

She Bought a Hat Like Princess Marina

I shuffled along the ledge, barely wide enough for the width of my shoe, the rubber sole scraping the concrete, the black leather uppers with their dull shine, contrasted against the white paint of the building which reflected the brilliance of the moon on this clear night. A mistake on my part, I was expecting the night to be dark enough that the black shoes, black trousers, black V-neck sweater, and black balaclava, would vanish against the building, hiding me from the security guards below. I even had luminous thread sown into the sweater cuffs and trousers hem to help me see my extremities in the pitch blackness. Instead, I was as conspicuous as a straight-man at Neiman Marcus. My black gloved palms were pressed against the wall supporting my body as I slowly edged my way to the open window on the third storey of the palace. I froze in place as the powerful beam of the patrolling guard's torch swept below me. I could hear the steady panting of the guard's scary-looking canine companion. I really should have done my homework on this job. A severe dereliction of duty on my part, I'm afraid. The guard moved on following the outline of the building. I waited until he turned the corner. I knew that I had six minutes until his twin, making the journey parallel to him, would appear from the other direction. I knew because I had timed it after being surprised the first time.

The muscles in my leg were aching and my knee was stiffening up as the lactic acidosis level in my bloodstream were elevated from the exertion the controlled ascent up the property caused took. I really wasn't in the right shape for this mission; my preparations were rushed due to the accelerated deadline imposed on me. I started moving again, faster than before, I didn't think my muscles could take another period of stillness. In my haste, my foot slipped off the edge and the following leg swung into space. I overbalanced and dropped to

my knee, the impact sent a jolt through my leg to my spine, my hands groped the wall for purchase. I managed to stop the momentum of the fall and recover my balance. I drew my leg back to the ledge and slowly raised myself off my supporting knee. Slower this time I continued my quest. I reached the window. It was a sash window, a foot higher than the ledge and almost six foot in height. The bottom sash window was raised to left air into the room beyond. I gripped the bottom sash and carefully lifted it up higher, in order to gain entry, it made a few squeaks as it moved up in its frame, but nothing to be concerned about. When it had reached the correct height I ensured it was secure in place and wouldn't come down on me as I entered. I crossed the threshold backwards, legs first, slowly and carefully, trying to feel out obstacles with my feet as I backed into the room. Now the mission really starts. I thought.

‘So do you think you can do it, Nicholas?’ asked Francesca Allerton.

‘Have I ever let you down before?’ I replied.

‘Well... there was that Chanel scarf,’ She laughed, ‘I’m just teasing, of course, you haven’t. You’re the best, a genius.’

‘Ha... ha...,’ I said, ‘watch out or I may take Dior’s Summer Collection to another company.’ I was only half-kidding; I was in demand throughout the whole industry. My designs were so successful that over the years my fee structure had changed from a modest fixed payment to a generous percentage of sales. Francesca left and I mulled over the problem I’d been given.

I suppose I should introduce myself, my name is Nicholas Charmant, I am the most famous fashion designer you have never heard of. World-renowned, my clothes are worn and loved by millions of women across the globe. I do not have a fashion house such as Gucci, Prada and Givenchy; my name is hidden behind the high-street fashion houses of Forever 21, Zara, Superdry, H&M, Miss Selfridges, et al. My clothes are the ones that sell by the hundreds of thousands to ordinary women. I re-design designer wear for a more affordable market. I take the \$400 Jimmy Choo high heel and turn it into a \$40 heel for Macys; the £250 Armani blouse into a £25 blouse for Next. The skill is in recreating the look, the feel and colour of the original using much cheaper materials while changing enough of the item to avoid being sued for copyright infringement. Anyone can copy something; it takes a real designer to do what I do. People disparage my work, calling them knock-offs or what I do theft, they do not understand the love I put into my creations, the passion I have for my art. It helps that the copyright laws for fashion are for more lenient than they are for other forms of art – music, paintings, publishing and film. In fashion, the items' overall design is not subject to copyright, just individual parts of an item – the textile print, the clasp on a handbag, and the most important part the logo or name. I can take a Guess jean and as long as I change the small embellishments, such as the back pocket design or the rivet pattern and do not call my version a Guess jean, then I'm mustard. The skill is in knowing exactly how close I can go before a company or designer can sue. I've been doing this for thirty-four years now and have never been sued, that is an enviable record in this business, and why I can charge so much for my services.

The item Francesca bought my skills to recreate, was the most talked about fashion item since the Calvin Klein slip dress in the 90s. It was an item that as far as anyone could tell wasn't available to buy anywhere. No one knew the designer, but everyone knew the piece. Two months ago a paparazzi photographer took a billion dollar photo, its subject: the reclusive Princess Marina. It was the first photograph of her for five years.

She had been the most recognisable women on the planet; beautiful didn't cut it as a description. She was the goddess Aphrodite, pale skinned, with a voluptuous figure. Long caramel brown coloured hair, flawless skin, which was always worn natural without makeup, she always looked elegant and regal, she didn't just wear clothes, they wore her. She made even the simplest clothing look like it cost a fortune. However, it wasn't just her physical appearance that enthralled the world; she was also an angel to the poor, the sick and the mistreated. She campaigned for Amnesty International and the United Nations. She visited war zones, famine struck countries, AIDS hospitals, disaster zones. Not just for photo-opportunities and publicity, but to actually make a difference to people's lives, some would call her the true People's Princess. All this changed five and a half years ago when she was kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Her plight was watched around the world as nightly footage of her treatment at the hands of the terrorists was uploaded to YouTube and re-broadcast around the world. The beatings and abuse she received was sickening. She was eventually freed by US Special Forces after a mistake by the kidnappers revealed their location. She was never seen again, she retreated to her palace in Luxembourg, hiding from the world. At least until that photo was taken.

In the photo, she was sitting on a balcony at a simple, white wrought-iron table, with a book and a cup of tea. Although the quality of the photo was fuzzy and unclear, due to the distance it had been taken from, you could see she was wearing a white blouse, and a dark brown split leg skirt. On top of her head was the most beautiful hat anyone had seen. It was a

small, brimless hat with a trim. It was like a cross between a miniature pillbox hat and a Russian Ushanka. In the photo, it looked like it was the colour of a milky coffee. It had no name; no one had ever seen one before. The internet went crazy. That little hat broke the internet far more than that photo-shopped Kardashian arse ever had. Facebook and Twitter ground to a halt as women everywhere wanted to know about the hat, who designed it, where could they get it from, rumours and hearsay spread across Mumsnet, but no one could find any solid information. The female world was waiting with anxious breath for news about this hat. Of course, Francesca had come to me, poor quality and even poorer designed imitations from Etsy were selling out within minutes. The market was ripe for a Charmant design. The problem was I couldn't make a version that was any better than the Etsy homemade efforts. I couldn't get the right material that gave the hat the shine it had in the photo, the trim didn't look good anyway I tried it. This stupid small hat was the hardest thing I had ever worked on. I obsessed about it for three weeks, catching an hours sleep here and there; meals with even less frequency. The deadline given to me by Francesca was due by the end of this week and I was no closer than I was at the start. I had never missed a deadline and never was beaten by a task. It had turned into a matter of pride for me and led me to do something reckless, very reckless indeed.

I turned around and switched on my small penlight torch, a thin weak beam emanated from it, enough for me to see the room. The room was large, dominated by a queen size, four poster bed with white voile curtains draping down, obscuring the bed's occupant. I carefully nudged one curtain to the side and in the dim light could see Princess Marina, sound asleep,

her breathing deep and rhythmic. She was partly covered by blankets and sheets; however, I could clearly see her face, especially as I leant closer to look. She looked as perfect as she did the day her life changed. A few slight wrinkles around her eyes the only concession to time. I must admit I wasn't prepared to see her and although I work in fashion I am heterosexual, which has been a boon throughout my career. The sight of her brought forth flashes of romantic lust, and wild proclamations of love, which I struggled to contain. I reluctantly retreated, letting the voile curtain fall back in place and stepped away from the bed, my pulse racing, surprising me greatly. It has been a long time since a woman has affected me this way, if ever at all.

I took a moment to settle myself down and got back to what I was there for. I looked for any obvious places the hat might be: any hat stands, hat boxes, shelves. Nothing. There were three doors leading off from the room I opened the first one, the nearest to me and saw it lead to a hallway, dimmed LED spotlights at regular intervals lighting the way. I closed the door, careful not to make a noise and moved onto the next. This door was across the room from the window. I opened the door and saw this was the en-suite bathroom. The hat could be in there I thought. The bathroom was larger than my bedroom, twin basins, a whirlpool bath, separate walk-in shower, and a toilet. Under the basins were a set of six cupboards, I searched them in turn. I only found spare towels, washcloths, and toiletries. Where the hell is it? I asked myself. I left the bathroom and went to the final door. Is this the dressing room and closet? I opened the door and stepped in, immediately the room was bathed in light. The room was a twin of the main bedroom in size, with blazing spotlights in the ceiling, reflected off dozens of mirrored surfaces, there were open-faced cabinets which were all backlit to display their wares, rows and rows of shoes, handbags, lights replicating on the shiny patent leather. No goddamn hatboxes or hat stands. Where can it be? Amongst the racks of clothes hung by silver hangers on their rails?

I hear a noise from the bedroom, then a voice, 'Who are you? Why are you here? Get your hands up!' The voice sounded heavenly, perfect tones, not too light and airy, a slight husk to it. I could have listened to her speak all night. I raised my hands above my head in surrender.

'I... I mean you no harm,' my voice, in comparison, wavered, like I was going through puberty again.

'Turn around and drop to your knees.'

I slowly turned around, fully aware of how I looked in my balaclava and assassin black clothes. I knelt down, my knees creaking, my heart shaking. In front of me, eyes blazing, holding a very large gun pointed at my head was the Princess. God, she looked incredible.

'I ha... haven't come to hurt you.' I said.

'Remove your mask. I want to see you.'

Carefully I took off the balaclava; a strand of my long grey hair fell in front of my face tickling my nose. I fought the urge to scratch it.

'My name is Nicholas Charmant, I'm not a kidnapper or assassin.'

She paused for a moment taking in what I said and my unorthodox appearance.

'The fashion knock-off guy?' She asked a touch of incredulity in her voice.

'Well, more of a re-designer,' I reply defensively.

The gun lowered, no longer pointing at my head. I liked it even less where it was *now* pointing.

‘What the hell are you doing in my closet?’

‘This is going to sound crazy, may I reach into my back pocket, just to get a photo, that’s all?’

She nodded her assent.

I slowly reached into my pocket and pulled out a folded copy of the famous photograph. I unfolded it and held it out for her. She took it off me and looked at it.

‘That’s me. Why have you got a photo of me?’ She raised the gun again, letting the photo fall to the floor.

‘The hat!’ I call out, panicked, the gun barrel looking large and vicious, the closet lights giving it another-world appearance, ‘I’m looking for the hat!’

‘What hat?’

‘The one in the picture... I need the hat to copy it; thousands of women want that hat.’

She stood there, a quizzical look upon her face, dropped the gun to her side and laughed at me. ‘You come all this way, crept into my room, come within a second of being shot for a hat? A hat? I hate to break it to you, Nicholas, there is no hat.’

‘Wh... what? What do you mean? You’re wearing a hat in that picture.’

‘You see how poor quality this photo is, and how far away it was taken from? The *hat* is my hair. I sometimes wear it that way, if I can’t be bothered styling it.’

I feel dizzy and reach out a hand to support myself, ‘Your hair?’ I look at her, at her beautiful brown hair, latte coloured, done up in a donut bun.

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