Who, me?"

The man's eyes narrow, as if to point out that we're both willingly standing in a damp New York City alleyway in February and that in itself is a questionable offense. My own frown deepens. I don't need masculine pity-worry from someone who'd attend this wedding. "I'm okay. Are you?"

This is a kindness unnecessarily wasted on a man in a tuxedo. But he nods, appeased by my answer, and finally goes back to his phone. I pretend to do the same, though I can't stop peeking. It isn't that I'm hoping he keeps paying attention to me, or anything like that. Genuinely flirting with a man would require me to temporarily stop being Cat Cromwell, Fun Fashion Girl, a mask I wear like it's

glued to my frame. I'd have to stop running, and you've got to keep moving if you want to keep having fun. The second I let my guard down, get domestic with a stranger who'd never be able to handle my true self . . . that's slowing down. That's doom.

It's just that he really does look familiar. Too familiar. And that isn't a good thing in my line of work. I know I haven't broken his heart; I charge triple for men who look like they have opinions about the Socratic method, even before you factor in the elegantly disheveled, tortured-celebrity-crush aesthetic.

My blood goes cold.

Oh my God.

I twist away, turning to face the streetlight at the front of the alleyway. Okay. No, this is—totally fine. So, yes. I do know who's standing behind me. It doesn't matter. I'm not eighteen anymore. I haven't watched Formula 1 in years. I'm not going to *talk to him*.

“Are you sure you're okay?”

He's talking to me. Again. And there's something new in his voice—irritation, maybe—like I've annoyed him by possibly being not okay. My face goes red beneath my weapons-grade foundation, but I take a deep breath, smooth my hair into place, and turn back around. “Totally fine. Just had to get some fresh air.” I smile again, like his whole patronizing, I-know-better-than-you gambit is so endearing. And fine, it was. Once upon a time. From afar. But as is, I'm very unendeared by it.

With an equally unimpressed *hmm*, his gaze dips to my feet. We're almost the same height, spot-on, and his eyes really are alarmingly brown, so it's a bit obvious. “You a friend of Bernard's?”

“Oh, no.” I not-so-subtly lean farther away. “Just here with someone.”

“Someone you're leaving?” he asks skeptically.

I bite my lip. “Well.”

“Well?” he repeats, waiting for more.

More that he won’t get. “Well! You caught me.”

His head tilts, and his wavy hair tilts with him. Unlike his younger days, he’s mostly clean-shaven, though his hair’s longer—tiltable. Then he hums, unsmiling, unblinking, and a tiny wave of unease rolls down my spine. “Just a phrase,” I find myself adding. “It’s not—I really am fine, if that’s what you’re worried about. I’m not, like, hiding. The date just wasn’t that great.”

“Why?”

I blink. Many times, actually. “He’s . . . I guess I didn’t expect all this.”

“All what?”

“You know, ice sculptures, multiple cocktail hours.”

He exhales out an almost silent, almost emotionless laugh. “Not for you?”

I hesitate. There are all different ways to look at someone: pupils blown with desire, excitement clouding your better judgment, seeing without seeing. Those are the kind of looks I’m used to. But his eyes are stuck on my face, calmly and acutely curious about me and my answers and my sneaking around, and I don’t like it at all. I know who he is. I once spent fifty dollars on a bootleg shirt with his face on it. But why is he looking at me like he knows why *I’m* here?

Or maybe . . . well.

Maybe he’s looking because he *wants* to look at me.

I entertain this thought for one nanosecond. His curious eyes. How his shoulders fill out that suit. This is younger me’s ultimate fantasy: a Wattpad of an evening with Fausto Ferreira Sanchez. Also known as Faust, the Pride of Portugal, Stark-Benzin Racing’s favorite, and one of the best Formula 1 drivers of all time.

Then the nanosecond is over, and I push the thought away so easily that I give myself chills. “You know what, I’m being so rude.” I suck in a breath through my fake smile. “I should go make sure I’ve said bye to him.”

I wait a moment. Here’s when my former hero hits me with the classic man-getting-left-at-a-party response: *Oh no, don’t go, you’re so (insert adjective here)*. Only, he doesn’t. Faust just looks at me, quiet and unreadable. And I guess I read him . . . slightly wrong. Or I’ve been dismissed? Noted as unattainable? I peek over my shoulder one more time as I head back inside—where I fully intend to hide until my car’s here, away from him and his twenty questions.

Faust has returned to his phone. Thumbs tapping, brow furrowed.

I don’t wait for him to notice me again.

I breeze back inside, heading to the nearest ladies’ room, through the little powder room with its vanity seating area and fire-hazard scented candles, toward the actual sinks. God, I’m good. Who else could shut down a man they used to watch on TV? And yeah, I don’t love how he looked at me, fascinated and foreboding and scary-hot, but I highly doubt that Faust’s heard of me, and really, my problem is having such an oddly specific type of—

I push open the actual bathroom door with a metal-handle-on-wallpaper *thwack*, and four startled heads snap up to stare at me, the harbinger of loud sounds.

“Oh,” I whisper. “Sorry.”

The ivory-gowned bridesmaids are gathered around what looks to be a woman crumpled on the tile. No . . . a bride. *The* bride. Imogen Baldwin, I can assume, from her flower-studded blonde updo, white-knuckled bouquet, and long pearl-colored gown, a vision of Carolyn Bessette. I’d seen her name on the hand-calligraphed

wedding invitation Winston had texted me—*Together with their families, Bernard Baudelaire and Imogen Baldwin joyfully request you to celebrate their marriage with a night of divine company and artful mingling*—but this is the first I’m seeing her.

Since the cocktail hour had gone excruciatingly long. And it had seemed like the wedding wasn’t happening.

And . . .

“Oh no,” I say, too surprised to formulate a smarter sentence.

The bride takes one look at my startled face, then bursts into tears.

“He—didn’t—come,” Imogen Baldwin sobs into an embroidered hand towel, chest hitching between words. “He said he only left those other women at the altar because he realized they were going to leave him first, but I told him I wouldn’t and I thought he believed me, and he promised me he would come. He *promised*.”

*Well, I would hope so*, I think. Or that’s what I would think, if my heart wasn’t breaking for her and this specific, horrible lie she’d believed enough to look so beautiful. *When someone shows you who they are*. . . . Grandma always said, never fully finishing the thought. She didn’t have to. “Imogen, you can’t blame yourself. We all believed him!” one bridesmaid says, waving her hands around Imogen’s glitter-dusted shoulders, as if she could stop her from ruining her perfect makeup by Jedi-mindtricking her problems away. “And it’s going to be okay. That’s the woman I was telling you about—Cat Cromwell. The woman who helped me! She can fix this.”

That’s when I register the person waving her hands around is Prestly. She’s wearing *so* much more blush than when we video called, and it’s honestly really cute, but also oh. Oh no. “I really

can't," I start to explain, "Because I was just here and, God, I'm so sorry, but that Winston guy knows Bernard, so it's a bit too—"

There's a knock on the door, then an unmistakably male voice. Vaguely French, as a Baudelaire would be, and just a touch remorseful. "Imogen? Are you in there? Please, can you come out? I know you're mad at me, and I should've been here sooner, but—it doesn't feel right. Imogen . . . I can't do this."

The women grow quiet. A cold sweat slides down the back of my neck as they turn, one by one, to look at me. The bride is last. Her eyes are wide and glassy, expectant and furious and hopeful and in need of something from me. And *that's* a look I can read very, very well.





## Chapter 2

# THE ENGLISH OPENING

“She offered you *how* much money?” Renata gasps, and that starts the barking up in the living room again. “Rowan! Enough!”

A toddler in a hot-pink Inspector Paws onesie comes trundling into the kitchen. “That’s not my name,” Rowan growls before dropping onto all fours and blinking expectantly up at me. *She’s going through a dog phase*, Renata had whispered when she let me in, and her daughter wound around my legs before going for my shoes. Before Renata could stop me, I’d made the benevolent mistake of calling Rowan by her “dog name,” Special Agent Beagle.

I stare at Rowan. The curly-haired four-year-old stares back up at me.

“You need to listen to your mom,” I say, because that seems like the thing to say. But when her shoulders droop, I hide my mouth behind my hand and silently add *Special Agent Beagle*, and then she’s jumping up and running down the hallway, squealing.

“Nice try,” Renata mumbles, going for the half-empty bottle of rosé. “She only listens to you.”

“Because I’m the fun aunt and therefore everything I say is much more exciting. Also, she’s four. And perfect. Give yourself a break.” I purse my lips as Renata refills a novelty Halloween mug. *Trick* is written on the side in hot pink, with a dog collar below it. “Do we need to have an Inspector Paws intervention?”

“Jesus, yes. Can you break our TV while you’re here? Wait.” Renata sets down the mug and leans toward me. Like her kid, my best friend Renata is 90 percent curly brown hair, 5 percent barely restrained chaos, and the rest pure goodness and love. She’s also one of the few women I know who’s taller than me, and when she leans, I get to feel like a tiny garden gnome staring up at angry Galadriel. “Back to you and the bride and this thing you should not do.”

I go for the wine mug. “I might do it.”

“Dude. No.”

“The internship that Maisie wants to do next fall is unpaid. And we’re waiting to hear if Bailey got into that one art school, but I know she did. And then she’s in *art school*, and I know she’s going to be the next Hilma af Klint—”

“Who?”

“Have her explain it. But they need the money.”

Renata’s brow wrinkles as I swig the lukewarm rosé, like she’s the one boldly trudging through bitter grocery store tannins. “You’re not your sisters’ keeper,” she says.

“I feel like that one book is kind of all about us being our sisters’ keepers.”

“With Cameron Diaz?”

“The Bible, idiot.”

Renata takes the mug from me, then chugs it. After she swallows—wincing, ha, there’s the tannins—she says, “You’ve never done a job like this. First of all, you were literally at this guy’s wedding. That’s

way too close. And the bride is asking you to fake-date a *professional athlete*. Aren't people obsessed with Formula 1 drivers' girlfriends? Like, to a weird degree? If you even get close to pulling this off, there will be blogs about you, photographs, internet stalkers. And that's all before you break up with him. Publicly."

"Look at you, knowing about sports."

"Don't distract me." She points a finger. "People are going to notice this race car driver is dating the 'Hilton Heartbreaker.'"

"And?" I shrug. "Dating and breaking up with shitty men isn't illegal."

"But disturbing the peace is."

"That was such a stupid case. That judge was biased." I frown and top off our mug. "No one's going to notice. It's been what, five years since that stupid article? I'm just some silly fashion influencer who's going to, woops, stumble into a Formula 1 driver's life and, bam, make him fall in love with me. This happens every day."

"Is that what happened to the client?" Renata asks. "Who even is she?"

"Imogen Baldwin, she's a ballerina at the American Ballet Company."

"Oh, so *she's* a famous athlete, too?"

"She's a *blueprint*. The little swan and the big European athlete who swept her off her feet. Come on, you know I can do that."

When Renata gets irritated with me, like actually irritated, not pretending to be mad so that she can swindle me out of the last mozzarella stick, she grinds her teeth so hard that I can practically hear her dentist's screams. "Show me the text again."

Smiling smugly, I unearth the encrypted message I'd received from none other than Imogen Baldwin. Her maid of honor must've given her my contact info, and I have to hand it to them; there

is something perpetually endearing about being part of women's whisper networks.

Bernard is about to start the next Formula 1 season, so he will be traveling constantly. But I know people on his current team (Stark-Benzin) and have three job openings I could get you into.

"Paperwork," Renata hisses. "You can't be a fake WAG with a fucking paper trail!"

From the living room, Rowan starts to howl.

"It's actually really smart," I explain. "Formula 1 travels around the world. The races are basically in new countries every week. Which is why I think it makes the most sense, narratively, to be his new coworker. I take one of these little gigs, magically appear in his life, publicly fuck him over, and vanish into the night. Also, the teams are huge, like nine hundred people. So nobody will even remember me once I bounce. Same with the internet stalkers."

"I don't like it."

Very aware of this. I press on. "If anyone realizes I'm the 'Hilton Heartbreaker'"—I air-quote the stupid tabloid moniker, cringing—"then I look like I'm trying to clean up my act. The paperwork is a good thing."

Renata is quiet for a long moment. "How do you know this much about Formula 1, anyway?"

I blink, surprised by her question. "Oh. I've just seen it around. My dad watched it when it was on."

This is only partially true. But I haven't exactly told Renata that

Formula 1 was my family's version of *Friday Night Lights*. That despite every odd, my Midwestern mechanic dad caught one of the few American broadcasts and fell in absolute love with it. He's the reason we watched Silverstone and Monaco and Monza like other families celebrated the Super Bowl, Crock-Pot queso dip, and canceled plans, Dad pestering the guys from the garage into drinking Budweiser from their work boots whenever Stark-Benzin finished first.

Yup. I used to be a fan of this guy's team.

Back when Faust drove there, too.

And now I can't tell Renata any of this, since she'll think I'm just taking this job for sentimental reasons. Which I'm not. Sentimentality is dangerous in my line of work.

I reach a hand out, and this time, it isn't for alcohol. Renata rolls her eyes, acts like she's debating some grand equation, then winds our fingers together. I smile at the way our fifty-cent mood rings click. Hers is always that same deep, dark navy blue. Mine's been stuck on black since I accidentally washed it in the pocket of some jeans.

"I miss you," I admit.

She looks at our rings. Blue and almost blue, or black and almost black, depending on how you look at them. Half-empty, half-full. "You know I can't come save you if this shit turns sideways," she says. "I've got Rowan now, and I still haven't told Bryce about all this. He still asks me when I'm going to introduce him to the rest of my modeling friends."

Ah, Bryce. The exceedingly average computer programmer who stole my Little John away. "It's not going to go sideways. When's he back from his work trip, by the way? I could do a Bryce intervention, too."

She snorts. "Tuesday. The pink hair will be enough."

After putting Rowan to bed we move to the bathroom, Renata delicately plopped on the closed toilet lid, Manic Panic jar in her lap, me cracking the window so we don't asphyxiate. "One of Bryce's many perks," Renata says with a smug grin. "He comes from a long line of Astoria realtors."

"Yeah, yeah," I mumble, as if I didn't officiate their wedding five years ago.

I will hand it to Bryce; brushing your teeth while watching lights twinkle across the East River is pretty ideal. Renata starts spraying down her hair, needing it damp for the dye, and I look out at the skyline as twilight settles in. This time of year, the waterfront is slushy, painted multicolored by pockets of pale gray ice and deep-blue water and fresh white snow. It's my favorite part of the city—like Lake Michigan around the holidays, vastly severe but moving right below the surface. Even if you didn't grow up walking around Chicago each Christmas like I did, half-frozen and all-happy, how can you not love the cold? It's so alive. Winter is always breaking apart and putting itself back together.

"Aren't you freezing?" Renata chatters. "Get my hoodie."

"I'd get bleach on it. And I'm fine."

"It's forty degrees and you're next to an open window."

"Forty is practically fifty."

"And fifty is . . ."

"Practically spring, yeah." I smile. "I like winter. The air's spicy."

We don't talk about my work or her family for the rest of her hair. Back when Renata and I used to live together, two aspiring models in a punishingly tiny Bed-Stuy studio, she'd pleaded with our original agency to let her have pink curls. But they wouldn't budge, insisting that any future commercial success would be tied

to her Ashkenazi ringlets. Same with me and my natural, stranger-stopping orange hair. Really, our first agency had been so strict and so anti-Tyra-Banks-makeover, we'd both gone wild at Sally Beauty after we'd quit working with them. The smell of developer and synthetic fragrance always takes me right back.

"Are you gonna visit Maisie while you're in town?" Renata asks.

I'm glooping pink goop onto the highlight we'd spontaneously decided she'd needed, and wipe her forehead with a latex thumb. "Not this time. She has finals next month, and she was already trying to tell me that she doesn't have to do that internship next fall. Which"—I flick a pink glob back into the plastic bowl—"is stupid."

Renata falls silent for a beat. "Why not let her skip it?"

"Skip interning for a real designer? In Paris?"

"Maybe she could find someone who wants to pay her."

"It isn't like that," I say quietly.

She rolls her lips together. "Bryce's aunt offered to list this place if we wanted to downsize. I could talk to him about if we could help—"

"No, Ren. I'm fine, I promise. Maisie just worries too much."

Always has. I have three younger sisters. There are the twins, Samantha and Bailey, from a very short-lived relationship Dad had after Mom passed. And I know I'm not their de facto mom because their actual mom split to become an army wife and I'm almost thirty—but it's hard to accept that they're both eighteen and legal adults. Samantha is the Sporty Spice of our quadrangle; her life is volleyball, her phone, and her friends, who she's either playing volleyball with or texting at any given moment. I try to tell Dad not to get too annoyed at her for it. I'd be goofing off in Calculus, too, if I was about to be a Division I athlete at freaking *Harvard*. Well, I wouldn't, but I get it.

Bailey is our painter. Beautifully tender-hearted, quietly

hilarious, she only just plucked up the courage to apply for art school this year. I think it sank in that she's a senior and the people in her Dungeons & Dragons circle-slash-fanfiction writing group are way too interesting to stick around Waterfield. Not that I'd sort of hoped she might stay in town and work at the garage with Dad, or open up a restaurant like Grandma—okay. I'd hoped. Just a little.

Finally, there's Maisie. And I don't have a favorite sister, I promise, but being able to bankroll her fashion design degree at Parsons has been a highlight of my life. Same parents aside, Maisie is me in another font: addicted to caffeine, chronically obsessed with clothes, too headstrong for her own good.

"If Maisie worries too much, then you don't worry enough," Renata says, and we're back to work talk. Fuck.

"Ah yes, a common problem. I'm too chill. People say I need to get my blood pressure up."

Then there's Renata, the sister I chose. I've chosen her ever since we met outside that shitty modeling agency, Renata chain-smoking hand-rolled cigarettes that I'd learned, months into knowing her, had been blunts. "You have a face that'll let you get away with murder," she'd said, winter-cold hands cupped around my cheeks. She was high and stoic, I was drunk and terrified; I'd just moved to New York City with a thousand dollars in cash, a backpack stuffed with Walmart's finest fashions, and my grandma's words twisting around my head: *Go be a model. Get out of Waterfield. Drive past Chicago, past New Jersey, and go live the life I know you can live.*

*Don't die in this town like I am.*

"Have you ever shoplifted?" Renata had asked me at the dive bar we went to later that night, her pupils wide and face serious.

"Um. No?"

"You could."

“Oh.”

“You want to try?”

“What?”

“Right now. Want to try stealing something?”

“No?” I’d whispered, thoroughly spooked by the calm confidence rolling off this woman I’d just met. She was a new archetype for me. *The Poised New Yorker*. “I’m not, I, I can’t do that. I can’t.”

“Really? You should test that hypothesis before you decide—with him.” She pointed at a finance bro. Black slacks, painfully crisp white shirt, pale scalp glistening between the buzzed darts of his spiky, too-short haircut. “Come on, you can see his wallet in his back pocket. Show me that you’re better than Indiana—”

“Illinois, actually—”

“That’s what I said.”

But I couldn’t do it, not right then. Even after he locked his lasers on me, the “little redhead” he “found.” He lectured me about the importance of getting a real job—like he had, at his dad’s firm, easy!—and investing in mutual funds, and then he stepped outside to make a call. “Order whatever you want on my tab,” he’d said. And after ten minutes without him showing back up, I did. A Diet Coke. Then, after thirty minutes, and the bartender asking if I knew how to get his card back to him, and Renata watching me swivel my ice cubes around and around, I got us shots and three orders of cheesy bacon fries.

That’s how it was for the longest time. Renata, me, open tabs, smiling. The bills were mostly paid, either by the opportunistic patronage of Manhattan’s richest men (who love to slip you a hundred if they think your phone’s getting turned off), modeling work (abysmal for non–nepo babies), or brand deals (I started documenting my outfits online right when fashion content shifted from blogs

to social media; lucky me). But then a friend's momager approached me—offering to pay a month of rent if I asked this ancient stockbroker out who'd been creeping on her daughter. *Help me prove to her that he's a fifty-one-year-old man who'd date any twenty-one-year-old girl. She knows I'm asking you and thinks he's going to say no.*

Just one text, with a link to my old headshots.

Secretly, I'd thought he was going to say no, too.



### Chapter 3

## SYMMETRICAL RESPONSE

Unless you're born with a silver spoon in your mouth—or you get extremely lucky in life—you really have no idea how easy rich people have it. And I'm not talking about, like, Uncle Kenny who made a hundred thousand dollars flipping the family property he inherited. I'm talking about the rich, the *real* rich.

But the easiness kills them.

You know those dog breeds that start chewing coffee table legs if they're left indoors for too long? Labradoodles, or whatever? That's the 1 percent. At any moment of the day, they're inundated with the psychological torture of being better-off than the other 99 percent of humanity, totally disconnected from how life works. They're alone. Always. They don't have roommates they begrudgingly learn to love, or cousins that text them for twenty dollars. They didn't sob at prom because someone made fun of their thrift-store dress; they had debutante balls, or secret-society meetings, or take-your-child-to-the-stock-market-floor day. Their lives are an escalator always going up, never broken down, and

only occasionally sucking their shoelaces into the claw-mouths of death.

They wish they could feel real pain. Actual suffering that bears real goals and personalities and growth. That's why they hurt the rest of us, I think. Sadism is as close as billionaires can get to humanity, physically.

I see shades of Christian Grey in Imogen Baldwin, though most of her anger is directed toward Bernard—rightfully. Loud, defiant classical music hammers down the hallway of her dance company's rehearsal wing, and I wait in a studio doorway for her to finish the song, watching her work. She's in a black leotard, dark blonde hair slicked back, white practice skirt floating around her legs as she cuts through the motions. To anyone else, she'd look like the picture of Sugar Plum Fairy grace. But I see her eyes dart to me in the full-length mirror as she practices her pas de deux, alone.

"Isn't it a little early for *The Nutcracker*?" I ask when the song's done.

"I'm looking forward to the person I'll be this December." She touches her updo with a similarly sleek smile, sounding barely out of breath. "Have you seen our performance before? Most wouldn't recognize the song."

"No."

There's always a pause the first time I don't give someone details about myself; the annual *Nutcracker* day trips with Grandma and Mom, hot chocolate, velvet dresses, a family tradition before Mom passed and we couldn't afford the tickets anymore. Nine years of fairy tale, dancing mice, animal transformations, Clara's tenacity breaking the Prince's curse. I keep it to myself.

Imogen nods, clearly understanding how this is going to work. "Thank you for meeting me here. I guess I just wanted to see . . ."

She swallows. “It’s been nice, throwing myself back into rehearsals—as nice as *Swan Lake* can be at the moment. I’ll send you tickets.”

“No need.” I follow her to a long, flat wooden bench in front of the mirrors. A little lumbar support would be nice for us mortals. “We’ll need to keep this brief. From here on out, we text.”

She nods again. “Like I mentioned before, I have connections with three job openings on the team—junior executive assistant, travel coordinator, and personal clothing manager. Stark-Benzin is choosy with new employees. My friends say they’ll review all new hires at the end of the season, in November, at which point you could exit if you’d rather not quit before then. It’s a shorter season, too. They’re redesigning multiple circuits for new safety protocols. Personally, I believe the assistant role would give you the most access, but perhaps the travel or fashion roles work better with your background.”

Okay, this ballerina is beyond Christian Grey. *American Psycho*, maybe? Either way, I’m slightly impressed. She’s done a lot of the leg work I usually do. Which begs the question . . . “Do your friends know you’re Trojan Horsing them?”

“I haven’t mentioned it,” she sniffs.

Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve rubbed elbows with a client’s inner circle. Sometimes friends or family catch on that my meet-cutes are a little too coincidental, or that it’s strange that a twenty-nine-year-old New Yorker is suddenly interested in their seventy-year-old uncle who lives on the West Coast, golfs to unwind, and waxes poetic about Reaganomics when he’s drunk. Usually, though, people don’t want to notice—because people love a love story. Especially when it’s a little unrealistic, kind of unlikely. That’s the magic. Random meetings. Fate at a coffee shop. Rich man, normal-ish girl. People ignore the hints that I’m faking it, the telltale clues that, hm, maybe

she's not here for the right reasons, since I'm selling an illusion people want to believe. *True love conquers all! Compromise is possible! Love at first sight is real and your boss-father-friend-whatever is proof! Also, see, he can't be that bad if someone loves him, which she does!*

Like lemmings over a cliff.

Imogen goes to change into recovery footwear, giving me space to click through the three job descriptions. It's a tough choice. The junior executive assistant role would let me stick my grubby little fingers into quite a few email inboxes, but it reports to an executive, and that seems a smidge too dangerous. Per Stark-Benzin's website, travel coordinator would guarantee that I'd be on the road with the team. And it'd be the easiest, probably. A headache, but mostly plane ticket bookings and melatonin gummies. I could literally only-one-bedroom Bernard and me. Right at the start, when he'd need to be chivalrous and bashful.

On the other hand, personal clothing manager would be . . . clothes.

A scratchy feeling creeps up my throat as I read the description: *Founded by the Stark brothers outside Berlin in 1992, Stark-Benzin has become synonymous with modern motorsports and technical distinction. Our personal clothing manager joins the premiere Formula 1 racing team as a stylist to our drivers, to make visible our world-renowned aesthetic.* The position is a one-season contract outright, starting in March with the Australian Grand Prix and ending in November at São Paulo—*though the ideal candidate would understand they may work out of our offices in Surrey (England) and New York City.* So, I'd need to sweet-talk the team into letting me travel. But they have to be desperate for candidates this close to the starting date, right? Plus, flirting over fashion choices, telling Bernard how good he looks in those tacky F1 team T-shirts, working in how I used to

be a model and now I'm an influencer and, oh, can he please save me with his money?

And—man.

Clothes.

Being a stylist would mean I was working *in* fashion. *With* clothes, not just wearing them. I thought I'd shelved my dream of becoming a designer, but apparently, if my sweaty palms are a sign, there's a tiny piece of my inner child lodged somewhere, holding out hope. I let her be the one to talk when Imogen returns. That little girl who screamed when she got her first sewing machine and turned socks into Barbie clothes deserves this moment.

"I'll do the personal clothing manager position. I'll be good at that. And the timeline's good." I wave a super casual hand. "It's almost March. Bet they rush the background check."

Despite her wet hair and puffy orthopedic shoes, Imogen looks like an angel as she considers my answer. Beautiful, with underlying terror. "Okay, that works for me." She takes a swig from her pale-pink water bottle, nudging at the medical tape around one ankle with her other foot. "I'll let Mei know. She'll be your manager."

"And she'll believe that her star athlete's jilted ex-fiancée just so happens to know the perfect hire, in the nick of time?"

Imogen flinches. "They—yes. He left *me*."

"And the team would know you're pissed about it." I watch her fingers tremble as she caps her water bottle. "I'm sorry. I know it's uncomfortable to talk about. But we have to get the story straight."

She glances at the mirror when she replies. "They always liked me. They won't expect it. I . . . I can say we met at fashion week a few years back, and that you mentioned wanting to become a stylist. That you have connections in the industry as an influencer."

"That's good." I smile, and she looks relieved. Not a sadist, just

a woman. “And how many people from the team were at your wedding?”

She pauses. “A few. But I believe I created enough of a spectacle to distract from you.”

I weigh that response. I know Bernard didn’t see me. When he discovered Imogen’s bathroom hiding place, he had the wherewithal to wait until she was ready to meet him in the hallway outside. Plus, I sidestepped a majority of the photographers and have been using one of my burner accounts to monitor Winston’s post-breakup social media as he embarks on his #SoloTraveling sugar scrub vacay. The only other person I’d really talked to that night had been Faust, the driver, and that base is covered, too. He’s on another team this season. It’s close, but not that risky.

Because it’s only a risk if I left an impression on him, which . . . yeah, no. I didn’t. *You’re just not memorable, kid*, was how my modeling manager had put it. *You might’ve been a pretty fish in a small pond back home, but you’re in the big leagues now. I thought we’d have luck in the commercial space, do the whole redhead-next-door thing, but . . . you just don’t have it. Sorry.*

“There’s always a potential for crossover,” I say, though. “Someone’s sister could be working on the team now and remembers when I dumped her brother. Things like that. But it’s never happened.”

“Really?” Imogen tilts her head. “But you’re pretty.”

I smile, a little amused. It’s a compliment to her—*pretty enough to make a mark*. Luckily, it isn’t true. “Thank you, but it’s okay. People don’t remember me.”

“I would.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. I really don’t have time to fight her on this. “Where did we meet?”

“In . . . the bathroom?”