

THE AWARD-WINNING STARLET SERIES

~GOLD MEDAL WINNER: Starlet's Web, 2014 Readers' Favorite International Book Awards

~SILVER MEDAL WINNER: Starlet's Light, 2014 Readers' Favorite International Book Awards

~

"I'm sure most readers will enjoy a glimpse of what's behind the cameras and what it might feel like for those actors who may not be ready for the lifestyle and the consequences of actions. It's raw and very engaging..." *-Readers' Favorite*

"YA fans will absolutely want to check out this series, where they'll find a new heroine to root for in the flawed but sympathetic Liana." *-BlueInk Review*

THE STARLET SERIES TIMELINE

November

Manny and Kate break up

Liana Marie's *Jefferson's Muse* international movie premieres begin

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December

Starlet's Man story begins

~

January

Starlet's Web, Liana Marie's first memoir begins

Golden Globes

~

February

Oscars

Starlet's Man story ends

~

May

Starlet's Web memoir ends

Starlet's Run memoir begins

~

August

Starlet's Run memoir ends

~

September

Starlet's Light memoir begins

~

November

Liana Marie's *Constantine's Muse* movie premieres begin

Starlet's Light memoir ends

Starlet's Web

a novel | The Starlet Series | 1

CARLA J. HANNA

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Twitter: <https://twitter.com/CarlaJHanna>

Website: www.carlahanna.com

DEDICATION

For Kaylin Marie and Carson Michael, my reasons for asking, "What if?"

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1 THE VARY MONTHS

I called Mom during my drive from my trailer on the San Diego set to my house in Santa Monica, California. We were both talented actors living separately. Mom reminded me that I was the web that caught the flies to feed the spiders. She praised me for playing my role so well. I felt more like the fly but didn't dwell on it. Being clueless about how well she spun the web helped. I would have abandoned my passive perspective and crumbled into pieces otherwise.

I loved my home on the Santa Monica Canyon ridge, north of San Vicente Boulevard. It was a cute two-bedroom house with a guest suite downstairs overlooking the Pacific Coast Highway and the canyon between Santa Monica and the Pacific Palisades. Every time I experienced another place in the world, I was shocked that my little house could be worth several million dollars. But the beautiful view was worth it. It calmed me.

My spirit lifted as soon as I entered the kitchen from the garage. Even though it was just after dawn, I walked to the windows in the living room and merged my memories of the view with the silhouettes I made out of the trees and connected with nature again. I sunk into the couch and watched the subtle, changing colors transform the shadows. I was at peace for the few minutes I had to

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myself before preparing for the stressful Sunday. That was what I wanted—no interaction, no dialogue. I was home.

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~ *BROKEN UP* ~

I heard a door close behind me as I gazed out the windows. I glanced to see if it was Sage, my manager, coming early to fetch me for the Golden Globe Awards. Only people I trusted had the code to the front door. I flew off the couch when I saw that it was Evan Pasteur, my loving boyfriend and gorgeous co-star in *Romeo & Juliet*.

Evan was a wonderful person. His dad was American and mother was French. His actress-aunt, Renee Dupree, was Mom's best friend and my co-star. His father was a professor of literature in Paris so he grew up around the performing arts.

Evan starred in several plays and musicals in Paris, New York and London, but *Romeo & Juliet* was his first Hollywood project. He and I were both surprised that the movie was such a huge hit and had fun promoting it. We shot the movie the summer after I turned sixteen. He was eighteen.

We dated during the February premiere tour before I turned seventeen and while I filmed *Jefferson's Muse* with Matthew Thorne and Grant Bell. Evan and I continued to date all of last summer when we could see each other. We often double-dated with either Manuel and Kate or Mitch and Beth, my childhood friends. We rarely saw each other in the fall when Evan filmed his spy thriller and I started my latest drama with Renee.

He grinned at me, arms extended. "Hey, sweetheart! I have a minute before I have to get to the Globes."

Evan was a presenter for the Golden Globe Awards that evening in Beverly Hills. He chuckled as I stopped his words with my lips. I flung my arms around his neck and continued to kiss him.

"I missed you so much, Evan!" I smiled as we separated.

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I had not seen him since his twentieth birthday, which was in December, before the holidays and the start of the grueling “UARY” months. *January* and *February* were the award months where good dramas became more profitable dramas based on the recognition they received. Cast and crew reputations, royalties, distribution, and return on investment all relied on the credibility of the movie awards to get viewers to download or buy DVDs for years to come and get investment for future projects. I used my sarcastic acronym: Use Awards to Reward Yourself in referring to the most political time of the year for we dramatic actors.

Evan’s face had thinned but his chest and arms were more muscular. I liked his new haircut. He started his role with un-kept hair and an unshaven look. He played a college student turned international spy in his latest project and had just wrapped the film. Surely the director and producers must have thought he needed to transform into a frat boy-type spy instead of the unlikely hero scholar-type they had first envisioned.

I asked, “You look all GQ?”

“Yep. I didn’t tell you? Crazy.” He laughed and hugged me again. We talked everyday but rarely about our jobs. He had been reading sonnets to me. “We re-shot the whole third act of the film after the new haircut. It follows formula now; so much for breaking stereotypes. Social media changes everything. The movie is judged before it’s even screened.” He held my hand as he walked me to the windows. “Beautiful.” He exhaled while he admired the view and then explained, “The ladies hated the hair. They thought I was too pretty to look ugly.”

I didn’t see Evan as an action hero because he was the best dramatic actor I knew. He was better with scripts than I was because he actually knew what he was saying. He rocked each take in *Romeo*

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↳ *Juliet*, and even made his Shakespeare lines flow like he was singing them. But he was incredibly good looking, my number two on the Hollywood hotness list, so his agent pushed him into a heartthrob role. He was six feet tall with a runner's body. He wasn't really muscular, just thin with a nice chest for the screen. His shoulders were narrow and he had a large head which I noticed in person but not on film.

I kissed him again, hoping his warmth could fill my emptiness. Evan and I had lived as adults for several years. We connected on every level and wanted respect and honesty in our relationship. We worked endless hours on set and spent the weekends promoting our films that were currently in the theaters and building our brands as successful, award-winning young actors. My project was also affected by public opinion. We had to switch locations from Istanbul to a set north of San Diego and were weeks behind schedule.

I agreed. "There's just too much money at stake to take risks on an action film. Maybe next time you can change the hearts and minds of movie-goers."

"Marie, I love to work, so whatever. But I will make a difference someday."

We differed there. I loved to act but hated everything else that went with it. I wanted out of show business. I was done with the show and the tell.

Evan shifted away from me. I grasped his arm and held his hand with my other, afraid to let go. He studied my face and gently put his free hand on my cheek. "I forget how beautiful you are, just breathtaking. You okay?"

"No. I'm so lonely," I admitted. "I want to quit. I want to be a normal seventeen-year-old adult girl." I laughed at the impossibility. I was bound to contracts I couldn't possibly escape. "Seriously, I don't

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have the strength to do any more award shows and interviews. I'm tired of staring at the sidewalk in public, pretending to not care that women hate me."

He gulped and his shoulder slouched as he exhaled. "We'll still be friends. Thanks for all these goodbye kisses. I'm gonna miss you so much, but I'm no cheater."

I groaned. I didn't know it was a done deal. We shared the same publicist. She had emailed Evan, my mom, and me an idea that Evan and I would break-up. Evan could enhance his brand as a twenty-year-old heartthrob if he were single. I could generate sympathy if Evan, the most talented young hunk in Hollywood, cheated on me. I had won awards for my acting and my image was everywhere from a cosmetic endorsement campaign. Social media data showed that women were fed up with my success.

Evan hugged me as I wobbled. "You didn't know?"

I whimpered as my eyes filled with tears. "Can't we date in secret?"

He led me to the couch and held my hand. He wiped my cheek and assessed me with his loving gray eyes. "What's the point?"

"But I love you, Evan. I need you."

"I love you, too, but it's not gonna work right now. This way, we're supportive, awesome friends." He exhaled. "Did you tell Manny how you feel about him?"

I shook my head. "Hell no!" The last time Evan stayed the night, we attempted to move our relationship forward but my body didn't respond to him. He suspected it was because I was in love with Manuel, my best friend from when we were preschoolers. He asked if he was right.

Partially, he was right. I survived Hollywood by focusing on long-term goals. I had rules that I followed so I wouldn't become an

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overextended young star. I stopped drinking. I didn't do drugs. I didn't party or sleep around. I was not going to be some guy's doormat. I worked hard. I wanted to be trustworthy, honest, loving, and free when I was old enough to get married to an honest, loving, wonderful man who would never leave me or our beautiful children. That's what I wanted. Evan was honest. Manuel was honest. But I was seventeen so I couldn't exactly get married yet.

"I wish I lied to you. I love you so much, Evan. I do." I held his hand tighter. "Let me prove it to you. I'm ready."

"Sweetheart, no. It's not about us doing it. It's about the way you two love each other so completely. It's like no one else is in the room when you're together." He let go of my hand. "I can't compete with that kind of love, Marie. You have to tell Manny."

"No! He'll laugh at me, reject me. I'm practically his sister. I can't do this life without him and you." I grabbed both of his hands and begged, "Please don't break-up with me, please."

He spoke softly, "We don't see each other, anyway. I'll still call every night. We'll get coffee when we're in town." He put his arm around me. "Don't forget that we want the same things in life. I don't want my Aunt's life. I want to control my career and marry the love of my life, too. Maybe it's you? We won't know until you know where you stand with Manny. Let's live a little and see. I'll love you no matter what, forever. Don't make this hurt more than it already does. Okay?"

I didn't want to agree. My throat was too tight to speak and the loneliness consumed me.

He continued, "So you're gonna see photos of me making-out with a model. Her name is Lelu. The photos are from an ad campaign I shot in South America. The scandal hits today so that people will feel bad for you. Your mom thinks you won't win Best Actress

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tonight so people will like you again. Last night, Lelu and I kissed on a date in Malibu for the tabloids. She's a nice girl so she'll be my Oscar date. I think you're going with Byron and will be dating him as you deal with me cheating on you. They want you to play the victim."

I put my hands to my face. I mumbled, "I am the victim. This life sucks."

"I know, but working is awesome. It's the price we pay for doing cool projects." Evan pulled my hands off my face and lifted my chin up to look at me in the eyes. "Sweetheart, you know the game. The audience can like you again." Evan stood up from the couch. "You've got support from your dad and Celia, your mom, me, my aunt, and Manny."

I said nothing as I watched him cross the room to the front door. He put his hand on the doorknob and turned to me again. "You tell Manny, or I will."

Shocked that he would betray my trust, I bolted off the couch and locked my eyes with his while I wiped my tears. I warned, "Don't. I will never speak to you again if you tell Manuel. He's all I have. He's pure, not Hollywood. You, my mom, me—all of us are products—we're the same. He's not fake. He truly wants the best for me."

Evan shoved his fists in his pockets and raised his voice. "Don't forget that I'm going to be accused of infidelity when cheating is wrong. I'm doing this because it's unfair that your fickle fans are jealous that you're truly incredible. I'm doing this because it's the best thing for you, not me. I'm not a fake." He judged me coldly and added, "I'm breaking up with you because you're in love with someone else and won't tell him the truth."

He threw open the door.

"Sorry! I'm sorry," I frantically shouted. I grabbed his arm.

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“Thank you for...” I blurted while my eyes stung and insides tightened. “Thanks for being selfless and kind, loving me.”

I had an unbreakable bond with Manuel. But Evan didn't understand that the bond didn't have to be romantic. I could love them both deeply with Evan as my lover and Manuel as my soul mate. I could survive without Evan. But I couldn't live without Manuel.

Evan hugged me as he breathed heavily. He whispered, “My aunt begged me not to act. My mom prepared me for the worst. What I didn't expect is that I would love you so much and would want to do this to make your life better.”

He patted my shoulder as he broke away. He left. I shut the door and used the dead bolt. The next person wanting to come in to my house would have to knock.

~ *SUBTEXT* ~

After Evan was gone, I texted Manuel and searched my contact list to see if there was anyone else I could reach out to. There wasn't. I texted my step-mom, Celia, anyway, knowing that she would be asleep.

When I heard Manuel's ringtone, I was on my bed hugging my beloved stuffed-horse, thinking about how my room was still decorated for a childish teenager. I had a poster bed with silly lights strung around it. I had the lavender chandelier and hot pink pillows that were an absolute must-have when I turned fourteen. I hadn't changed anything because I liked my life before I started acting and wanted to remember what it felt like to have no worries and know that I was unconditionally loved.

“I just got your text.” Manuel worried, “Are you okay?”

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“No. I hate my life. Evan and I have to sacrifice our relationship because the public thinks my life is too good and easy. What is this? Exploitation number ten in my five years of acting hell?”

“At least. Listen, I have to bike with Beth but will be there in five minutes.”

* * * * *

Beth and Manuel dated their sophomore year and remained great friends after their breakup. They had a connection much like he and I had but their relationship was more competitive. When Beth dated Mitch, the school’s popular and athletic valedictorian, their friendship deepened into a platonic one.

Kate, Manuel’s ex-girlfriend and my ex-best friend, used to complain to me about their friendship but I didn’t see evidence of romantic feelings between them. I figured Kate was jealous that Beth transformed from being the big girl to having the most beautiful body in the school. Since Beth and Manuel shared the same interests in sports, they biked, swam, and ran together outdoors.

I scanned the only photo I had in my room, concentrating to focus my blurred vision. The photo captured Mom, Grandma May and me on my fifteenth birthday at her ranch in Montana.

Grandma looked like a female version of Dad. Dad was, and still is, ruggedly good-looking, with his Native American dark hair he keeps buzzed, high cheekbones, striking amber-green eyes that complement his bronze skin, and a tall, muscular body. Mom always reflected on that first moment she saw him—she said that his eyes penetrated her soul. According to Grandma, I have Dad’s eyes and spirit.

Mom contrasted Grandma with large blue-green eyes, thin eyebrows, long eyelashes, large lips, smooth pale skin, and thick

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auburn hair. I resembled both of them and neither one. Mostly, I looked tired in the photo because I just wrapped *The Beautiful Outcast*, a movie about Virginia Woolf's difficulty dealing with her mother's sudden death when she was thirteen and her mental collapse after the death of her father.

I visited Grandma at her ranch after our wrap party because I was so depressed after making that movie. I stayed for over two months and did all my schoolwork online. I rode my horse every day and learned how to fly a plane. I escaped public scrutiny. I learned to ignore tweets and never check Facebook. I was complete that summer.

While I waited for Manuel outside I thought about my recent award-winning performance for *Jefferson's Muse*. I did a good job with the script and with emoting. I nailed the character. Mom and her producer buddies created the character for me: a 'not really black but not white' slave.

* * * * *

Seeing Manuel approach on his bicycle made my body sparkle from the inside out and diminished my sullenness. Manuel was tall, like his Latino father, and muscular. I never asked his specs, but I figured he was 6'1" and 185 pounds. He had high cheekbones, perfect lips, a thin, straight nose, short black hair, and creamy skin like that of cappuccino ice cream—his skin was not white but not dark either. He was lighter than me. His eyes were his most attractive feature, with impossibly long, black eyelashes veiling his rich coffee-colored eyes. The color of his iris was light enough to express all of his emotions to me with one glance but dark enough to hide those same emotions from strangers. I loved being one of the people who held the key to unlock all of his thoughts when I peeked into his soul.

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An acute pain crippled me as soon as I saw his eyes when he removed his helmet and sunglasses. I couldn't help loving Manuel but couldn't possibly tell him that I loved him in case he didn't feel the same way about me. I could no longer pretend that my feelings were only platonic. I wanted him desperately. My eyes watered as I accepted that Evan was right to dump me. It wasn't fair to him that I loved Manuel so completely.

Manuel hugged me immediately, "I'm sorry. It's okay."

"Already I feel better just by seeing you. But also worse." I explained, "I feel like I *am* Muse, a slave to the gods of Hollywood."

"Feeling bitter? It's just like last time when you said you were a fly in the spider's web." Manuel put his arm around me as we walked through the front gate. "Remember, you have a great life and can quit soon. It's just several hours of acting tonight for the Globes. You'll leave unscarred. "This too shall pass," as your mom says."

"Oh, I hate that saying and feel very scarred right now." I hugged him again and relaxed. Ever since we were kids, Manuel's hugs pushed out all my worries.

I stopped crying and explained, "The cheating isn't true. Evan would never do that for real. It's to balance our brands, make women like me again and give him freedom to be a total heartthrob. But Evan really did dump me. It's over."

Unlike industry people, Manuel didn't use worthless words. He kissed my forehead and walked to the outdoor love seat. He was so unusual in my world—humble, content, considerate, affectionate, loving, and practical. He floated between the two social classes in Santa Monica: the high-net-worth families and the low-cash-flow households. His mom owned an apartment building worth several million dollars so his family had high net worth. But they lived on his dad's salary as a driver for a delivery company. Manuel's spending

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money came from working his restaurant job. He grounded me.

Manuel stood unbalanced in his cycling shoes and shook out the cushions. His muscles flexed in his tight biking shirt and shorts. He seemed like a man, not a boy.

“It’s only been a few weeks since I’ve seen you but you look taller.”

“Yeah, my mom thinks I’m having another growth spurt. I eat everything in sight.” He laughed. “She bought a bag of cookies and I left three. My dad was mad.” We sat down together. “I think it’s the triathlon conditioning I’m doing with Beth. We’re both getting fast.”

“Well, you look really good.” Manuel played varsity water polo and basketball and swam for Samohi (Santa Monica High School). I changed the topic, “So how was work yesterday?”

“It was fine bussing tables for pricks and posers. For every star, there must be a ten-person entourage of posers.” He hesitated. “Marie, do you have an entourage?”

“Well, yeah, I guess.” He was quiet. I asked, “Are you thinking I’m one of the bitchy stars telling you to fetch them more sparkling water?”

Manuel answered, “No. I know you. You’re a sweetheart and my best friend. You’re kind and smart, super generous, witty, pretty, and a really good actress. It’s just...never mind.”

I pleaded, “Please tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Did you know that the number one graduation gift that the girls in our high school want is plastic surgery? There are tons of girls who are getting their noses done and tons more who want their boobs done. They want to look like you, even though you’re all natural. Beth and I talked about it yesterday. She likes you and wants to hang out with us more. She just got asked to model again. She doesn’t want to be trapped in contracts like you and her mom but is worried

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that she will be when she swims for Poland in the Olympics.”

Beth’s parents moved from Poland when she was ten years old. Her mom is a striking TV actress who plays a Russian. Her dad is a German and Russian language teacher at an elite private high school in Brentwood.

I agreed. “She will be played if she’s successful. She should get her swimming scholarship to college and then purposefully swim slowly in the qualifying Olympic heats, say she’s sorry and blame her failure on nerves. People forgive humility, you know.”

I snuggled back into Manuel’s chest and noted, “Beth doesn’t like me. We had fun last summer double-dating with Evan and Mitch, but, after, Beth told Kate that I’m a fake.”

Kate was my only girlfriend until last December. When she and Manuel broke up, I tried to call her and talk to her but she refused to talk to me. Instead, she sent me an email saying that being my best friend was too lonely. She also wanted to forget Manuel and said I’d be a constant reminder of him.

He objected, “That’s not true. What would Kate know? Beth can’t stand her.” He added, “Beth likes you. You need friends. You should be friends.”

“You’re my only friend.” Aware that the truth sounded pathetic, I sat up straight on the loveseat. “Anyway, I’m certain Beth hates me. Kate recorded the conversation and played it to me. Beth shared her frustration that you couldn’t see me for what I was, a movie star, not some humble sweetheart.”

“No, Marie. I mean, yes, Beth couldn’t understand how someone so successful could have insecurities. She has this thing about suffering. It drives her not just in her workouts but in how she sees the world. Since you’re rich and had your career handed to you, she didn’t think you struggled with anything. Just like the public,

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right?”

He paused again, “Why the hell would Kate record it and play it back to you? Did she do that a lot?”

I answered, “All the time. She’d press the Memo button on her iPhone.”

“*Lo siento.*” Manuel put his arm around me. “What I’ve said, too?”

“Yeah. One time, you told her it would be incest if we dated. Anyway, she said it’s better for me to hear the truth firsthand so I’d know who my friends were.”

“Oh, sweetie, that was really mean.” He exhaled. “I shouldn’t have lied. I mean I’ve learned from our whole messy break-up to always tell the truth.”

“You lied?” I wondered what he lied about. “You mean you still love Beth?”

Manuel exhaled again, “For me, my feelings for Beth didn’t end after we broke up. Dating her was a disaster but I love her and think she’s hot.” He studied my face, bit his lip, looked away, and sighed. “My feelings for Kate ended though. I can’t believe she did that. No wonder you don’t have friends.”

“I don’t see the point when I know what they think anyway.” I gazed at his loving eyes. “I trust you. I trust Evan, but he thinks like my mom.”

“Marie, I promise that Beth likes you, Mitch adores you. Evan loves you, too. He’s just doing the best for your careers. I said those things to get Kate off my back about...” Manuel stopped mid-sentence and started a contingent thought. “It makes me sad that you’ve got, like, ten people around you at all times but don’t have more than about three friends, always lonely in a crowd. I don’t want you to feel abandoned when I start dating someone or...” Manuel

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stood up and switched the subject. “So you leave for Beverly Hills soon?”

“Yep. Elise is coming to run with me first, make sure I don’t look fat for tonight. Then Sashi’s driving me.” Elise was my personal trainer. I scanned my iPhone. “Elise is late. I have to be at the hotel to get ready for the Globes by ten this morning.”

“So the story is Evan cheated on you?”

“Yep. He says he still loves me but...” I shrugged my shoulders. “So we’re friends. Byron will be my date to everything.”

Byron Jones was my co-star in the film we were currently working on, *Constantine’s Muse*. I had kissed him again since Manuel and I had talked. I needed to be even more direct with him at the Academy Awards in February.

“You’re quiet.” Manuel eyed me disapprovingly and crossed his arms across his chest. “You kissed him again, didn’t you?”

“Ugh, I stopped the kiss. I just don’t expect it. It’s like I forget that I don’t like him when I’m around him.” Trying to explain how I could not get Byron to stop kissing me was very difficult. Manuel gave me plenty of strategies to make Byron stop but nothing worked. “It just happens.”

He shook his head and walked through the gate. We both peered around the street for the paparazzi that would be arriving at any moment.

“Did Evan know?”

“No.”

Manuel scrutinized me reproachfully. “Ironic. You were the cheater.”

“No, I wasn’t. I didn’t want Byron to kiss me. I always shut him down.”

“You need to be cold, an ice queen, to get him to back off.”

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Manuel concluded, "You're too sweet for that, naturally. But that's the only way, Marie."

I followed him. I saw an opportunity. I could test his reaction to me physically, see if he loved me without having to tell him how I felt.

"Yeah," I agreed, "but it's something about how smooth Byron moves and how he knows what I'm thinking that catches me off guard each time."

I slid in front of Manuel, put my hand behind his neck, and pulled his lips to mine.

The kiss happened in slow motion. My heart stopped as his body jolted. Probably within an instant of feeling his lips, he pushed me away with so much force that I tripped backwards and fell on my butt. Nonetheless, my lips tingled and the hairs on the back of my neck and hands stood up. No one's lips felt like that. I couldn't deny that I was in love with him.

He bellowed, "What the hell, Marie?" He stared at me, fists and jaw clenched.

I stood up, fighting the urge to puke and hoping my body wouldn't tremble. I hid that my heart broke. "See, Byron is just like that. I have the same reaction. See, it's not cheating."

My kiss was as unwelcome to Manuel as Byron's kisses were to me. I blinked quickly and willed myself to act normal.

Manuel grabbed his bike helmet and sunglasses. "Don't do that to me, Marie. I'm not an actor." He shook his head at me and sighed. "That was mental."

He put on his bike helmet, then dropped his glasses, tripped over himself getting them, and finally stood upright. He breathed purposefully, relaxed his shoulders, and added, "Maybe now that you're single, you don't fight your feelings with Byron and you go

with it.”

Clearly Manuel didn't love me as a girlfriend. Breathing was getting harder to do but I controlled my tear ducts. I admitted, “It doesn't matter anymore.”

Manuel pinched his eyebrows in question.

I joked to lighten the mood, “Resistance is futile.”

“An Oscar nominee who's a Star Trek geek,” he laughed. He grinned as he exhaled again. His hands relaxed. He forgave me for crossing the line.

He opened his arms. I walked to him and we embraced, as siblings do. I relaxed into his warmth, thankful he loved me even though it was platonic. He felt so much responsibility for people: keeping Beth safe, making time for me, and helping out his sister. Good thing I knew where I stood with him romantically. Good thing I didn't tell him that I was in love with him.

“I've gotta go. Beth gets so mad when I'm late but I had to see you.” He let go, covered those beautiful eyes with his sunglasses, and got on his bike. “I can't wait to go off to college and just study and do this training all the time. Life is going to be so awesome next fall!”

“Ride safely, Manuel.” I needed him to leave as soon as possible.

“Love ya, Marie.”

Despair overwhelmed me as I watched him ride off. I forced myself through the privacy of the front gate and collapsed on the flagstone patio and cried, destroyed from double heartbreak. I thought about calling Evan, telling him Manuel's reaction, and begging him to forgive me for not loving him enough. But I loved Evan too much to have him live a lie by dating me in secret. It was over.

I went inside when I heard a car drive up, the first of the

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paparazzi to arrive. I had only been home for an hour and my entire perspective had changed. I had no idea how I could possibly keep working. I wanted Manuel.

~ *UNDRESSED* ~

“Darling, you look stunning from the back. I told you that you can pull off a plunging back.” Franz added, “You’ve got the best figure in the business.”

“But she’s seventeen,” Mom interrupted. “We’ve talked about this. Your job as her stylist is to maintain her brand as a wholesome teenaged actor.”

Franz’s face fell as I turned around so Mom could see the dress. Mom had the smooth, glowing skin of a woman in her late twenties even though she was forty. She was Michelle Michael, Oscar winning actor and Hollywood sweetheart. We called ourselves ‘actors’. The word “actress” was outdated. We all were actors, all equal, even though we females showed so much more skin.

“It looks great,” Mom concluded. “But cover her up, and she must wear a bra. Try the next, dear.”

Franz raised his eyebrows at me and the first designer who was messing with the back. We had two more gowns to try, complementary dresses from up-and-coming designers who were there for the gown selection. Mom and I were so busy that it was the only way we could arrange the dress fittings. The designer of the second dress put the second gown on me and fussed with the back zipper.

Mom responded. “No. You can’t just throw on some tulle at the bottom hem because I objected that the dress was too short. Thank you for your time. Next.”

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The designer slouched. I wondered how many free man-hours it took to get to this point but agreed with Mom. He made a way too short dress with a plunging neckline and then slapped on some see-through scratchy fabric as a fix. Franz shook the designer's hand while I stepped out of the dress.

Franz hurried to get me into the last dress. He whispered, "Darling, look more confident. Don't show weakness, please."

I smiled at him but his smile was gone, replaced by focused eyes and pursed lips. We entered the adjoining hotel room together.

Mom smiled. "Marie, please twirl."

The dress felt heavy and confining. The train dragged from the weight and the bodice cut into my breasts.

"Franz, you know I love you but you struck out today. You're the best stylist in the business but you're getting weak, flaunting her curves. Be stronger." Mom considered me again, "Darling, how does that one feel?"

"It's fine, just heavy in the back. The bodice should be let out a little. It cuts into me." I learned that it didn't matter how the dress felt. She'd choose the one that accomplished the look she had in mind. Without much hope, I added, "The first dress is more comfy."

Mom came over to me and pulled up on the dress. "Franz, she's up for a Globe and an Oscar and is absolutely terrified that she will win. We need to make this as comfortable as possible."

I played the Muse character in *Jefferson's Muse*. She is a mythological muse who takes human form as an eighteen-year-old and never changes through time. She comes into the lives of men, inspires them, they love her, the men move on to greatness, and she tries again to find love and meaning for herself. I'm able to portray characters of different races because my natural features are so ambiguous. I can use makeup to darken or lighten my skin color for

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different characters, and my hair can be dyed or hidden under a wig.

She waved the designer to come over. "This is her Oscar gown. The bodice shows way too much cleavage. Remove the train to lighten the dress, and she needs straps. Put the weight on her shoulders." She raised her eyebrows at Franz. "Fix the first dress for tonight."

"Absolutely, Michelle," Franz confirmed.

Mom smiled at me. "I'm overwhelmed, dear." She held my hand and closed her eyes. "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." She squeezed my hand. "You look amazing in both dresses, Marie, but you should also look your age."

"Mom, now I really am scared about tonight."

"My little introvert," Mom smiled, "don't be scared about tonight. You're not going to win the Globes. We didn't campaign for you since your audience has been so critical of your success. Just enjoy yourself with Richard, Grant, and Matthew. You deserve the recognition."

Muse inspires two men: the twenty-six-year-old Thomas Jefferson, played by Matthew Thorne, and a slave, played by Grant Bell. We had just won several awards: People's Choice Favorite Movie, Favorite Movie Actor for Grant, Favorite Actress for me, Favorite Drama Movie, Favorite On Screen Team for Matthew, Grant and me, and Favorite Movie Star Under 25 for me. I won the Screen Actors Guild award for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Leading Role and Critics' Choice Best Actress.

"I sure hope you're right that I won't win, Mom. I'm not in the mood. We made a mistake. I miss Evan already."

"I'm so sorry, dear." She whispered, "It was the only way to get you back on top. If I were a young actor today, I wouldn't have been

able to handle such quick shifts in public opinion. Social media is a cruel bully. Be careful not to read anything or go online. Okay, honey?”

I nodded. I always nodded and smiled.

~ *LOSER!* ~

Matthew leaned into me and talked into my ear, “Marie, I’m so proud of you. Good job, kiddo. You were heroic sitting there all night and clapping for the winners. You lost with grace.”

“Thanks,” I smiled. “Good job to you, sitting there knowing you deserved to at least be nominated.” Matthew was not much taller than me when I wore heels. He was 5’10” and famous for his six pack abs. He could also act.

“Thanks. I’ve got a present for you. I’m assuming you get to bail now that the Globes are over. Can I bum a ride with you and give it to you in your limo?”

“I’ll have to ask my mom.” Mom was home. She only cared about four annual award shows. I studied his face. “You’re not staying to work the after-party?”

He smiled at me and his eyes searched the room. “You didn’t come in with your mom. She’s not here.” He waved to Grant. “I’ll get far more publicity getting into that limo with you tonight. Please do me the favor?”

Grant kissed me a Hollywood hello, a quick kiss on the lips. “Hey baby, love you. That was an ultimate F.U. that we didn’t win.”

“It’s alright. Love you, Grant.” Grant was gorgeous, an excellent actor, and a genuine person. He gave the best performance of any actor but was overlooked by the Globes and the Academy because he was a new actor and the Academy members didn’t know his work,

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not because he was African American.

Grant shook Matthew's hand. "I heard you already moved to Brentwood?"

"Yeah," Matthew confirmed. "I can't afford it yet, but at least I got out of the dump in L.A. My agent said my next royalty check will be even bigger. All of ours will be thanks to all these awards we're winning."

Grant agreed, "I know, right. But I'm still in my dump. I want to see the money first, see how many people own a piece of me, before I spend it. My agent warned me that it's like the Colorado River and I'm Mexico."

Matthew patted Grant's shoulder. Someone signaled to Grant to meet someone influential. Matthew smiled at me and handed me a card and a jewelry box. I read the card. It was a sweet thank you. I opened the box. He gave me a pair of amber and diamond earrings.

"They match your incredible eyes. I thought they'd look so beautiful on you. Do you like them?"

"Yes, thank you. They're really pretty." I grinned at him and his eyes twinkled. I put the card and earrings in my handbag and smiled at him. I wasn't afraid of him.

"I'm glad." He smiled, put his hands in his pockets, and leaned forward, "Can we please get out of here? You can drop me off at my condo on your way home."

We left without me texting Mom for permission.

Heading in my limo to Santa Monica, Matthew admitted that he wanted me. I was surprised and flattered. My gorgeous co-star thought I was hot? Wow. Cool. But I didn't know what to do. He was a man, and I was off-limits to a man. I kissed a lot of guys at parties, but that was just for fun, and all men knew that Martin, the best lawyer in Hollywood, represented me and would lock them up

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for statutory rape.

“Matthew, what are you doing?” I asked as he unzipped my dress. “I don’t want to do it with you.”

Everyone I knew had an awful casual-sex experience. I was not going to do it with someone I didn’t love. I loved Evan, and we didn’t. I certainly wouldn’t be doing it with Matthew.

He reassured me, “Okay. No intercourse. How about this?”

He moved off of me onto his knees while he stretched me out on the long limo seat. My bra was still on but my dress was off my torso. He kissed my breast, trailing his tongue along my skin to the edge of my Spanx and back up to my breasts. He caressed me.

Surprised, I reacted, “No. I don’t want that. Nope.” And I moved my hands to pull his hand out of my crotch. He removed it but pulled me on top of him on the floor of the limo as he continued to kiss my lips and breasts. That was fine. It was kind of fun and felt nice.

But then, he unzipped his pants and pulled down his boxers. “Blow me, Marie.”

“What? No. You’ve got to be kidding me. No, I don’t want to Matthew.”

He pushed my head down and was holding my shoulders with his hands so that my cheek was in his crotch. I felt trapped. “No.”

I backed up away from him. He followed, rolling on top of me while he tried to pull off my Spanx. I struggled to keep them on.

“You either blow me or screw me. You can’t turn me on like that for more than a year and not finish what you started. You’re so hot. I have to have you.”

“No! Get off me!” I screamed in anger.

Sashi, my driver since middle school, stopped the limo abruptly, ran out of the driver’s side, and threw open the door.

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“She said, ‘No!’ That means ‘No.’ She’s seventeen years old. Get off her.”

Matthew fumed, “You mind your own business, asshole.”

“Get out of my car. You’re being recorded by our dispatcher. A driver will be here for you to take you where you need to go. Get out of my car now!” Sashi threatened.

“You’re a tease, Marie,” Matthew complained in an angry whisper and left the limo. He and Sashi had a few words. Then Sashi returned to close the door.

“He didn’t? You okay? I made it in time, Marie, right?”

Sashi’s job was to protect me.

“I’m okay. He didn’t... that was close... scary. Thanks for... I’m so embarrassed.” I blushed while I finished pulling up my dress.

It happened so fast that I didn’t really know what happened. But the confusing, crawly, slimy feeling from the encounter exposed Matthew’s intentions. The limo smelled of his stink.

“I’m so sorry. You did nothing wrong,” Sashi reassured me. “I’ll call your mom. We’re professional. Your secret is safe with us.”

I curled up on the seat and couldn’t hold myself hard enough. I wanted to crawl out from under the sticky grey ugly weight that had become my skin. I wanted to scald his presence off me and out of my mind but I couldn’t get away from the memories flashing like a movie projector loop through my mind. My stomach turned as other repressed traumas took center stage.

I forced myself to push the memories into a deep hole in my brain and slammed the lid down. But I had a sinking feeling. I would never be able to pile enough rocks on the lid to keep it shut without this night creeping back into my life and haunting me forever.

I didn’t want Sashi to tell Mom. I didn’t want to tell Mom.

When I got home, I didn’t cry when I mechanically narrated the

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scene to her but I was scared that it would have been so easy for him to rape me. I summarized as if it happened to a character I played rather than to me.

Mom explained that I did nothing wrong. I was a child and he was a man. In California, it's illegal for a twenty-five-year-old man to sleep with a girl under eighteen. Period. It's a misdemeanor even if she agrees. It's a felony if proven violent. He tried to rape me and should be punished. She urged me to press charges, stand up, be a role model, protect other girls from statutory rape—victims like Kate and Elise.

All I could think about was what the press and public would do with the news.

Fed up, I threatened to quit acting. Mom called Martin. He explained that it would cost me about \$40 million dollars to quit. He disagreed with Mom about pressing charges. They argued about my safety versus hurting the project with the negative publicity. Martin came up with alternative ways to punish Matthew.

The rage boiled inside me, but I couldn't release it. I wanted to scream but couldn't get any sounds out. I wanted to cry, but no tears fell. I was trapped, shaking uncontrollably, violently.

"Stop!" I shouted over the speaker phone. Hearing my own anger surprised me. I immediately re-gained control.

Mom kissed my cheek. "Honey, I'm so sorry. I love you. What do you want to do?"

I studied her face, trying to read what she'd let me do. Mom was the Hollywood good girl who prayed every day and gave most of her money away to charities. She was a remarkable, sweet woman, incredibly talented, and beautiful. Her tight smile and wet eyes told me that this was my decision.

Matthew's words haunted me. He called me a "tease." I wasn't a

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tease. I had said *no*. I was a minor and clueless about how I could be perceived as sexy. I didn't see myself that way.

"I never want to work with him again. And I want *him* to suffer—not me, so no press."

"Okay," Mom whispered to me and then hugged me. She pulled me into her shoulder and lifted her chin.

Mom turned off her phone and reassured me, "Don't let his worthlessness in. You're precious and strong."

Her words made no sense. "I wouldn't think it happened to me...but it did...but I don't have the right emotion or something?" I was trying to use all of my years of listening to my therapist to describe my feelings. Everyone talked like they were in touch with their emotions, and my psychological training meant absolutely nothing at that moment. Without dialogue written by someone else, I had no description for what I was feeling. I tried again, "Why does it feel like there's no *me*?"

"This too shall pass. You're an actress, trained to separate the physical your character feels from whom you are. We have to disassociate to protect the self."

I was so frustrated. I barked, "Mom! What does that mean? In English, please!"

Mom brought my hand up to her cheek and surveyed me through her tears. "It's not your fault. You trusted a man not worthy of your trust. I'll help you pick up the pieces."

"I don't have any pieces left to put into emotional safety boxes, Mom. I'm numb."

She prayed, "May God heal your body and soul. May your pain cease. May your strength increase. May your fears be released. May blessings, love, and joy surround you. Amen."

Humiliated that I lost Evan and the Globes, upset that I couldn't

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lie to myself about my love for Manuel, destroyed that Manuel didn't feel the same, terrified of winning an Oscar, and mad that I was trapped as an actor in the Hollywood web, I was not in the mood to pray.

I left Mom on the couch. I wanted to suffocate my emotions—hate, betrayal, weakness, anger, fear, regret, responsibility, shame. I disappeared into my girlish pink bedroom. I pulled my bed closer to the windows without much success, abandoned that idea, and then carefully re-organized my totems on my bookshelf. I didn't want to remove any object from my happy, precious childhood.

I heard my door open and looked up from the floor, ready to snap at Mom.

Manuel smiled warily in the doorway, asking permission to come in with his soulful eyes.

I nodded. Waves of relief, peace, security, and love flowed through me. I smiled at him.

He sat next to me on the floor. “Your mom called your dad who called mine. You sure know drama, don't you?”

I nodded. He put his arm around my shoulder. “Sometimes I forget that you're innocent even though you're an actress.”

I leaned into him and relaxed.

“Where were you trying to put your bed? The middle of the room provides an interesting vantage point, I guess.” He encouraged, “How about I help you move it to its new spot?”

~ *THE WEB* ~

My Globe loss and the public embarrassment of Evan cheating on me put me back on top. I did a few interviews that went just fine. My trailer on set shielded me from the paparazzi. Women liked me

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again. I worried that an Oscar win would re-ignite the hate but Mom explained that the Academy Awards that night offered me freedom. An Oscar equaled royalty. She assured me that all women loved princesses.

I texted Mom when Byron and I arrived at the hotel in which Franz and his team of artists would transform us into movie stars for the Oscars.

Byron had a typical lean and toned ideal Hollywood build. He had light brown hair, perfectly bronzed skin, and expressive eyes. His features were precisely balanced, but also unique because when he smiled, he had adorable, childlike dimples in his cheeks. His smile often took my breath away because of the contrast between the chiseled marbled smoothness in his pensive expression and the warm youthful glow of his smiling expression. It didn't seem possible that both faces originated from the same striking man. Byron was number one on my personal hotness list. I just wished he had more talent.

We sat down on the couch together in the hotel lobby. He leaned into me so quickly that he managed to kiss my lips.

"Stop!" I scolded, surprised by the intensity of my voice. "I asked you to stop doing the Hollywood hello. I want you to be my friend and co-star. That's it, no romance. Remember, I'm seventeen and you're twenty-one. You don't want to get arrested for dating a minor. You know that's statutory rape."

"Marie, you're the star of another major motion picture, your seventh feature. You're Muse. You're not a teenager. You're wonderful, gorgeous, smart, sweet, and talented. I'm not insincere. I love you and that's that."

Byron's blue eyes silently stunned me. They swooped in, blocked my thoughts from logical reason, and replaced them with an acceptance that he was beyond reproach.

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He continued speaking in his melodic Australian accent, “Besides, I just turned twenty-one a month ago and you turn eighteen in two months. You know as well as I do that it wouldn’t be statutory rape.” His voice pulsed in my ear, “It would be making love because I love you.”

“Well, maybe for you. I’m not interested whatsoever. Actually, I’ll be looking into getting a chastity belt until I can become a nun.”

I eyed him again to assess his truthfulness. The “love you” talk was typical for Hollywood. I tossed the sentiment around, too. Byron was new to the business and sometimes I couldn’t tell if he meant it when he said he loved me.

After a lengthy silence, he asked, “Marie, are you afraid of attention?”

“Definitely. The press had a field day with my parents’ divorce. It was pretty sad to see my mom go through so much pain while the whole world was happy that the perfect Hollywood marriage failed. My mom was a faithful and loving wife. People couldn’t get enough of her ruin. It hurt a lot, more than you could imagine. The press also turned my words after my first Oscar nomination. Then look at what just happened with Evan. Total nightmare. I trust absolutely no one in the media and, I don’t want to be preachy, but please don’t say that you love kissing me on set. It’s so over-the-top.”

I was nominated before, for Best Supporting Actress, three years prior for my very first film, *Left to Die*, but didn’t win the Oscar. Mom told me I wouldn’t win. It was a step towards veneration, and it would increase exposure of the film and hopefully increase box office revenues by at least \$30 million. She practiced with me for hours about how I would go to the Academy Awards, pose for the cameras, sit patiently and uncomfortably in the Shrine Auditorium, smile when I lost, showing support for the actor who won, and pretend that I

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was not disappointed. The evening I lost, I was painfully embarrassed and nauseous. I stained my dress from perspiration. When we reviewed the video, I seemed completely composed. I smiled and gave the impression that I was happy for the winner. I remembered that I blushed, but I had so much makeup on that the cameras didn't pick it up. There was no strain on my face from the uncomfortable, painful gown. There was no sign that I was sweating buckets. That was the night I learned that I could act. That night Mom won her Oscar for Best Actress in a Leading Role for *Left to Die*.

Byron ignored my request. "You seem like you know that you're going to win? Is it rigged?"

"Michelle and Richard wrote *Jefferson's Muse*, released the feature film during Thanksgiving break when every American in the audience would be thankful for our American forefathers, maintained heavy worldwide promotion in December, and made sure the film would be nominated for an Oscar in January."

"So? Why would that mean you'll win?"

"Well, here's how it works: there are five steps. Step one of the nomination game is that each member of each American Academy branch nominates a talent. The Director Branch of the Academy nominates the directors. The Acting Branch nominates the actors, and so on. The top nominees are selected from each branch. Matthew and Grant had no chance at being nominated, since most of the Acting Branch members are older actors who, for the most part, don't even watch films in theaters or see the actor's actual performance. I'm a household name. They know my talent with scripts; there are only a few of us who can do that.

"Step two, the top votes from each branch become the nominees for each category.

"Step three is a massive marketing push by each studio's and

talent's publicists to all members. In my case, the producers—my mother, Richard, and Ira—promoted Muse to the members non-stop.” Richard Conning was the director working for Ira Goldberg Studios.

“Step four, all of the members vote on the selected nominees, no matter to which branch they belong.

“Step five is the Academy Awards show, where the industry members congratulate themselves and reinforce their influence as American film making royalty. Which, honestly, is absolutely true.”

Byron laughed. “It’s so political, interconnected. I had no idea.”

I nodded. “I think of it as a web, the fans are the flies, and the insiders are the spiders. Sometimes I think I’m the web. Right now I think we young actors are flies. It’s impossible to escape the web.” My eyes watered.

Camille, my therapist, and Mom kept talking “victim” but I kept thinking “fool.” I had responsibility for letting the public dictate my love life just to be liked. I should not have willingly kissed a man when I knew it was against a law made to protect me from a creep. Although Matthew didn’t rape me, he betrayed me. My fans betrayed me. I participated in my own exploitation. I betrayed my ‘self’.

But there was a change in me. Being a good girl meant being alone. Losing Evan made me question two things: why I gave everything of myself to entertain an unappreciative audience and why isolating myself to protect my private life was worth it.

I considered Byron who thought he loved me and doubted my resolve. He filled a void. Why not date him, be vulnerable? Could I survive it?

Byron patted my leg sympathetically and changed the subject, “So are you ready for today, babe?”

“I’m worried that I’m going to win,” I admitted. I was

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conflicted. I never wanted to be an actor. Many of my contracts would have to be renegotiated, five-year contracts that were set up to expire when I turned eighteen. I wanted to sign nothing and walk away. Winning this award would make walking away very, very difficult for me and for everyone who owned a piece of me.

I did have to finish the “Muse” series, though, so I knew walking away would be relative. It would probably take two to three years to get out of the business, given that I was obligated to finish *Constantine's Muse*, the film I was working on presently. I knew that I'd still be part of my Hollywood world.

“Why wouldn't you want to win an Oscar? You're a great actress. Is it true that you don't go to the screenings, that you don't watch your work?”

“True. I'm too sensitive to the stress the director feels when everyone in the room second guesses him, advocates for an actor to get more screen time, worries about their return on their investment, and threatens him in order to make the changes they want. It's this room full of spiders stressing about how they can catch the most flies.”

“Marie, after tonight, you'll be a spider.” Byron smiled. “Lean on me if you get overwhelmed. I understand.”

“Thanks. But I don't want to eat flies.”

~ *LOOKING GOOD* ~

Mom arrived in jeans and a tee. Sage was already in full makeup but the stylists had not started on her hair.

Sage was a beautiful woman, my height with long black hair, dark skin and green eyes. I didn't know if she was Persian or Turkish, perhaps Indian. Her name was also her trademark. I loved her eyes,

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not just the sage color or the contrast with the green against her skin, but also the depth of emotion that her eyes expressed. From her eyes, I knew I could trust her and that she was genuine. She was in her mid-thirties but looked a few years older than Mom. Dad hired her when she needed a job after she bombed out as a performer. She was a huge teenaged success, starring in a cute young adult motion picture series in which she also performed the vocals for the key tracks. She had instant fame but couldn't handle the pressure from both Hollywood and the concert tours. She was a complete drunken slut there for a while. Her second album was a flop. Her production studio didn't renegotiate her contracts and no one gave her another chance. She went to rehab, cleaned herself up, reconnected with her Muslim roots, and fell in love. But she was a has-been in the entertainment industry. That's when Dad hired her to manage his and my engagements around Mom's busy schedule. When he moved to Montana and I became an actor, I became her sole client. Since she lived the jet-setting celebrity teenaged life and then found God again, Dad figured she'd know the game and help me from imploding. And she did. She was a terrific manager, protecting me from making her mistakes.

"Mom!" I hugged her. "I forgot to ask you yesterday. How's your project going?"

"The film will be wonderful. But I'm still disappointed we have to shoot in Vancouver. I'd like to be closer to you, Marie. I love you so much. I've missed you more than I can say." She sighed and hugged me tighter. "I'm so proud of you. You did such a great job on *Jefferson's Muse* and Richard says you're even more tremendous in *Constantine's Muse*. Wow, honey; good work."

"Thanks." I let go. "Hi Sage." I hugged her too.

"Great job, Marie. It's always a pleasure working for you. I'm so

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proud of you, too.”

“Thanks, Sage. And thanks to you, I have nothing to worry about. Except tonight. I’m terrified. Can we practice again, Mom?”

“That’s why I’m here. But let’s make sure your dress fits first.”

Mom turned to Byron and shook his hand. “Hello, Byron, I’m Michelle Michael, co-producer of the film you are wrecking. Please learn how to act.”

Byron shook her hand but said nothing. He smiled and winked at her. For a moment, I thought Mom had turned him on or something. We walked uneasily to the elevator and to the hotel room.

Mom hugged Franz and the three of them left the room to the adjoining room to brief Franz’s team.

Byron kissed me again from out of nowhere.

“Stop! Dude, I didn’t see that coming. I’m aware that you’re standing next to me, and then boom, out of nowhere! Please, my nerves are completely rattled. Don’t kiss me.”

“I thought it would relieve some tension, that’s all.”

I searched his face and shook my head. His eyes expressed sincerity and face was relaxed, showing no sign of tension or worry. I pleaded, “I don’t want to be just another girl to you. I want it to be special, with someone who only loves me. Please, I’m not a trophy.”

He stepped back from me and waited until I acknowledged him. He explained using his most patient voice, “You don’t fool me, Marie. I see how lonely you are. I’m your guy. I can give you so much love.”

“Byron, you think I’m this innocent virgin. I’m not. I have chosen not to be promiscuous. I used to party, too. I’ve seen it all and don’t want it. I’m not going to attend gross parties, blow you, or go through rehab again. I’m completely not your type.”

He shook his head. “You’re wrong about me, Marie. You’re

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right that I get pissed too much. And these girls, they're everywhere, aggressive, in line. I won't deny myself but I don't want you in the way I have them. I respect you, admire you." He looked down and his lips slightly puckered into a sexy pout. "I want you to move into my condo with me until we finish shooting. You won't be lonely anymore. I won't be either."

I shook my head. "Be realistic. We wrap. We say a painful goodbye. We both feel more alone afterwards as we go on to the next project. You're incredibly hot, Byron. Your line of girls will never stop. You'll continue to lose yourself each time you're bashed online. You'll keep changing who you are for a fickle audience. I'll miss you too much. An affair is temporary. It's not what I want."

He sighed, looking deflated. "Okay. I'll back off."

"Promise?" I asked.

"You have to know the effect you have on me. I love the color of your eyes and the mind hidden behind them, and I only get to see them if I'm really close. Babe, we connect. But I'll do my best." Byron crossed the room and slouched onto the couch. "I wrote you a song. Please just let me sing it to you when we get back to the set." He picked up the remote and turned on the TV.

He didn't promise. A song would completely wear me down. I answered, "Just take no for an answer."

Mom came in to get me to try on the dress. She assessed the situation.

She walked directly to Byron and put her hand on his shoulder, looking at him with knowledge and purpose. "Byron, back off from my daughter. You're co-stars. You're not romantic. Use your feelings on screen. Repress them when you're off the set. Marie is *not* Muse. You touch her without her permission and you'll wish you stayed down under."

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Byron put his hand on hers and returned the stare with conviction. "I'm in love with her. I know she's more than Muse. She's perfect, one-of-a-kind, extraordinary, and beautiful. But she's so lonely. I can replace that loneliness with my love if she'd let me."

He took Mom's hand off of his shoulder and kissed the top of it as he got up from the couch. He held her hand as he walked her to me.

"You both are absolutely gorgeous. I promise I'll try, Marie." He smiled and put Mom's hand in mine. Then he walked back to the sofa, sat down, and watched TV.

Mom and I watched him. I wondered if any want-to-be or unproven actor but Byron had the nerve to treat Mom that way. Mom was a diva and most people tried desperately to kiss her ass.

Then I noticed Mom. Her face glowed from the confrontation and she shifted her body, accentuating her legs. She actually had an insurance policy on her perfect legs. I shook my head in disbelief. She giggled and tossed her hair as she pulled me to the adjoining room.

I was going to scold her for flirting but Franz was positively giddy when I entered the room. I thought he would be stressed out about how Mom would react to the dresses but he grinned and tried not to bounce. His hands were clasped together. I eyed Sage and Mom. They smiled, too.

I asked, "What is it, Franz?"

He squealed, "Your Oscar presents! Your own collection! What do you think?"

He unveiled a collection of Anabelle by Marcia Sherrill handbags, totes, evening bags and a cute little backpack. Her trademark was a pink pineapple, which always brought me back to comforting thoughts of looking out of my terrace in Santa Monica at all the palm trees in the canyon.

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“I love them! Thanks! These are in my collection? What does that mean?”

“Marcia named the bags after you. You’ve got a Liana bag and a Marie tote from your favorite Palm Springs line. This gorgeous bag for tonight is the Marie Michael from the Hollywood line! We got it in both black and gold. I figured the Durglo backpack would be your favorite.”

Mom hugged me. “I got a set for everyone! Renee wears hers tonight, too. I’m so proud of you, Marie, so very proud.” Mom got down to business. “Now let’s get ready!”

I sat in a swiveled chair in front of the bathroom mirror. Franz’s team had several stations throughout the hotel room. He turned the adjoining room into wardrobe and catering. Franz was working on my makeup first. Someone else would do my hair.

“Franz, Byron insists that he’s in love with me and wants to date. He’s completely hot. I like him but, you know?”

“If you date someone, date Evan again. You two are beautiful together in every way. Byron doesn’t deserve you. You’re too good for him, Marie.”

“I have such a hard time. I kiss him a lot off set, ya know, at least a couple times a week. I... it’s always in response to him kissing me. I just don’t know why... It’s like I don’t see it coming and then it’s, ‘wow’, and then I stop kissing him back when I remember that he’s shallow.”

“I don’t think Byron is shallow. He loves you but he’s not right for you. He’s new to this world and from what I can tell will crash like most of them. Can I tell you what I see?”

“Of course, Franz. Please.” Although I had to be careful with what I revealed about myself with him, I could trust that he would tell me the truth.

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“I’ve watched you for years on set and at home. All your co-stars love you. You’re sweet and naturally beautiful inside and out—one in a billion. But, you, my dear, are in love with only one boy and until you tell Manny how you feel, you won’t be able to date anyone.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I blushed. I shook my head. “It would hurt too much to tell Manuel. He doesn’t love me that way. He hates that I’m an actor. He thinks I’m his sister.”

Franz put his hand on my shoulder and stopped applying my foundation. He looked me in the eyes and pleaded, “You need to tell him that you’re in love with him, take the chance.”

“I kind of did. I kissed him and he pushed me away.”

One of his assistants entered the room. Franz shooed him out and closed the door. He continued, “I hate seeing you so lonely. I know Evan didn’t cheat on you. You broke up because you loved Manny. Manny thought you were mental when you kissed him and pushed you away. Renee told me. Nothing will change for you unless you’re honest with the people you love. I personally like Evan better, but you and Manny have a stronger bond. Manny doesn’t play games. You played a kissing game.”

I chuckled and then explained, “I’ve kissed Manny twice, actually. The first time was playing spin-the-bottle. The second time I pretended to demonstrate Byron’s surprise kiss. Both showed that he didn’t care while both tore me up inside.”

“Manny is dense, darling. But he’s absolutely in love with you. I can feel it in the room when you both are together. Michelle knows. Evan knows. Beth knows. Kate knew. You two are the only ones in denial. You need to be straight with him.”

“I’m afraid to. He’ll reject me and then what?” I asked and then turned from him, embarrassed that he saw through me so clearly.

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“Then you’ll have closure. I’ll be here for you, as is Renee. Evan would jump at the chance to date you again. You can find some peace because then you’ll know where you stand with Manny.” He giggled. “Besides, Evan is ready for commitment and is mature. Manny needs to grow up and be more open-minded. I saw him roll his eyes behind my back when I was getting you ready for the SAG awards. I kindly ask you: never invite him to come by again while you’re in hair and makeup. Please.”

Franz smiled and added, “And he should praise you after your transformation into a goddess, not complain that you’re more beautiful without makeup. I also don’t like that he acts like the keeper of your modesty. You have the best figure in Hollywood and should flaunt your perfection, not hide it.”

Franz stopped his rant. “Darling, I like Evan. He’s worldly, beautiful and wise.” He raised his eyebrows. “Tell Manny how you feel. If he doesn’t feel the same, call Evan and this time love him in return and you’ll be so happy with him.”

I nodded but didn’t feel like talking anymore. I would be so vulnerable if Manuel rejected me. I’d feel like a complete idiot after he gasped at my admission of love and withdrew from my life. But then I would have the freedom to let myself love Evan. Franz was right that Evan would take me back. I let it play out in my head. Nope, I would miss Manuel too much. He had to stay in my life. I needed him on a deep, almost spiritual level, even if it was just as a brother.

Franz got down on his knee in front of me and held my hand. “Marie, I know you’re my boss, but you can trust me. I’m a gossip. I am. But I won’t betray you. You’re one of my best friends and I know I’m yours. Well, I share that role with Manny. Listen, I see everything, hear everything. I put things together. I heard about

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Matthew. You're right to want to destroy him. You're considering dating Byron. From the swelling around your eyes, you've been crying. I'm here for you, can support you. What you've been through is too much. I love you. Please let me help."

I hugged him and tried so hard not to lose it. Tears fell anyway. He held me while I cried it out.

I pulled myself together. "Thanks, Franz."

"Let's start over, my beautiful friend." Franz handed me a cold wash cloth to wipe my tears and sooth my eyes.

After he finished reapplying my foundation, he opened the door and called in his assistants. It was time to transform. At least I had my black handbag with embroidered pineapples that could remind me of nature, peace, and home.

~ *THE STATUETTE* ~

I had just spent one hour on the red carpet with Byron as my date, being ushered by bodyguards and told to whom we should greet and talk, walking from my Academy-provided limo to my seat in the auditorium with Byron kissing my cheek for the cameras and putting his arm around me any opportunity he found during the times we were together. We were finally in our seats. My feet were killing me in the silver stilettos. My gown probably weighed fifteen pounds and hurt my body from the moment Franz helped me into it. My breasts were taped to provide the right amount of cleavage and uplift. My skin itched everywhere. I was a little sweaty. My face was heavy from the makeup and the false eyelashes pulled at my eyelids. My hair was dark, long and flowing. I had a terrible headache, but I was used to that. Since just after my fourteenth birthday, I always had a headache.

As in all of the awards shows, I was acting at the Oscars, trying

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to show that I was not acting. TV viewers wanted to think that I was being myself, but if I were myself, I would have been inside my home, looking out the window at the peaceful view, wearing sweats and no makeup, and talking in short bursts of thought as appropriate for a teenager. I would not be with Byron. I'd be hanging out with Manuel. Fortunately, thinking of Manuel and some of his goofier moments helped me get through the night until Evan, who I knew in advance would be the presenter, announced the nominees for Best Actress in a Leading Role.

The Academy selected the clip of my monologue in which Muse inspires the young Thomas Jefferson to look beyond building Monticello, challenge who he is, change the new world, and build the dream of a United States of America. Muse moves him to action, to dream of universal liberties, and to create a government that serves the people. Muse is passion and hope. I nailed the difficult dialogue and even cried in the scene. I was certainly convincing.

As Evan introduced the last nominee, I continued to smile, knowing the cameras were on me, but I could taste the acid in my mouth and my body shook. I whispered to Byron, "Help me."

He quickly held my hand and smiled at me, knowing that now the cameras focused on both of us and our possible love connection. I breathed, relieved to share the pressure.

Evan announced, "And the Oscar goes to Marie Michael, Best Actress in a Leading Role."

I sat there, certain that I did not want the honor. Who was I but some ungrateful kid who did not want the attention?

Byron gently shook the hand he held, trying to help me save face and get going. He kissed my cheek and whispered, "Marie, get it together. Get your ass up there."

He stood up and carefully pulled me up on my feet, grinning the

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whole time and whispered again while he hugged me, "You're an actress, Marie. Go act."

I composed my face, smiled, and got to the podium. Evan sensed my struggle so he met me at the top of the stairs, embraced me, and kissed my cheek. I didn't care that the audience would be confused by Evan's sweetness. I didn't care that our publicist would be mad that we ruined the charade.

He smiled at me and whispered, "You can do this, *ma Cherie*. You're my girl who totally rocks."

His encouragement calmed me and I took a moment to smile at him before he escorted me to the podium, tell him with my eyes that I would be stronger for both of us. I received my unwanted statuette of a naked, anatomically ambiguous actor. I had the speech my mother wrote memorized. I performed it. I smiled. I leaned on Evan and walked off the stage gracefully to where Mom was waiting for me backstage.

I quickly embraced Evan. "I love you, Evan. Screw the criticism and humiliation just to sell more seats in a theater. I've missed you."

He let go and put his hand under my chin. "I agree and love you always but dating still doesn't make sense." He squeezed my shoulder and let go. "I'm proud of you, sweetheart."

I stared at him while Mom hugged me with enthusiasm.

"Oh, Marie, I'm so proud of you!" She said as she held me.

I nodded at Evan to say *au revoir*.

I whispered, "Mom, I'm going to puke...hurry."

Mom smiled to everyone around her as she pulled me quickly to where Sage stood for the handoff. Sage pulled me into a small closet-like room and I threw up into the plastic-lined trash bag she gave me. I dropped to the floor and uncontrollably shook the statuette that was still in my fist. Sage held me in silence until she could see that I

had calmed down enough for reason.

“We’ve arranged for you to exit quickly. Sashi will drive you back to the Muse set. Michelle and I will stay. Richard is here, of course, to represent you and his film. You did a great job. Do you think you could handle one more hour backstage?”

“I’d rather not,” I answered. “I’d rather die and go to hell.”

“I know how you feel. I was there, too, but imploded. I’m here so you won’t be me. I’ll fix your makeup and get you in the car. Byron will ride with you back to the set. We’ll give the paparazzi what they want with you two leaving together. Look happy. Carry your Oscar proudly; smile. I’ll get the Oscar for engraving right before you get into the limo.” Sage smiled at me and cleaned up the mess I had made of my face. She sprayed some breath mist into my mouth. They were definitely prepared for me to lose it.

Sage sent some texts and tied up the plastic bag of puke like it was a baby’s dirty diaper. I wondered if Sage had any kids. I knew she was married. I got an email or several emails from her each day, every day. She was more than my manager, she was my crutch. I trusted her but she definitely was a professional who worked for me. We didn’t confide in each other—ever. I was shocked that I never asked about her family.

“I’m sorry I don’t know tons about you. Do you have kids, Sage?”

She smiled at me and then simply said, “You’re my boss. I’m your employee. You have enough on your plate that you don’t have to worry about me, too. I have two boys and a great husband. I love my family and my job. I will always be thankful that your dad hired me. I’m grateful that you give me every Friday afternoon off so I can pray at my mosque. And you pay me very well, thank you.”

She patted me on the shoulder and lifted me up to a standing

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position. I repositioned my stilettos.

“Ready?” She asked.

“Yeah.” I sighed. I was sure I could make it to the limo.

I stopped to pose with my Oscar and then Byron. I endured the gauntlet of photographers with the protection of our bodyguards. I gave the Oscar to Sage, wishing she could unzip me from the tight dress so I could breathe. I got in the limo and waited for Byron. The door closed behind him, and I felt a wave of relief flow through me.

“You did it, babe! I thought you were going to go into shock. Damn, you’re one hell of an actress.” Byron put his arm around me and kissed my cheek.

I shifted away from him and removed my shoes. My feet were throbbing. “Thanks, Byron. I suffer from stage fright. I sure didn’t want to win tonight. But it’s good for the Muse brand, bad for the Marie Michael brand.”

“Yeah, thanks for being so awesome. I get paid \$100,000 for my role in this project and then will make millions because you win the Oscar for best actress. Now everyone will see *Constantine’s Muse*. You just made my career. Thanks.”

I joked, “Byron, ya know it’s your agent, manager, publicist, stylist, trainer, lawyer and bartender who will get most of that.”

The mention of a bartender immediately made Byron pour himself a drink from the bar and light a cigarette. Byron was a chimney.

I really felt for him. He probably couldn’t quit acting for another five years with the contracts to which he was bound, and he was a walking time bomb of self-destruction. He had no handle on the fame. He repeated the same story about himself to everyone he met and, after he was smashed an hour later, told the same story again. He probably thought people cared but would soon learn that nobody

did. He'd soon learn to trust no one.

~ *PROM PLANS* ~

I fumbled through the bag left for me in the limo and found my cell phone. Dad and Celia sent a text praising me. I texted a return thanks. I called Manuel.

"*Bueno*," he answered. He and his father said '*bueno*' instead of '*bola*' and I never truly understood why. He said it was just a greeting and didn't mean "good" in context.

"Hey, Manuel," I said as I closed my eyes, instantly feeling relief from hearing my best friend's voice, feeling loved.

"You did it. My mom cried, ya know. Thanks for thanking us."

"Ugh, I wanted to die. It was excruciating." My lungs constricted just thinking about the stress.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I know. Just keep in mind that you did it. You're awesome."

"Thanks." I sighed, ready to change the subject. "Byron and I are heading back to San Diego. So what are you going to do tonight?"

"I'm going out on a double date with Alan to some fight, I guess. Alan is paying. He got a driver so it should be an easy date."

Alan Goldberg, my producer's son and our classmate—when I went to classes—was a compelling jerk, one of those mega rich guys who was the life of the party, knew everyone, treated girls as whores, made enormous social errors, and then apologized sincerely for being an ass. He was scrawny, only a few inches taller than me, and completely un-athletic.

All of us had sworn off our friendship with him and yet we all somehow forgave him. Each time we forgave him, we felt like fools

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and the cycle continued. Now that we were seniors in high school, with the exception of me at work most of the time, we finally gave up trying to exclude him since the effort was futile anyway.

“I thought you’d never get set up again with Alan. I mean, you’re on the seventh girl you thought was a slut and moved too fast for you.” I had counted.

“They are all so vacant. I just can’t deal with anyone I’ve dated since Kate. But Alan set me up with that cute girl I like from Brentwood when I called him to get her number. Her name is Trish. She goes to the school where Beth’s dad teaches. Tuition there is \$32,000 per year, for a high school! That’s so insane! I asked Beth’s dad about her.” He sighed. “Beth and I got into a huge fight this morning. Anyway, Trish doesn’t take his classes, but she’s really smart and plays classical guitar and piano. She’s a singer. She’ll probably think I’m a total loser but I gotta try, right? So, Alan’s taking Sherry since she knows her.”

My heart sank but I tried my best to sound supportive, “You’re trying to impress a girl by taking her out on a Sunday night with Alan? Are you mental? Take her out to Malibu and have a stroll on the beach. Please, Manuel, don’t take her out with an asshole and his slut to a fight!”

“I can’t. I don’t have a car. What am I gonna do? Ride the bus to Brentwood to pick her up on my bike?”

“No. Wait a second. Take my car. It’s in the garage at my house,” I urged and then felt stupid for giving him the means to have a successful date.

He laughed. “You’re really trying hard to get this girl to like me. Thanks, I guess, my little match-maker, but no. Alan has it all set up.”

“Well, okay. Tell me how it goes.”

“I will. I hope I like her. She’s cute and smart and there sure

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aren't many girls like that. I figured I'd ask her to prom if we click. I'm running out of time."

"It'd be a bummer to miss prom," I confirmed. It was early, at the end of March, because of all the budget cuts in the public schools. The administration had to cut off several weeks of school. Every senior had to do two independent study projects to make up for the lack of education. I was worried that I'd miss prom if Byron kept messing up and delaying the schedule.

Manuel sounded shocked. "Are you going?"

"Yeah, my mom said I'd regret not going. Don't tell anyone, but I paid for renting out the Getty Mansion off the PCH for the school so we could go there—my donation this year. Alan asked me to go with him, but I figured I'd ask someone once I knew for sure that we'd wrap by then. Otherwise, I told Alan that I'll drive down that afternoon and go with his group and then come back to the set the next morning."

Byron interrupted, "I want you to ask me to your prom, babe."

I laughed. "I guess I already have a taker."

Manuel interrupted, "I'm mad. You should've told me. We could have gone together. I've been wasting all this time looking for a girl to ask to prom and could have gone with you? Damn, Marie."

"I'm sorry. I just figured you wanted a real date since you have to go. If I said I go with you and then couldn't and you get crowned then what, you'd go to prom by yourself? I mean, what prom king does that?"

"Marie, I'm not going to be prom king. Sam will be. Kate will be queen. We broke up. Sure I was nominated, but I'm a geek. Kate's the popular girl. Sam's a dude." Manuel paused. "Listen, I like Trish. I'll ask her to prom if we click. If we don't, will you be my date? If you can't go, I'll go by myself in Alan's group. Deal?"

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“Sure, yeah. But don't you want a romantic prom or something?”

“Yeah, but... So we have a plan?” Manuel grumbled.

I agreed, “Yeah. Cool. Will we be doubling with Beth and Mitch?”

“No. I...I kissed Beth today. She's beyond angry with me.”

“What?!”

“Yeah, I'm gonna deal with this one myself. So, let's not talk about it.”

I didn't know what to say. I swallowed. My insides ached as I lost another piece of 'me'.

At that moment, Marie Michael determined that she was not going to give loving Manuel another thought. Mom said the key to happiness was acceptance of what you cannot change. Marie had to stop wishing for something impossible and deal with life as it was, not as she wanted it to be. She or me—whoever—had to accept that Manuel loved me as his sister and make the most out of the fact that Marie Michael was, and would continue to be, an actor.

“Anyway, I should go. I love you, Marie. You rock.”

The-Artist-Formerly-Known-as-I ended abruptly, “Okay. Bye.”

~ OSCAR TRAPPINGS ~

Marie Michael did it. After a week of anxiety it was over. Sage had my Oscar. Whoever I was did not feel the pride appropriate for the honor. I felt the relief from the pressure. I just desperately wanted to get out of my dress and put the whole experience behind me.

“Byron, don't get any ideas but please unzip me. I've got to get out of this dress before it suffocates me.”

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“Sure, but I always have ideas. Your lips, just...wow, and your body...mmm.”

“Byron. Just treat me like your little sister and don’t try anything. I warn you, my driver will kick your ass. Please?”

I turned my back to him and lifted my hair off my back. He pulled at the zipper. I added, “It’s sewn closed. Rip it.”

He tried. He reached for the bar. “Maybe the bottle opener will work.” He tried again and asked, “So are you dating Manny?”

“No.”

“I’ve seen you look at him. The only time you’ve blown your lines was when he was on the set last fall. You think he’s hot; so why the best friend bullshit?”

“It’s not bull. We’ve been best friends since we’ve been in diapers.”

“Marie, I look at you and see a woman who needs a hug and a friend. I can give you that comfort.”

I wanted Byron that way, especially since Trish would be falling in love with Manuel even though he loved Beth, not me. I could feel my eyes water and worried that I was going to break down in tears if I said anything to him.

Of course Byron noticed. “Oh, Marie, don’t cry.” He stopped ripping the threads, moved next to me, and held me as I cried. He didn’t try to kiss me.

“Byron, please just unzip me. Honestly I didn’t need friends before this messed-up month. You’re right that I’m lonely.” I wiped my tears with my hand. “But I can barely breathe in this dress. I’m suffocating.”

He unzipped me, handed me a tissue, and poured himself another drink. I inhaled deeply and unwound. I changed while he told stories about his glorious high school days. With my t-shirt