

Pretty Follies

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***The problem for us is not: are our desires satisfied or not?
The problem is: how do we know what we desire?***

~ Slavoj Žižek

Chapter 1 - Rise Before

A hundred million dollars raised.

A billion-dollar valuation.

The kind of milestone founders sell their souls for.

And yet, Chase Parker felt the weight, not the win.

The team was celebrating. They'd earned it, every damn one of them. Poured themselves into QuantCloud like ether into fire. Chase smiled, bought the first round, let the rooftop noise rise around him, then slipped away before the second toast.

He told himself his absence wouldn't matter, and if it did, they'd understand. But the truth was simpler. Accomplishments no longer moved the needle. Success was supposed to silence the noise. Tonight, it made it louder.

He'd cashed out enough to sleep well for life, but at the cost of the one thing he never meant to trade, control. Control of QuantCloud. Still CEO, but no longer in command. He'd gone from the final word to a single-digit blip on the cap table. Now, he answered to them. A board full of polished knives and smiling doubts. People who didn't see the future the way he could.

Outside, Fort Lauderdale pulsed. Neon bled into asphalt. Rooftop parties spilled champagne. Deals moved like currency, traded in whispers, sealed with handshakes slick with sweat.

A few blocks away, Chase chose a different kind of altitude. High above it all, tucked into a quiet corner of The Aviary, he watched ambition churn below. A current of hustle and hunger. Men like him, always chasing more. Never alone. Never truly with anyone.

The Aviary suited him. A world apart, order above chaos. Measured luxury. Low voices threading the air, bound by an unspoken pact to maintain tranquility. The ocean mirrored the

skyline's golden glow, a restless tide chasing something it could never catch. From the top floor, the city looked small. Manageable. From this vantage point, it was easy to believe he'd never fall.

He slid the empty IPA glass to the table's edge, the last trace of bitterness still clinging to his tongue. Here he was, slightly buzzed, a billion-dollar empire on his shoulders, and a future he couldn't outrun.

Before he could flag the bartender, sparkling water appeared. The bubbles caught the warm glow of the pendant lights overhead—a welcome reset after three strong beers.

“On the house.”

Her voice was smooth. Confident. Effortless in its command, like it expected to be listened to.

Caught off guard, Chase looked up.

Nina.

Her name glinted off the silver nameplate, but she didn't need it. Nina carried a presence that made introductions feel optional. Dark hair twisted into a lazy knot, rebellious strands slipping free as if she hadn't meant to be noticed and the room refused to cooperate.

But it was her eyes that held him. Amber—molten, alive, like sunlight caught in honey. Eyes that didn't just look at you, but through you, like she was flipping through chapters, still deciding if he was worth the next page.

The ghost of a smile tugged at his mouth. “You didn't have to.” He brushed condensation from the glass. “But thanks.”

Nina didn't look away. “You're not here to drink.”

Then, “You're here to hide.”

He exhaled, almost a laugh. “Is it that obvious?”

“Only if you’re paying attention.”

Chase nudged the glass, watching the bubbles climb. “So this is less on the house and more an interrogation.”

She smiled anyway and slid the glass closer.

He took a sip. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch.” She leaned on the bar, studying him. “Just looking out for Fort Lauderdale’s rising tech star.”

Tech star. A price tag in two words. He kept his face neutral anyway. “You know who I am?”

“Everyone’s talking about QuantCloud. Quantum computing for AI? Sounds like science fiction.” She tilted her head. “And here you are, drinking beer like a regular guy. Not exactly what I pictured.”

Chase eased in, intrigued. “Okay, I’ll bite. What did you picture?”

Nina mirrored his movement, closing the space just enough. “Someone older, maybe in a lab coat. Not a handsome guy in a wrinkled suit with,” she paused, “awkward charm.”

Heat crept up his neck. He resisted the urge to adjust his collar. Compliments, especially personal ones, always caught him off guard. And she’d nailed it with awkward.

“No lab coats,” Chase said with a self-conscious chuckle. “Just long hours and a lot of trial and error.”

“You must love it,” Nina said. “Building something from scratch.”

“I’m obsessed with the vision.” His voice went low. Half armor, half habit. “Figuring out how to make a machine answer questions most people haven’t even thought to ask.”

“That has to feel good,” she said, like it was obvious.

Chase hesitated. “It should.” Then, because honesty was simpler than the act: “The work makes sense. People are harder.”

Nina didn’t rush to fill the space. Her eyes stayed on him. No judgment. No impatience. Just steady.

“With machines, you do X and you get Y,” he said, almost apologetic. “With people, you do X and somehow they hear Z.” A small, self-aware shrug. “I’m good with patterns. I need subtitles for what people don’t say.”

A trace of recognition crossed Nina’s face, like she knew what it meant to be out of step with the world. “And now you’re running a company that might change the future.” A wry smile tugged at her lips. “Not bad for the kid who had trouble fitting in.”

Nina’s voice cut through the ambient hum, clear, unforced, and Chase noticed something. Not just the cadence—the way it settled him. He held eye contact longer than he usually could. No effort. No static. Just stillness.

The moment balanced on a pin. Then it broke. Nina’s attention turned away, pulled by an obnoxious voice at her shoulder.

“Hey, deep end—mind if I drown for a bit?” Bold. Theatrical. A line that stuck—not because it was clever, but because it knew it didn’t have to be.

Slicked-back red hair. Tailored blazer. Too much cologne. Chase had seen Preston around—tossing hundred-dollar tips like confetti, flashing his Patek Philippe like it was a passport to belonging. The confidence of a kid who’d never been hit back.

“Another Old Fashioned.” Preston owned the air. “Put it on my tab.”

Nina barely glanced his way. “Sure thing, Preston.” Polite. Detached. Practiced indifference, learned from years of deflecting uninvited attention.

“Can I ask you something?”

Chase looked up, unsure.

“I’ve seen powerful people come through here with their success stories,” Nina said. “And they never look happy. Like they got everything they ever asked Santa for and somehow, it still wasn’t what they really wanted.”

“You’re observant,” he said. “But I didn’t hear a question.”

It took her a second, then Nina smiled. “Okay, here’s a question.” She didn’t look away. “Why do the people who seem to have it all end up at my bar looking like they’re missing something?”

The silence held. His throat tightened—like she’d heard what he didn’t say. Success was the part he’d mastered. But self-worth? Fulfillment? Happiness? That was a code he couldn’t crack.

Chase looked down and traced the condensation around the glass again, finishing what he’d started, one smooth orbit until the streak connected and sealed into a ring. Nina had knocked him off-balance without even trying. He could have deflected. Should have.

Preston thumped the counter, raising his glass like a ringmaster calling for applause. “Cheers to big moves, big money, and a summer we won’t forget!” His grin spread wide, a performance for an audience that hadn’t asked for a show.

Nina rolled her eyes, tapping a fingernail against the counter—crisp, deliberate, a clean punctuation mark. “Duty calls.” She started to turn, then glanced back. “Don’t leave without saying goodbye.”

Chapter 2 - The Fall

The fall didn't start with the crash. It started with the silence right before it—the kind that prickles the back of your neck, whispering turn around, but never loud enough to stop you.

Chase stepped into the thick Florida night, humidity clinging to his skin like consequence. His mind lingered on Nina's smile, the pull of her voice. Too easy.

The valet handed him his key card. Polished. Professional. Oblivious.

At the driver's door, Chase paused—one hand on the handle, the other holding a sliver of guilt he couldn't shake. His mind was always two steps ahead, even when the ledge was only one step away. Too much riding on tomorrow. Too many people counting on him.

He told himself he didn't do instinct. Never had. Chase ran on logic. But tonight something short-circuited, a glitch he should've honored.

He exhaled once, quick and dismissive, and slid into the seat.

The city blurred past in streaks of neon and taillights, every light timed for a rush-hour that wasn't there. The Tesla whispered beneath him—smooth, surgical, precise. Full Self-Drive engaged. The weight of his hands on the wheel.

Since QuantCloud cracked the manufacturing problem—quantum chips on standard silicon—the company stopped being a curiosity and became an inevitability. They weren't shipping hardware. They were selling access: quantum compute through the cloud, brutal physics hidden behind a clean interface. Climate simulations. Drug discovery. Materials no one could fabricate by hand. Problems that used to take years collapsed into hours. Models ran in the dark while the world watched the outputs and called it progress.

Their Series C didn't just close. It detonated. A hundred million from legacy banks, government-adjacent money, and private equity with a bottomless appetite. Everyone wanted in. Another win. And yet Chase's thoughts kept slipping. There was no blueprint for what they were building. QuantCloud burned seven figures a week. Product-market fit still wobbled. The ideal customer changed weekly. Purpose fought profitability like weather fronts colliding.

And he was at the helm.

A red light flared ahead. The city's glow warped in the windshield.

Nina's face resurfaced, easy confidence, wit. A moment of lightness.

The light turned green. *Almost home*, he thought.

The Tesla glided forward—silent, smooth—an unwavering machine. Unlike him. He'd spent years climbing, higher, higher, higher. The view was intoxicating. But you never realize you've gone too far until the ground isn't there.

Headlights. Right side. Too fast. Too close.

A fraction of a second—just enough to know what was coming. But not enough to stop it.

The sound of his breath. A half-second of brutal clarity. Impact. The wheel tore from his hands. His body slammed forward. The world spun, Las Olas a kaleidoscope of marquee-lit streaks and wreckage.

Glass shattered, shards ripping through the cabin. The restraint crushed his chest, jerking his collar hard enough to tear. Bones screaming. His pulse thundered in his skull. A ragged breath.

Airbags detonated with a muffled whoomph. Chemicals stung his nostrils. A hollow silence. Then—pain. Not sudden, but deep and spreading—like a system scanning for damage.

Fuck. Breathe. What just happened?

Then, the sounds. Too many. Too fast. A horn, shrill, unbroken. Shouting. Sirens tearing through the thick, humid air. Chase gasped, hands fumbling with the seatbelt. The strap refused to let go.

Move.

He shoved the door open. It groaned—metal splintered, barely holding shape. The car was wrecked. Worse than him. Glass glittered across the seats like shrapnel. The windshield spiderwebbed. The front end crumpled against the curb, folded like foil.

He stepped out slow, more stiff than hurt. The air hit him thick—burnt rubber, the sweet bite of coolant, something metallic. Blood, maybe. It clung to his throat. Bitter. Wrong.

The other car—a compact sedan—crumpled around a lamppost. Its hood smashed. Steam hissed from the engine like a final breath. A groan from inside. Chase stepped toward it.

Flashing lights. Red and blue, smeared across broken glass. Too bright. Too loud. Too real. Police swarmed within minutes. Statements. Forms. The routine of it all, so practiced, so efficient, it almost tricked him into thinking this might be okay.

Earlier tonight, Liam had pulled him aside, QuantCloud’s steady-handed COO, the one who always knew how to anchor the chaos. “Take the win, Chase. Just slow down for one night.” Now, the sirens had swallowed it whole.

A firm hand gripped his arm. An officer pulled him aside. “Sir, have you had anything to drink tonight?” The officer was broad-shouldered, weathered—the type who had already made up his mind. His badge caught the streetlight’s glare, a silent assertion of authority.

His pulse pounded against his temples. Chase hesitated. “Just a couple of beers,” he said, forcing his voice steady.

He nodded toward the Tesla. “You know how the cameras work, right? Nine of them. Every angle. The dashcam will show it—the other driver ran the red.”

No reaction. Just those unreadable eyes, taking him in. “Sir, step over here for a breathalyzer.”

Chase started to speak—then stopped. Nothing he said would change what the machine was about to say.

“Blow.” A beep. *0.083*. Over. He knew what it meant.

“Turn around.”

Two words, final as a gavel strike. Steel clamped around his wrists. His rights droned in a monotone, distant and indifferent. A fresh wave of nausea churned in his gut—this wasn’t just a traffic stop. It was leverage. A headline. A board call. Then votes—quiet ones.

Flashing lights strobed against the Tesla’s fractured windshield, warping his reflection. Tonight was supposed to be a celebration, a testament to QuantCloud’s unstoppable rise. Now, everything lay in pieces, and the sirens just screamed.

A hand guided his head as they ducked him into the back seat. Vinyl stuck to his suit. The squad car door clanged shut.

In the back of the cruiser, he replayed the night—the rooftop, the beers, Nina, the intersection, the crash—steps he hadn’t realized he was taking until too late.

Inside, the station reeked of lousy coffee, disinfectant, and bureaucracy. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, throwing sickly shadows. Chase inhaled, steadying himself. He should be anywhere else. Thinking of the next move. Instead, he stared down a camera-lined hallway that ended in a holding cell.

Chapter 3 – Pit Stop

The air was thick with sweat and stale regret, the kind that seeps into cinder block walls and never lets go. Chase sat with his back against the wall, dress shirt clinging to his skin, damp with the weight of bad decisions.

His body ached from the crash. His wrists were raw from the restraints. But the pain was minor compared to the tighter, deeper coil in his gut. Not fear. Just humiliation.

The worst part wasn't the concrete. Or the static still buzzing in his ears. It was the faces. Liam's—steady, loyal, brilliant. And Hanna. God, Hanna. He could read the disappointment before she even blinked. Not anger. Not judgment. Just weight.

They'd built QuantCloud together, the three of them. Every dorm room all-nighter. Every near-collapse. Every miracle pivot. And now he was stuck in a place where futures came to die.

How the hell did I let this happen?

Liam's face again. Hanna's. The look that said: you don't get to wreck this alone.

This couldn't follow him past the weekend. It wouldn't. Tomorrow, he'd get to work. But tonight? Tonight he was just a guy with bloodshot eyes and a shirt with a torn collar. Just hours to kill. Steel bars for walls. And the sobering clarity of aftermath.

Exhaustion sank into his bones.

Stay awake.

He let his head tip back until the cinder block bit into his scalp. No screen. No data. No empire to manage. Just this box. Just this moment.

His eyes traced the cracks in the ceiling, breath steadying. Time slowed here. Too slow.

He thought of his father, a food-and-beverage manager at a country club, grinding through eighty-hour weeks so wealthy families could enjoy long weekends. His mom worked double shifts as a social worker and still made it work, driving Chase to STEM camp day after day because a teacher had whispered “gifted” like it was a prophecy.

They didn’t always agree on how, but they were united on one thing: build something honest. Make us proud.

And now? Here he was. Sitting on a steel bench, a thin layer of sweat glued to his shirt, the bitter taste of failure fresh on his tongue.

They could never know. He’d scrub it clean. They’d never read about it. Never look at him with disappointed eyes.

Tonight, he just had to make it through the hours. Let the alcohol bleed from his system. Wait out the silence. Countdown to sunrise.

Boots echoed down the hall. Each step louder than the last.

Chase didn’t need the noise, the company, the reminder. He just needed the night to end.

The door buzzed, then creaked open.

“Easy, man—I walk just fine,” came a voice, all swagger and deflection.

Two guards flanked a kid as they shoved him inside—skinny, cocky, hoodie half-zipped. He staggered slightly but caught himself, brushing off invisible dust like he was walking into a party, not a holding cell.

“Y’all always this friendly?”

The guards didn’t react. One slammed the door behind him with a metallic finality.

The kid just chuckled to himself. “Tough crowd.”

Chase glanced up from the metal bench where he'd been sitting for hours, shoulders stiff, face drawn.

Doesn't look old enough to be here. He melts onto the bench like he owns the space, legs spread, elbows loose. His hoodie hangs low, sleeves half-pushed, fabric thinned from wear. Jeans frayed at the edges. Old sneakers. But nothing about him reads careless. His hazel eyes watch everything, like he's already decided who you are and whether you matter.

A lazy grin spread across his face. "Damn, Suit. You look like you fell off the corporate ladder on your way up. Tell me I'm wrong."

Chase studied him, appreciating the humor. "Oh, you know, your classic 'wrong place, wrong time' story. The kind I'm sure your parents are warning you about."

The kid's eyes sparked with mischief. "Name's Betts," he said. "I win 'em."

"Betts." Chase tested the name, nodding thoughtfully. "Let me guess—one went sideways?"

"Not even close," Betts said, nodding toward Chase. "You? Got corporate scandal written all over you. What's the play, man? Boardroom brawl? Hostile takeover?"

Smart-ass kid. Chase fired back, "What'd they get you for? Bombing at open mic night?"

Betts tilted forward, elbows on knees. "Man, I was just chillin' out on Las Olas, right? Had a joint. Just one. I'm mid-stride, mindin' my business, vibes immaculate. Cop rolls up, tells me to toss it." He grinned. "So I did what any reasonable guy would do—I hit it one last time first."

Chase blinked, half-smiling despite himself. "Of course you did."

"Right?" Betts said, laughing now. "And suddenly I'm a menace to society. Like I'm out here pushing weight instead of tryna catch a breeze." He shook his head. "Wild part? Wasn't even high yet. They caught me in the warm-up lap. Now I'm sittin' in here like I'm El Chapo's intern or somethin'."

“How old are you?”

“Twenty. Yeh, I know. Gotta baby face.”

“And they’re treating you like public enemy number one?”

Betts kicked his feet out, leaning back like the walls couldn’t touch him. “I ain’t that dude. Little weed? My dreams got range.” He swept a slow glance around the cell, the corner of his mouth curling. “This? Just a pit stop.”

Chase didn’t bite.

Betts clocked the silence. Really looked at him this time. Not the surface read. A study. Like he was running Chase through a mental database, looking for the match. His eyes dropped to the watch on Chase’s wrist, then back up. “Tech, right? Gotta be. Suit like that, but your vibe ain’t corporate-corporate. Smart money. Startups.” He tilted his head, same little wiseass grin. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

There it was again. That phrase. Like a verbal tic. Or a challenge Chase hadn’t asked for. It was already getting under his skin.

He let the pause hang long enough to feel like a choice. “I build things,” Chase said finally. “Technology companies, mostly.”

Something lit behind Betts’ eyes—not just recognition, but possibility. *This might be my shot.*

“Speaking of tech,” he said, leaning in, voice dropping like he was sharing a trade secret, “I got this idea. An app. Peer-to-peer sports bettin’. Cut out the middlemen. No house edge. No gatekeepers. Genius. You feel me?”

At least he didn’t say *tell me I’m wrong*. Chase tilted his head, considering. “It’s... ambitious,” he said finally, careful not to crush the spark.

“Ambitious is the point,” Betts said, grinning. “Got any tips, Suit? You look like you know how the big dogs play.”

Chase saw himself in him—too much voltage, not enough circuit breaker. “You need a story,” he said. “Not just the app. Why you. Why now. Investors don’t buy code. They buy vision.”

Betts snorted. “Investors.” The word tasted fake. “I don’t know anybody with money.”

“You will,” Chase said. “But you don’t start there.” He nodded toward the concrete floor like it was a map. “Start with what you know. Prove it works where people already trust you. Your block. Then your city. Then your state. Build out.”

“Then the universe,” Betts said, laughing, throwing his hands up. “In that order.”

Chase smiled. “Before you start conquering galaxies, there’s something to think about.”

Betts’ grin tightened—the first sign the kid could bruise. “What’s that?”

Chase hesitated. “You’re talking gambling. That’s regulated for a reason.”

Betts leaned back, eyes narrowing. “You’re about to tell me I’m not the guy.”

“No,” Chase said, steady. “I’m telling you it’s expensive. Licenses. States. Compliance. And if you pretend it’s not real, it’ll eat you alive.”

Betts held his gaze, testing him. “So what—just give up?”

Chase felt the barb land. “I’m not saying that,” he said. “But you don’t do it alone. Find someone who’s been through it. A mentor. Someone who can keep you from learning every lesson the hard way.”

Lightly beating out a rhythm on the bench, Betts teased, “Ya know, Suit, might see me on a billboard one day. ‘Betts, King of the Game.’ You’ll say you knew me when.”

Chase shook his head, smiling despite himself. “King of the Game, huh? Bold title. Let’s just hope you’re not too busy dodging lawsuits and audits to enjoy it.”

“Forget that.” Betts laughed, the sound bouncing off the concrete. “I’ll hire someone like you for that. Keep me clean while I rake it in.”

“Good luck affording my rates.”

Betts angled forward, his grin fading slightly. “I bet you gambled on something big. Taken a risk without knowin’ if it’d pay off.”

Chase hesitated. QuantCloud surged through his mind—tension, uncertainty, pressure dressed up as progress. “It’s all a gamble. The difference is knowing when the odds are worth it.”

Betts watched him for a moment. Like he could see the gears turning behind Chase’s stillness. Not just silence, but weight. Thought. A man with a lot running under the surface. “Ya know what the problem is?”

Chase glanced up. *Is this kid for real?* “Enlighten me.”

“It’s rigged. The system.” Betts’ voice had lost its bravado. “House always wins. That’s why I want my app to work. Ya know. Level the playin’ field.”

Chase hadn’t expected the seriousness threading through Betts’ words. “I can see your passion. That’s a good start.”

As time slipped, their conversation deepened. Betts kept things light, throwing out jabs that found their mark. “You’ve got this whole mysterious vibe going, Suit,” he teased, nudging Chase’s arm. “You’re either a spy or the most boring accountant alive. That’s facts.”

Chase shot back. “And you’re clearly the poster child for responsible decision-making.”

The banter came easy. Too easy. Somewhere between stories about bouncers, fire escapes, and bad luck that refused to break, Chase found himself doing something he hadn’t in months—actually laughing.

There were no metrics. No headlines. Just a kid with hustle in his eyes, dreaming out loud. And Chase—off script, off grid—gave him time without it turning transactional.

For a few hours, that was enough.

Before he knew it, morning threatened the edges of night.

The guard—who looked like he wanted to be there about as much as they did—read off names. His voice was flat, mechanical, like a substitute teacher taking roll call. The metal door groaned open. Chase exhaled, pushed himself up from the bench, rolled his shoulders. Betts wasn't far behind.

First appearance. A formality—but one they couldn't skip. The process was quick and impersonal. Charges read. Pleas entered. Bail set: \$500 each—low. Nothing for Chase, but more than Betts could afford to lose.

At the bond window, Chase slid the cash across without looking up. Betts tried to pretend it didn't matter.

And just like that, the doors opened.

The city was waking. Pale morning light stretched long shadows over the pavement as the hum of traffic in the distance grew louder.

Betts turned, offering a tired grin. "Hey, Suit, let's not make this a habit, huh?"

Chase shook his hand, grip firm. "It's not the kind of place I intend to get used to."

"Where do I send the five bills?"

"Pay me back when you're on a billboard."

Betts nodded. No more words. But Chase understood. It was thanks enough.