

Second Chance

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The air-conditioning had just stopped working in the offices of *Chic* magazine on a blisteringly hot June day in New York. It was their second brownout of the day, and Fiona Monaghan looked as if she were ready to kill someone as she strode into her office after being trapped in the elevator for twenty minutes. The same thing had happened to her the day before. Just getting out of the cab on the way back from lunch at the Four Seasons made her feel as though the air had been sucked out of her lungs. She was leaving for Paris in two weeks – if she lived that long. Days like this were enough to make anyone hate New York, but in spite of the heat and the aggravation, Fiona loved everything about living there. The people, the atmosphere, the restaurants, the theater, the avalanche of culture and excitement everywhere – even the brownstone on East Seventy-fourth Street that she had nearly bankrupted herself to buy ten years ago. She had spent every penny she had on remodeling it. It was

stylish and exquisite, a symbol of everything she was and had become.

At forty-two, she had spent a lifetime becoming Fiona Monaghan, a woman men admired and women envied, and came to love when they knew her well and she was their friend. If pressed, she could be a fearsome opponent. But even those who disliked her had to admit they respected her. She was a woman of power, passion, and integrity, and she would fight to the death for a cause she believed in, or a person she had promised to support. She never broke a promise, and when she gave her word, you knew you could count on her. She looked like Katharine Hepburn with a little dash of Rita Hayworth, she was tall and lean with bright red hair and big green eyes that flashed with either delight or rage. Those who met Fiona Monaghan never forgot her, and in her fiefdom she was all knowing, all seeing, all powerful, and all caring. She loved her job above all else, and had fought hard to get it. She had never married, never wanted to, and although she loved children, she never wanted any of her own. She had enough on her plate as it was. She had been the editor-in-chief of *Chic* magazine for six years, and as such she was an icon in the fashion world.

She had a full personal life as well. She had had an affair with a married man, and a relationship with a man she had lived with for eight years. Before that, she had dated randomly, usually artists or writers, but she had been alone now for

a year and a half. The married lover was a British architect who commuted between London, Hong Kong, and New York. And the man she had lived with was a conductor, and had left her to marry and have children, and was living in Chicago now, which Fiona considered a fate worse than death. Fiona thought New York was the hub of the civilized world. She would have lived in London or Paris, but nowhere else. She and the conductor had remained good friends. He had come before the architect, whom she had left when the affair got too complicated and he threatened to leave his wife for her. She didn't want to marry him, or anyone. She hadn't wanted to marry the conductor either, although he had asked her repeatedly. Marriage always seemed too high-risk to her, she would have preferred to do a high-wire act in the circus than risk marriage, and she warned men of that. Marriage was never an option for her.

Her own childhood had been hard enough to convince her that she didn't want to risk that kind of pain for anyone. Her father had abandoned her mother when her mother was twenty-five and she was three. Her mother had attempted two more marriages to men Fiona hated, both were drunks, as her father had been. She never saw her father again after he left, nor his family, and knew only that he had died when she was fourteen. And her mother had died when she was in college. Fiona had no siblings, no known relatives. She was alone in the world by the time she was twenty,

graduated from Wellesley, and made it on her own after that. She crawled her way up the ladder in minor fashion magazines and landed at *Chic* by the time she was twenty-nine. Seven years later, she became editor-in-chief, and the rest was history. Fiona was a legend by the time she was thirty-five, and the most powerful female magazine editor in the country at forty.

Fiona had nearly infallible judgment, an un-failing sense for fashion and what would work, and a head for business that everyone she worked with admired. And more than that, she had courage. She wasn't afraid to take risks, except in her love life. In that arena she took none at all, and had no need to. She wasn't afraid to be alone, and in the past year and a half she had come to prefer it. She was never really alone anyway, she was constantly surrounded by photographers, assistants, designers, models, artists, and a flock of hangers-on. She had a full calendar and an active social life and a host of interesting friends. She always said that it wouldn't bother her if she never lived with anyone again. She didn't have room in her closets anyway, and had no desire to make room for anyone. She had enough responsibilities at the magazine, without wanting to be responsible to or for a man as well. Fiona Monaghan had a breathtakingly full life, and she loved all of it. She had a high tolerance for, and a slight addiction to, confusion, excitement, and chaos.

She was wearing a long narrow black silk skirt that fell in tiny pleats from her waist, as she walked off the elevator she'd been trapped in for twenty minutes, on her way back from lunch. She wore a white peasant blouse with it, off her shoulders, with her long red hair swept up in a loose knot. Her only piece of jewelry was a huge turquoise bracelet that nearly devoured her wrist and was the envy of all who saw it. It had been made for her by David Webb. She was wearing high-heeled black Manolo Blahnik sandals, an oversize red alligator Fendi bag, and the entire combination of accessories and long, clean lines gave an impression of inimitable elegance and style. Fiona was as dazzling as any of the models they photographed, she was older but just as beautiful, although her looks meant nothing to her. She never traded on sex appeal or artifice, she was far more interested in the soul and the mind, both of which shone through her deep green eyes. She was thinking about the cover for the September issue, as she sat down at her desk, kicked off her sandals, and picked up the phone. There was a new young designer in Paris she wanted one of her young assistant editors to research and pursue. Fiona was always on a mission of some kind, it took a flock of underlings and minions to keep up with her, and she was feared as much as she was admired. You had to move fast to match her pace, and she had no patience for slackers, shirkers, or fools. Everyone

at *Chic* knew that when Fiona shined the spotlight on you, you'd better be able to come up with the goods, or else.

Her secretary buzzed her ten minutes later to remind her that John Anderson was coming in to see her in half an hour, and she groaned. She had forgotten the appointment, and between the heat, the lack of air-conditioning, and the interlude in the elevator, she wasn't in the mood. He was the head of the new ad agency they'd hired, it was a solid old firm that, thanks to him, had come up with some exciting new ideas. It had been her decision to make the switch, and she had met nearly everyone in the agency but him. Their work and their track record spoke for itself. The meeting was merely a matter of form to meet each other. He had been reorganizing the London office when she decided to hire the firm, and now that he was back in town, they had agreed to meet. He had suggested lunch, but she didn't have time, so she'd suggested he come to her office, intending to keep it brief.

She returned half a dozen calls before the meeting, and Adrian Wicks, her most important editor, dropped in for five minutes to discuss the couture shows in Paris with her. Adrian was a tall, thin, stylish, somewhat effeminate black man who had been a designer himself for a few years before he came to *Chic*. He was as smart as she was, which she loved. Adrian was a graduate of Yale, had a master's in journalism from Columbia, worked as

a designer, and had finally landed at *Chic*, and together they were an impressive team. He was her right arm for the last five years. He was as dark as she was pale, as addicted to fashion as she, and as passionate about his ideas and the magazine as Fiona. In addition, he was her best friend. She invited him to join the meeting with John Anderson, but he was meeting with a designer at three, and just as Adrian left her office, her secretary told her that Mr. Anderson had arrived, and Fiona asked her to show him in.

As Fiona looked across her desk to the doorway, she watched John Anderson walk in, and came around her desk to greet him. She smiled as their eyes met, and each took the other's measure. He was a tall, powerfully built man with impeccably groomed white hair, bright blue eyes, and a youthful face and demeanor. He was as conservative as she was flamboyant. She knew from his biographical material, and mutual friends, that he was a widower, he had just turned fifty, and he had an M.B.A. from Harvard. She also knew he had two daughters in college, one at Brown and the other at Princeton. Fiona always remembered personal details, she found them interesting, and sometimes useful to help her know who she was dealing with.

'Thank you for coming over,' she said pleasantly as they stood eyeing each other. She was nearly as tall as he was in the towering Blahnik heels she had slipped back on before she came to greet him.

The rest of the time, she loved walking around her office barefoot. She said it helped her think. 'I'm sorry about the air-conditioning. We've had brownouts all week.' She smiled agreeably.

'So have we. At least you can open your windows. My office has been like an oven. It's a good thing we decided to meet here,' he said with a smile, glancing around her office, which was an eclectic hodgepodge of paintings by up-and-coming young artists, two important photographs by Avedon that had been a gift to her from the magazine, and layouts from future issues leaning against the walls. There was a mountain of jewelry, accessories, clothes, and fabric samples almost entirely covering the couch, which she unceremoniously dumped on the floor, as her assistant brought in a tray with a pitcher of lemonade and a plate of cookies. Fiona waved John Anderson toward the couch, and handed him a glass of the ice-cold lemonade a moment later, and sat down across from him. 'Thank you. It's nice to finally meet you,' he said politely. She nodded, and looked serious for a moment as she watched him. She hadn't expected him to look quite that uptight, or be that good-looking. He seemed calm and conservative, but at the same time there was something undeniably electric about him, as though there were an invisible current that moved through him. It was so tangible she could feel it. Despite his serious looks, there was something very exciting about him.

She didn't look as he had expected her to either. She was sexier, younger, more striking, and more informal. He had expected her to be older and more of a dragon. She had a fearsome reputation, not for being disagreeable but for being tough, though fair, in her dealings, a force to be reckoned with. And much to his surprise, as she smiled at him over the lemonade, she seemed almost girlish. But despite her seemingly friendly air, within minutes she got to the point of their meeting, and was clear and concise in outlining *Chic's* expectations. They wanted good solid advertising campaigns, nothing too trendy or exotic. The magazine was the most established in the business, and she expected their advertising to reflect that. She didn't want anything wild or crazy. John was relieved to hear it. *Chic* was a great account for them, and he was beginning to look forward to his dealings with her. More so than before the meeting. In fact, as he drank a second glass of lemonade, and the air-conditioning finally came back on, he had actually decided that he liked her. He liked her style, and the straightforward way she outlined their needs and issues. She had clear, sound ideas about advertising, just as she did about her own business. By the time he stood up to leave, he was almost sorry the meeting was over. He liked talking to her. She was tough and fair. She was totally feminine, and strong at the same time. She was a woman to be feared and admired.

Fiona walked him to the elevator, something she did rarely. She was usually in a hurry to get back to work, but she lingered for a few minutes, talking to him, and she was pleased when she went back to her office. He was a good man, smart, quick, funny, and not as stuffy as he looked in his gray suit, white shirt, and sober navy tie. He looked more like a banker than the head of an ad agency, but she liked the fact that he wore elegant expensive shoes that she correctly suspected he'd bought in London, and his suit was impeccably tailored. He had a definite look about him, in sharp contrast to her own style. In all things, and certainly her taste and style, Fiona was far more daring. She could wear almost anything, and make it look terrific.

She left the office late that afternoon and as always was in a hurry. She hailed a cab outside their offices on Park Avenue, and sped uptown to her brownstone. It was after six when she got home, already wilted from the heat in the cab. And the moment she walked in she could hear chaos in her kitchen. She was expecting guests at seven-thirty. She kept her house ice-cold, as much for her own comfort as for that of her ancient English bulldog. He was fourteen years old, a miraculous age for the breed, and beloved by all who knew him. His name was Sir Winston, after Churchill. He greeted her enthusiastically when she got home, as she hurried into the kitchen to check on progress there, and was pleased to find

her caterers working at a frenzied pace, preparing the Indian dinner she had ordered.

Her part-time house man was wearing a loose yellow silk shirt, and red silk harem pants made of sari fabric. He loved exotic clothes, and whenever possible, she brought him wonderful fabrics from her travels. She was always amused by what he turned them into. His name was Jamal, he was Pakistani, and although he was a little fey at times, most of the time he was efficient. What he lacked in expertise in the domestic arts, he made up for in creativity and flexibility, which suited her to perfection. She could spring a dozen people or more on him for dinner at the drop of a hat, he would manage to do fabulous flower arrangements and come up with something for the guests to eat, although tonight the caterers were performing that task for him. There were half a dozen of them in Fiona's kitchen, and Jamal had covered the center of the dining table with moss, delicate flowers, and candles. The whole room had been transformed into an Indian garden, and he had used fuchsia silk place mats and turquoise napkins. The table looked sumptuous. It was just the right look for one of Fiona's parties, which were legendary.

'Perfect!' she approved with a broad smile, and then dashed upstairs to shower and change, with Sir Winston lumbering slowly behind her. By the time the dog got upstairs, Fiona had peeled off her clothes and was in the shower.