

A stylized, high-contrast illustration of a woman's face and hand. The face is rendered in shades of orange and peach, with large, bright red lips. The hand, positioned in the foreground, wears a large, brilliant-cut diamond ring. The background features a dark, silhouetted city skyline. The title 'MEAN MOMS' is written in large, bold, yellow capital letters with a purple outline, centered over the face.

# MEAN MOMS

*A Novel*

**EMMA ROSENBLUM**

*author of BAD SUMMER PEOPLE and VERY BAD COMPANY*



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*A Novel*



Emma Rosenblum



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*For my mom, Barbara*

## Prologue

Every wealthy mom in New York City, from uptown Manhattan to down, from Brooklyn Heights to Cobble Hill to Park Slope, had heard about what happened at Atherton Academy. They'd read the panicked WhatsApp missives from the safety of their penthouses and town homes, huddled under cashmere blankets, clutching glasses of cabernet. An incident at Atherton's annual benefit, something terrible, beyond words. Someone was behind it all, but no one knew who. Accusations were flying. A mom. It was definitely a mom. A real psycho. A possible murderer in their midst, wearing the same designers that they did, getting a blowout at their same salon, possibly even sharing the same dermatologist.

Maybe it was the selfless mom, the one who always volunteered, who collected money for gifts, who chaperoned the school trips.

Maybe it was the popular mom, the one everyone worshipped, the prettiest and richest and coolest.

Maybe it was the working mom, the one who missed the parent get-togethers, who rarely came to pickup, who was always racing off to a Zoom.

Maybe it was the flirty mom, the one who leaned into the dads at cocktail parties, who showed too much cleavage, who made eyes at the hot male teachers.

Maybe it was the messy mom, the one who arrived ten minutes late, who forgot to buy school supplies, who never read the important emails.

Maybe it was the sporty mom, the one whose kids played lacrosse, hockey, *and* football, who had coaches on speed-dial, who wore her tennis outfit all day long.

Maybe it was the know-it-all mom, the one who spewed the latest parenting research, who knew exactly what the surgeon general recommended, who could cite stats about the dangers of screen time.

Maybe it was the anxious mom, the one who still cut her middle schooler's grapes, who'd tracked her children since pre-K.

Maybe it was, maybe it was, maybe it was.

A sociopath standing alongside them at pickup, listening in as they chatted about weekend plans and moms' nights out. One of their own. But who could it be?



# PART I

## *Fall*



# **WhatsApp Chat**

## ***Atherton Lower School Moms***

### ***94 Participants***

**Dre Finlay**

Good morning, Atherton moms! This chat is for general announcements and info, but is not, I repeat, is *not*, the official channel for school communication. Dr. Broker and your class moms will send emails for that purpose. Please forward me contact info for any moms I missed—only I can add them as admin. Happy first day of school!

**Jennifer Smyth**

Hi all! I was wondering about after-school sign-ups. I want to get Jordy into chess on Wednesdays but can't find where to register.

**Armena Justice**

Jennifer, registration closed last week. Email Mrs. Pegaru to see if there's any room left.

**Jennifer Smyth**

How is it closed already? I never got a notification.

**Armena Justice**

Maybe check your spam folder? I definitely got a notification. Does anyone know when school picture day is? Hermenia's photos were horrendous last year, the wonky color correction made her blond hair look orange, like a mini Donald Trump. Shudder. 😊

**Caroline Press**

It's on the 19th. They're using the same company this year—it's actually my company.

**Armena Justice**

OMG, I had no idea! I was only kidding—it was Hermenia's fault for being born with that hair, not the photographer's ...

**Kim Berns**

Hi, ladies! We're no longer at Atherton. We will miss everyone but felt that Liam needed to be in a more structured environment. Dre, can you please take me off the chat?

**Jessica Hillton**

Remember to save the date—October 3rd—for kindergarten moms' night out!

**Valerie Greg**

Why aren't the dads on this chain?

**Dre Finlay**

Valerie, we had all the dads on the chain last year, but they never participated, so we felt it best not to inundate their WhatsApp messages ;) But if you'd like to include your husband, feel free to send me his info.

**Valerie Greg**

I'm a lesbian.

**Kim Berns**

I'm still receiving these messages ... Dre, can you take me off the chat?

## Chapter 1

# The First Day of School!

Belle Redness lived for the first day of Atherton drop-off. She loved getting back into the swing of her New York City life. She enjoyed the Hamptons, but by August she was hot and bored and sick of the pool, the garden parties, and the bugs. Especially the bugs. This summer, they'd been dealing with a nightmarish infestation of lanternflies, inch-long monsters with spotted brown wings that laid shiny eggs all over her beautiful trees. They'd soar around her yard, creating a horrible, biblical scene on her pristine East Hampton estate. She'd gotten used to the sensation of squashing them, hard, crushing their shells into the grass with her strappy sandals. For nearly the entirety of August, Belle had stopped entertaining, so distressed by the idea that her friends would notice the insect carcasses littering her lawn. Bugs, apparently, didn't care how much money you had. It was the worst thing about them, worse than the bites.

So she'd been happy to get back to the city last week, away from the vermin plague, settling into their four-thousand-square-foot floor-through penthouse on Leonard Street, their "Tribeca Gem," as *Architectural Digest* had put it. Belle and her husband, Jeff, had gutted the apartment over two years, living in the Greenwich Hotel with their daughter, Hildy, and their

son, Miles, while their architect and designer, a husband-husband duo who called themselves “the Davids,” went to town. In *AD*, Belle had described their time at the hotel as Hildy’s “Madeline in the City moment,” which she’d thought was a charming way of putting it. In reality, all of them, particularly Belle, had nearly gone crazy, packed into a two-room suite with no kitchen and just one and a half baths. But they’d survived.

The apartment, after all that, turned out perfectly, exactly how Belle had imagined it. It opened with a gallery-style foyer, ideal for displaying their growing art collection, including pieces by Marilyn Minter and Jeff Koons. The entry led to a living-library space, separated from the rest of the apartment with a sliding door, which the Davids had covered in bright purple felt. (The project, which ended up costing \$8 million, was funded entirely by Belle’s father, the former CEO of J.P. Morgan, as was everything else in Belle’s lucky life.) Aesthetics were very important to Belle, who was a fashion designer. Well, she wasn’t *quite* a designer yet. But soon. Very soon.

This morning, the first morning of school, Belle sat in her kitchen, sipping a latte that their live-in housekeeper, Ivanna, had made for her. She stared out the big bay windows, with their clear southern-facing views of One World Trade. It was 7:30 a.m., the downtown sun was bright, and Belle felt rested and ready to jump into fall. Later this year, she was set to launch her first company, Pippins Cottage Home, a small clothing-slash-lifestyle brand. It was debuting with just one item: a flowy linen dress that resembled the nightgowns Belle wore as a child. She’d named it “The Dress.”

Hildy came in, wearing sweats and a hoodie that hung on her thin frame. Belle winced at Hildy’s outfit but said nothing. Miles followed, in colorful Flow Society shorts and hideous blue Crocs, the pride of every fourth-grade boy. He gave Belle a hug, twirling her long hair playfully as he did. When Belle was young, she’d grown her thick, chestnut hair to her midback, and she’d kept it that length into adulthood. She felt that it gave her a girlish charm and loved that it had become her signature look, topping it with ribbons and bows and the odd headband.

Hildy stayed far away. The family's white Ragdoll cats, Duke and Sky, came slinking in together, each rubbing on one of Hildy's legs.

"Mom, come on, let's go," said Hildy, bending down to pet Duke. Hildy was in the seventh grade. Both the Redness children attended Atherton Academy, on Sixteenth Street near Stuyvesant Square Park. Atherton was the top private school in downtown Manhattan, catering to children of tech CEOs and creative empires rather than the private-equity crowd that lived uptown. It was eminently more fashionable to have your kid at Atherton than, say, Trinity or Dalton or St. Bernard's, and Belle was all about being fashionable.

Belle's only gripe about the school was that it didn't have a uniform. Some nonsense about the importance of self-expression. Every morning was a war, with Hildy refusing to wear any of the overtly feminine items Belle had bought for her at LoveShackFancy. Hildy had no interest in looking "cute," as she put it with a grimace. She rightly pointed out that these clothes were Belle's style, not her own. Instead, Hildy bought her sweats exclusively from Champion.

"Just because you and the other moms are bitchy fembots who dress and look alike doesn't mean that I have to be like that," Hildy explained to her matter-of-factly, after Belle had offered to take her school shopping. Belle had nodded and kept her mouth shut. Her therapist had told her that the more she pressured Hildy to look a certain way, the more she would resist, and so Belle had been working on holding her tongue. If this was the worst thing about Hildy, so be it. Hildy already had a couple "theys" in her grade at Atherton, as well as one boy who was transitioning. Hildy had assured Belle that her fashion choices were just that; she liked boys, she didn't want to *be* one. But the dread that one day Hildy would change her mind, come home, and tell them to call her "Henry" lingered.

Was this what it felt like during the 1950s, when no one knew which child would come down with polio? Belle wondered. She understood that questioning your gender didn't equal possible paralysis or even death, but there was something strange about New York City lately, something

mysterious and sinister, that was spiking her anxiety. The lanternflies everywhere. Dog poop decorating the sidewalks. Slugs after rainstorms. The uptick in subway slashings, which Belle kept hearing whispered about at cocktail parties. Everything suddenly felt like a threat.

Belle shivered as she and Hildy and Miles approached the main building of Atherton, a gorgeous rust-red structure with proud white columns. They'd had their driver, Fred, drop them off a couple of blocks away from the school, as the area became clogged with SUVs and Ubers and even the occasional Rolls-Royce. The September air was warm and heavy. They passed a sleeping figure on the sidewalk, covered in ratty black blankets, and the pungent, sour smell of unwashed human hit Belle's nose. She held her breath and grabbed her children's hands. Hildy shook her off as if Belle was a stranger.

Belle, stung, recovered in time to put on a big smile for the drop-off crowd gathered in front of the school entrance, the moms with fresh chops, waving goodbye, taking pictures of their little ones with signs like NOAH'S FIRST DAY OF FIRST GRADE! ☺ and CONGRATS TO FIFI ON KINDERGARTEN! OUR STAR! All the moms went to the first day of drop-off. It was where you reconnected with people you hadn't seen over the summer, who'd been living on Shelter Island or Martha's Vineyard or Fire Island instead of the Hamptons. Everyone dressed up, showing off their tasteful tans and new wardrobes. Belle was in a variation of her standard uniform: a silk cream minidress from Khaite with a dainty scalloped collar, with Manolo Blahnik polka-dot Mary Janes. She'd tied her hair with a large pink bow.

There were no nannies in sight, which would surely change tomorrow, when the sidewalk would be filled with women of different sizes and ethnicities. But today was for the parents. To preen. To chat. To remind each other they existed.

"I can go by myself now, drop-off is for the lower school babies like Miles," Hildy scoffed. "Suck it, Hildy," said Miles, who then raced off to find his friends, leaving Hildy and Belle standing together miserably.

“Belle! Hi! Gertrude already went in!” Belle saw Morgan Chary walking toward them through the perfumed throng, her thin arms outstretched. Morgan was the wife of Art Chary, the founder of the billion-dollar sneaker startup Welly, the one that sold trendy shoes for \$100. Morgan was in her postworkout best—Beyond Yoga everything, including some sort of Lycra turtleneck situation, her blond hair pulled back in a high ponytail, her feet clad in her favorite Loewe sneakers. “Excuse my outfit,” said Morgan, as if she’d be wearing anything other than overpriced spandex. Morgan was the workout queen. “I’m just coming from a class with Tracy Anderson—she’s the best.”

Belle and Morgan and their other closest friend, Frost Trevor, had known each other since the first day of pre-K at Atherton. The women had become an inseparable troop, gravitating toward one another, as some moms inevitably did, lured by a commonality of style, money, and circumstance. They were a powerful bunch, both the wealthiest and the prettiest moms in the lower school, which was saying something, as most of the Atherton moms were wealthy and pretty. If you weren’t, well, why not?

A minute later, Frost appeared, wearing a sleeveless pinstripe vest and swingy wide-legged pants, which Belle assumed were some prized vintage find. “Oh, thank God you’re both here, I didn’t want to have to speak to anyone else,” Frost said conspiratorially. She was glowing from her summer vacation abroad. Belle noticed that the other mothers, particularly the newer ones, were looking their way, admiring their group as you would celebrities—at a distance, with reverence and not a little jealousy.

“Uh, Mom, I’m still here,” said Hildy with an eye roll. She was standing to the side, slumped a little, and Belle inwardly cringed at her disheveled appearance.

“Hildy, darling, how was your summer?” asked Frost, giving Hildy a big, warm hug. Though Morgan was the super-mom, Frost was the most maternal of the bunch, though you wouldn’t guess it from her avant-garde clothes and intimidating beauty.



“Yeah, fine, sleepaway was good, Mom and Dad didn’t drive me *too* crazy when I got back,” Hildy said. “Actually, maybe Mom did.” Frost laughed. Belle didn’t. “I’m going into the building now, but nice to see you both,” said Hildy.

“You too, sweetie,” said Morgan. Hildy slunk away, putting her hoodie over her head as she walked inside.

“Maybe you’ll see the boys at lunch,” Frost shouted after her. Frost’s twin sons, Alfred and King, were also in the seventh grade, along with Morgan’s only daughter, Gertrude. Belle watched as Hildy disappeared into the building, a moody twelve-year-old weight off Belle’s shoulders. Then she turned back to her friends, lighter. She saw Miles from afar. He waved at her and blew her a kiss, then headed into school, following King and Alfred like a puppy.

“So...” said Morgan, leaning closer to Belle and Frost. “Have you heard about this new woman? Sofia or something?” Morgan always knew everything first; gossip found her, nourishing her body in place of the food she barely ate.

“A new mom, apparently very ... attractive,” continued Morgan, her voice low, her eyes darting around to make sure they weren’t being overheard. Belle wondered how attractive this woman could possibly be. Weren’t they all “very attractive”?

“Her kids are starting in second and fourth; no one has any idea how she got them in. That’s basically impossible,” said Morgan. A blonde and brunette, arms linked, both in crisp white midi dresses, walked by. Belle recognized them as third-grade moms and remembered that they both had four children each, that classic New York City rich-family flex (four private school tuitions plus a five-bedroom apartment equals fuck-off money). Morgan waved as they passed. “Hi, Armena! Hi, Kendra!”

Morgan knew everything and everyone. In between her barre classes and marathon training, Morgan was on every school committee, did copious research about how to live your best life, and made it her job to dole out useful information. Need to find an after-school art class? Ask Morgan. Need

a weekend nanny? Ask Morgan. Looking for a contractor to combine two apartments? Ask Morgan! They joked that she should start her own “Ask Morgan” Substack, and that every mom below Twenty-Third Street would subscribe.

“Ohhh, tell us more about this Sofia person,” encouraged Frost, a small smile on her red lips. “She sounds fab. Maybe she’s, like, a princess or something. You know Atherton loves a royal. Remember when Princess Anne’s grandkids went here for a year? Such tiny snobs.” Frost laughed, shaking her glossy red hair, the envy of every Atherton mom. Frost was the daughter of a prominent art dealer and famous literary agent, and she’d been an It Girl in the early 2000s.

Out of the mob appeared a strikingly pale woman in a black leather skirt, ankle boots, and an oversize black cashmere turtleneck, somehow not melting in the September heat. It was Ava Leo, one of Atherton’s most famous parents.

“Ladies! Hello!” said Ava, running her hand through her sharp bob. Belle admired Ava’s blunt bangs, cutting a perfectly straight line across her forehead. Ava had a huge, amorphous job at Pinterest, and she was as out-and-about as they come—in the front row of every fashion show, at galas, fundraisers, even the Oscars, somehow. Her husband, David Chung, was the chef/owner of the hottest restaurant group in New York, BaoFuku, and they had a combined social following of four million. Their girls were in kindergarten and fourth grade.

“What’s happening, Ava? All set for the big to-do?” asked Frost.

A few years ago, Frost had thrown a legendary Valentine’s Day bash at her and her husband Tim’s home, a Gramercy town house overlooking the park. “It’s like a Wes Anderson movie set; it’s just layers upon colors upon symmetry,” Frost had said in a feature about it in *Architectural Digest* (the story was written by the same journalist who’d profiled Belle, and it was, much to Belle’s frustration, two pages longer than her feature). Frost had thought it’d be a riot to go full-on theme party, so she’d dubbed the shindig “Love-a-Palooza” and hired a high-end wedding planner to execute. They’d

painted the outside of her house red and paid the company that owns Conversation Hearts to make life-size candy hearts, with cheeky sayings like TAKE MY HUSBAND and KEY PARTY PARTICIPANT, which were placed around her home like sculptures. And she'd mandated a dress code of "Sexy V-Day Getups." The Atherton crowd had gone all out. Belle had paid a Broadway costume designer \$20,000 to create a Swarovski crystal bodysuit for her and a three-piece red suit for Jeff.

The party was such a smash that it got written up in the *New York Times* Styles section—"Parents Gone Wild! The New Trend Among Wealthy Breeders: Theme Party Mania."

Since then, over-the-top theme parties had become an Atherton tradition, with different couples doing the honors. The small school's already impressive clout had increased as a result. Everyone in Manhattan wanted to send their children to Atherton because everyone wanted to go to these events. Admissions had become even more competitive in recent years, locking out some of the richest and most prominent. (Which is why when someone said there was a "new mom," particularly one whose children were starting in a nonentry year, an interesting story was certain to follow.)

Ava and David were next up to host. They were calling the party "A Bouquet of Newly Sharpened Pencils," after a line from *You've Got Mail*, referring to the magic of New York City in the fall. Guests had been tasked with dressing up like "autumn in New York," whatever that meant.

"Ugh, we are totally not ready," said Ava. "There's still so much left to plan, and it's coming up in two weeks. We have the menu set, at least—David is being obsessive about the food, no surprise. He's having the BaoFuku staff re-create iconic NYC dishes—Russ & Daughters' bagels with lox and cream cheese; shooters of Manhattan clam chowder from Grand Central Oyster Bar; Dominique Ansel's Cronut. I need to figure out the decor, but I think we'll pull it off in the end."

"I can't wait!" said Belle, who meant it. She loved the theme parties and particularly loved picking her looks for them. And she wouldn't mind the

face time with Ava, who could potentially help with PR when *The Dress* debuted. Belle had been gearing up to ask Ava if she could post a picture of herself wearing *The Dress* in her Instagram feed. She'd sent a sample over to Ava and hadn't heard back from her yet. She knew Ava was inundated with these kinds of requests, but Belle was hoping that their Atherton connection would put her at the top of the pile. "I bet it's going to be one of the best parties ever," added Belle, laying it on thick. She glanced over at Frost, who was looking at her skeptically.

Their conversation was interrupted by Gabby Mahler, Ava's best friend and one half of Atherton's fanciest lesbian couple. Gabby's family had some sort of real estate fortune and at one point had simultaneously owned the Chrysler Building *and* the Empire State. Gabby's white-blond hair was cropped short, and she was wearing almost comically oversize black frame glasses.

"I trust everyone had a faaaabulous summer? At your faaaaabulous Hamptons homes?" Gabby continued mockingly. Gabby was *allowed* to be funny because Gabby was a lesbian. The rest of them had to be nice, and to take each other very seriously. Those were the rules.

"I have to run," said Ava. "I'm meeting with one of the set designers of *When Harry Met Sally*, to see how we can infuse that vibe into the party."

"Well, that wasn't in my top ten things I thought you'd say next, Ava," said Gabby. "But impressive! Can't wait for it. Margo and I are thinking of dressing up like Richard Gere and Winona Ryder, from *Autumn in New York*. I'm Richard Gere, with the hair. Margo's going to be the Winona Ryder character." Gabby's wife, Margo, rarely made appearances at school drop-off or mom get-togethers. Margo had carried all three of the couple's sons, Howie, Sully, and Mac, and there was some gossipy debate over whose eggs went with which kid.

"Doesn't Winona Ryder die in that movie?" asked Frost.

There was a quick moment of awkward silence before Ava air-kissed them all and ran off, a flash of black leather. They were then joined by Clara