

WOMAN ON FIRE

A NOVEL

LISA BARR

“Thick with history, scandal, romance, and deceit,
Woman on Fire is a truly compulsive read.”

—MARY KUBICA, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Local Woman Missing*

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FIRE

A NOVEL

LISA BARR

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

Dedication

TO DAVID, NOA, MAYA, MAYA, AND IZZI—MY EVERYTHING.

And in loving memory of my beloved Grandma Rachel—Survivor, Fighter, Mama Bear, and Executive Chef in Heaven's Kitchen—the voice in my head.

Epigraph

Good artists copy, great artists steal.

—**PABLO PICASSO**

You can look at a picture for a week and never think of it again. You can also look at a picture for a second and think of it all your life.

—**JOAN MIRÓ**

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Epilogue

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Prologue

ART BASEL, MIAMI

FROM THE CORNER of her eye, Jules catches the woman's piercing anthracite stare, those distinct dark brows locked and loaded, observing her intensely as though she were a painting. Her pulse races as she pivots slightly, purposefully giving the woman a better view. *Careful*, she reminds herself. Every move counts.

Jules has prepped hard for this moment. She studied Margaux de Laurent's predilections, knows the woman's style and taste as though it were her own. She carefully assembled her look tonight. Gone is the bookish journalist, and in her place emerged this other being—elegant, sexy, and suggestive. Jules's unruly chestnut curls are blown out into beachy waves. She has shed her studious tortoiseshell glasses for contacts and is wearing a one-shoulder crimson Hervé Léger bandage dress that is glued to her body—curves that she's spent her whole life camouflaging beneath baggy sweatshirts. The dress was sent to her with one message: *This is what you're wearing*. The *or else* was implied. The sender doesn't know that Jules is already one step ahead of her.

The ensemble also came with shoes—four-inch-high Anika Baum stilettos—no surprise. Because Art Basel is not about the art; it's about the shoes. Shoes tell the whole story—who you are, what you can afford, if you are an impostor or the real deal. Either you are a fifty-dollar-day-pass patron (a nobody) or a VIP pass carrier (a somebody who knows somebody) or, as in Jules's case, a proprietor of the much-sought-after magenta "First Choice" V-VIP pass (a contender). "Details are the deal breaker," she was told months ago when the investigation first began. "Margaux de Laurent is considered the most important gallerist in the world. You ignore the details, you're out of the game."

Margaux's garnet-glossed lips curl seductively in her direction. But Jules knows better. That look is not lust; it's about control. The woman

then places her half-finished champagne flute on a passing waiter's tray and grabs two newly replenished glasses. She raises one flute at Jules, intimating that there is more at stake here than meets the eye. It is *her* party, after all, the most coveted see-and-be-seen event at Basel, and she expects Jules to act the part she assigned her.

The De Laurent Gallery soiree, sponsored jointly by UBS and LVMH, is an exclusive, hand-delivered-invitation-only affair, a lavish showcase of the gallery's emerging and established artists. The gathering includes A-list celebs and models, drug dealers and politicians, influencers and socialites, critics and collectors, all cross-pollinating in the courtyard of the Versace Mansion, now known as Villa Casa Casuarina, and who probably won't leave until sunrise. Margaux's goal is not just to sell her artists' work but, more importantly, to elevate her brand and eclipse her competitors.

Sleek in a Tom Ford androgynous-meets-porn shirtless tuxedo dress, Margaux relishes her belle of the ball status. And it makes Jules sick just to look at her. The twin mounds of her bronzed breasts are perched high and visible, her deep cleavage immobile—a *still life*—untouchable and fake, like the woman herself.

Goose bumps rise along the nape of Jules's neck as Margaux makes a beeline toward her. *Stay calm, look confident*, she warns herself. There are no second chances. Everything is riding on this. Glancing quickly across the courtyard, past the partiers, Jules spots Adam, encircled by a group of journalists, discussing his paintings. He doesn't see her yet; doesn't even know she is here. It is safer that way. God, he looks good. Ruggedly handsome with shaggy, soccer star hair, Adam sports a fashionable blazer, which Jules knows he hates. He's way more comfortable in ripped jeans and one of his many rock concert T-shirts.

Squeezing her eyes shut briefly, she tries not to think about what was. She needs to stay focused and protect him—all of them—from Margaux. Fear ripples through her, and she fights it off. *Is anyone safe from that bitch?*

Balling her hands into tight fists, Jules knows that it's going to take a hell of a lot to trap Margaux and get the real story out. Not the one being published in the paper tomorrow, but the truth. *The story behind the story.*

Sashaying through the decked-out crowd, Margaux appears oblivious to the sycophants angling for her attention as she moves with pantherlike precision toward Jules. The fawning guests, intersected in Venn diagram circles, separate, allowing her passage. Jules holds her breath as Margaux's silky jacket lightly grazes her exposed skin. This close, she

can't help but inhale the woman's overpowering scent—Tahitian vanilla with hints of rose: Clive Christian No. 1 Imperial Majesty—one of the world's most expensive perfumes. She read a British *Vogue* article months ago detailing Margaux de Laurent's "must-haves."

"Dress fits like a glove," Margaux whispers in Jules's ear. "Take notes and be ready." She shuts down any follow-up questions with a hard press of her lips against Jules's unexpectant mouth. It requires all of Jules's willpower not to spit away the taste of champagne and cigarettes. "And stay in your lane," Margaux warns her as she hands Jules the flute of Ruinart champagne, then sluices past her toward the other side of the courtyard.

When Jules looks up, she meets Adam's stunned gaze. He spotted her, saw the kiss. His mouth is dropped open. *What the fuck, Jules?*

It's not what you think, her eyes transmit back. She quickly looks away, tries to blend in with nearby guests. She can't deal with him right now. She must get through this without interference. Her heart pounds as she turns to watch Margaux step up to the podium next to the ornate fountain topped with Poseidon's head in the center of the courtyard. The celebrity deejay stops the music midmix, and everything else around her screeches to a halt.

Margaux commands the room, her battlefield. Soaking up the adulation, she clears her throat and waits until the collective silence feels uncomfortable. She likes it that way. The game of it, the power play. Everybody knows Margaux de Laurent thrives on attention. Jules scans the room filled with hundreds of mesmerized faces and yearns to shout, *You idiots, she's playing you!*

Everything is staged flawlessly, like a movie set. The extravagantly decorated courtyard and pool deck are filled with paintings carefully placed among giant ice sculptures and hundreds of gilded candles. The waiters, all young, muscular men wearing tight black jeans and sleeveless white tanks, are chiseled and glossy, like Chippendales dancers. Even the weather cooperates. Unseasonably warm for a winter's night, with a made-to-order breeze. *Too perfect.* Jules exhales deeply. Something's got to give.

"Good evening, and welcome," Margaux begins. "I'm Margaux de Laurent, and I'm thrilled to be here with you tonight." She doesn't need a microphone. Her rich voice resonates, her British accent posh and well-heeled, reflecting her privileged upbringing. "This is DLG's eighteenth year presenting at Art Basel. Tonight's showcase is particularly important to me because it's more than just an exhibit—it's personal." She gestures

toward the large covered canvas perched behind her, and everyone's gaze follows. She has her audience in the palm of her hand. "This painting has been missing from our family collection for eight decades. Until now . . ." There is a pregnant pause as Margaux makes a panoramic sweep of the packed house, then turns to her assistant standing near her dressed in head-to-toe black. "Unveil it."

The drape comes off in one dramatic swoop and Jules gazes up in awe at the enormous canvas, and then a shock wave hits her as though she walked into a restaurant and a surprise party were waiting for her on the other side of the door. She may be imagining it, but Margaux smiles directly at her from the podium, a mercurial grin that quickly dissolves into a sneer. Jules's blood thumps; her anger mounts. That painting does not belong to her.

"*Liar!*" Jules screams at the top of her lungs, but no actual sound emerges. Her voice is hollow. Perspiration slides down the back of her designer dress. *This can't be happening.*

But it is.

The clapping is random at first, and then a resounding ovation breaks out, deafening, like the winning goal in a World Cup game. Jules's face burns, yet her hands are cold, as though her body temperature is malfunctioning, realizing that *she* is the one who has been played.

Margaux revels in the applause. Her hard gaze finds Jules once again. Her iced smile is no longer a mere victory lap—it's a *You're fucked* with a cherry on top.

Jules sees Adam trying to push through the packed house and make his way toward her. Before she can react, she feels a hard rap on her shoulder and follows the finger. A sharp-faced young woman stands before her in a white leather minidress so tight that it would take a scraper to get it off. Jules recognizes her as the Door Girl, who stood at the mansion's entrance marking off the guest list—which clearly isn't her day job.

"Follow me," the woman commands under her breath. *As in now.* Jules's legs no longer seem to hold her up. Her gaze shoots to the other side of the room, searching for Adam, but he is gone. *Where?* Her head is spinning. *Think, think.*

Her gut warns her to run like hell, but the bigger part of her knows that she'd better do as she is told. The *or else* looms over her head like a black cloud. Jules follows the woman out of the courtyard, through a discreet side door, down a short narrow staircase, and into the unknown. Before she can see what's happening or revise her decision, Jules's purse is snatched, and she is pushed roughly into the back seat of a waiting vehicle

by a firm, meaty hand.

She turns briefly, and through the car's tinted rear window she spots the Door Girl standing in the zigzag shadows of a lit-up palm tree in the distance. Suddenly, without warning, a hood is placed tightly over Jules's head and her hands are tied. The air leaves her lungs, and it feels like her head is departing from her body as the car accelerates. She braces herself against the sticky leather seat. Why didn't she leave or run or scream when she had the chance? Is the damn painting worth her life and those of the people she loves?

Eighteen Months Earlier

One

CHICAGO

JULES IS DRESSED for her interview—black slacks, white blouse, red flats. Never mind that her new boss doesn't even know that she exists or that she's going to crash his office.

“Do you really think this is a good idea?” Her mother sits down next to her at the kitchen table, having brought them both coffees and sprinkled donuts that she'd picked up from Stan's on her way home from work. “To be honest, if someone turned up at my office without an appointment asking for a job, they'd most likely be shown the door.”

Her mother looks exhausted from a long day in court. They both grab a donut—their appetizer before dinner. “Well, I tried to reach him through normal channels and got nowhere,” Jules explains. “Weren't you the one who taught me that ‘sometimes it takes balls to be a woman’?”

Her mother laughs, and her smile, though tired, still manages to light up the kitchen. “I'm sure I did.” She takes a bite of the donut, then removes her suit jacket, which seems to be sticking to her. “But this is Dan Mansfield. You can't just barge in. Besides, I've heard he's an asshole.”

“Really? From who?”

“Steve. Dan interviewed him a few times in connection with some of our bigger cases. And—”

“Umm, Steve the Asshole Boss calling Dan Mansfield an asshole. Now there's a twist.” Jules practically inhales the Nutella-stuffed donut as she shoves it into her mouth.

“Exactly.” Her mother laughs. “Takes one to know one. Why don't we just order pizza later, curl up on the couch, watch *The Bachelor*. I could use some mindless guilty pleasure. It's been a day.” She unknits the silk bow of her ivory blouse. “I'm spent.”

Her mother works too hard. “Tape it. We'll watch it when I get back, I promise.” Jules rises, hugs her mother, then rinses out her coffee mug in

the sink. Her mother eyes her in the way that means she's looking at her but thinking of something else. Maybe it's about a case. She really needs a life outside of the courtroom—Jules tells her that all the time. Her mother yeah-yeahs her, but it's just the two of them against the world. There's no dad in the picture. No one else to share the financial burden. He took off long before Jules was born. Jules knows that she was the outcome of an accidental pregnancy during law school, but her mother has always told her, *He was the mistake, not you.*

Putting the rest of the dishes in the dishwasher, she kisses her mother lightly on the cheek and grabs her car keys off the hook. "Don't worry, okay? What's the worst thing that could happen—Dan Mansfield tells me to leave? Meet you on the couch later. Love you."

* * *

As Jules walks briskly down the narrow corridor of the *Chicago Chronicle*, she hears the roar of a man's voice in the distance.

". . . and do you really think I give a crap what the mayor ate for dinner? Give me a goddamn story I can print!"

It's him. She's sure of it. Jules recognizes the baritone with a tinge of smoker's rasp, having seen Dan Mansfield countless times on television, reporting live from exotic locations. She wasn't nervous before, but now she feels slightly terrified to meet her personal hero, whose bestselling memoir on investigative reporting is perched on her nightstand like a Bible. She glances again at her watch. Her timing is good. Nathan, a friend from graduate school, who interned at the *Chronicle*, told Jules that the optimal time to catch Dan was after seven p.m. She spots a brown stain on the lower left side of her shirt. The Nutella. How did she miss that? The problem is—her mother was right—Dan is not expecting her. This could get tricky.

As she passes one closed door after the next, Jules is surprised by how quiet the building is for a newsroom, even at this hour. Like a ghost town. And the interior could use some major attention. The peeling beige stucco ceiling and the brown paneled walls appear as if they hadn't seen an update since the seventies. *Where is everyone?* Even her college newsroom was bustling at this hour. Journalism is not a nine-to-five gig. The good stuff always happens later.

Following the echo of the voice, Jules stops in her tracks when she sees a light seeping surreptitiously through the closed door of the corner office just up ahead. *That's got to be his.* She's left messages and has sent her

résumé to Dan Mansfield twice. But nothing. Zero. No response. What's the worst thing that can happen now?

Standing at the door, she reads the small, engraved black sign: DANIEL MANSFIELD, MANAGING EDITOR. *Bingo*. Exhaling deeply, she covers the chocolaty stain with her résumé folder and knocks.

"Who is it?" a woman calls out gruffly.

"Jules Roth."

"Do you have an appointment?" She sounds irritated.

"I'm . . . his niece."

Jules shifts her weight from one foot to the other. *Please let me in*. The woman answers, scowling. She is either forty or sixty depending on the angle, plain faced and bulky in a shapeless beige potato sack sweater rolled up at the elbows. Her saving grace is a smattering of cute freckles bridging her nose. "Dan doesn't have a niece." The woman's keen dark eyes narrow in, her forehead scrunching up like an accordion. "Who are you and why are you here?"

Clearly the gatekeeper, but in between the sliver of doorway space and the woman's arm, Jules sees Dan, his back facing her, head bent, typing away inside his office. She waits a few seconds and then goes for it, pushing past the woman and taking her by surprise.

Dan stops typing and looks up with a slight smirk, as if a young female intruder is a daily occurrence.

"I tried stopping her," the woman tells him, hands on sturdy hips, her eyes launching bullets at Jules.

"And you are?" Dan asks calmly, folding his arms.

Jules holds her breath longer than intended. *It's really him*. The thick, wavy, gray-black hair, the rumpled blue work shirt with an army of pens lining the pocket, the black eye patch over his left eye—just like on TV. She speaks rapidly. "I'm Jules Roth. I just graduated from the Medill School of Journalism. I want to work for you." She gnaws her bottom lip, a nervous habit she hasn't been able to shake since middle school. Aloud, she sounds disappointingly juvenile; this is not at all like the powerful speech she'd rehearsed in her head on the way over.

"Impressive entrance. Well, you made it past the prison warden." He gestures to the doorway, where his assistant is still standing, cross-armed and red-faced. "Many have tried, none have survived. Thanks, Louise. I'm fine. I'll take care of this. You can go home now."

Heaving a sigh of relief, Jules doesn't waste a minute. She whips out her résumé from the folder, leans over Dan's desk, and plunks it down. Dan eyes the document, then scrunches it up into a ball, chucks it into the

trash basketball style, and scores.

“For starters, I don’t give a shit what’s on paper.” He pushes a stack of files out of his way and nods toward the chair in front of his desk. A good sign. Jules eagerly takes a seat. “But I am curious”—his left brow arches—“how did you get past the security guard? Not that he would have noticed. That guy is too busy flirting with the interns.”

Jules feels the heat prickling up her neck. “I flirted with him and told him I was your niece and came here to meet you. All true except for the niece part.”

Dan laughs hard, and his whole cranky face lights up to reveal the existence of a younger, perhaps once-joyful man. “Not bad.” Just as quickly, his darker expression returns. He leans back, studying her. “Let me save you time and energy. I already have an assistant. And more importantly, I didn’t set up this meeting, and I have neither interest nor time to train you—or anyone else, for that matter.”

As he speaks Jules notices the deep scarring lining his hands, like raised spiderwebs. *Burns*. And his left hand . . . missing the index finger. And, of course, the patched eye. The injuries are a result of an explosion at a meth lab facility that he and his team were investigating a few years back in El Paso. Dan paid a hefty price. The undercover operation went bad. The cartel got wind of the investigation and blew it up with him inside. She read about it. It made national news. Dan survived the explosion, but the other reporter from his team did not.

She looks away from the burns and focuses on his face. She knows he is not waiting for her response—he is challenging her. She clears her throat. “Here’s the deal, Mr. Mansfield.”

“First strike.” Dan raises the index finger on his good hand, like a referee. “Mr. Mansfield is my father, and I couldn’t stand him. But I do like deals, so keep going.”

Jules eyes the myriad awards lining the three shelves behind him and the action photographs of Dan as a young reporter in war zones hanging on the far wall, and on the console behind his desk she sees a small, framed photograph of a little girl in a gymnastics outfit who must be his daughter. “The deal is, Dan,”—she emphasizes his name—“my classmates are all vying to work for various magazines, newspapers, and online media. I graduated with one plan only, and that is to work for you and your investigative team. And here I am.”

He stares at her like she’s just escaped the asylum. She quickly changes tactics and starts ticking off stats. “I was the editor in chief of my high school newspaper, editor in chief of my college newspaper, editor in

chief of my grad school newspaper . . .” She waits for a reaction—and gets nothing, not even a blink. “And . . . I worked summers all through high school at our community newspaper, and they hired me as a front-page reporter.” Rambling, Jules can’t stop, having crossed the line from being interesting to going up in flames. “I also had three internships during college, and I . . .” *Did he just roll his eyes? That’s it. Pull yourself together now.*

Jules stands. Bold, but necessary. “Look, I’m not here to waste your time or mine. I will do anything to get the story.”

“I’m no longer with the investigative team. I’m the managing editor now.” Dan flips over the papers on his desk aggressively, which tells Jules two things: He’s not happy about it, and he’s not being completely transparent. There’s no way that Dan Mansfield has stopped investigating—that’s like the Barefoot Contessa announcing she’s given up cooking to become a maître d’.

Jules knows she’s blown it, so she pulls out her lone, last card. “Do you remember Porn Gate?” she blurts out. “Six years ago?”

Dan’s brows knit together as he clasps his hands and leans forward. There, she got his attention. “Of course, who doesn’t? But it wasn’t my story. It was our competitor’s paper . . . a high school girl was used as bait to break the biggest porn ring ever of young girls being trafficked—a story that landed one governor, four state senators, and a truckload of other sick fucks in jail.”

Jules heaves a deep sigh, making space to air out her deepest secret. But it’s go big or go home, and she is sure as hell not leaving. “Well, you’re looking at her—Anonymous Girl. That was *my* story. In high school. I brought it to the paper.”

His chin pops up as though yanked by a marionette’s string. “And why the heck didn’t you bring it to me?”

She meets his one-eyed gaze evenly. “I tried. You ignored my calls.” She goes for it. “But I’m here now. You can make it up to me.”

Dan gulps an unexpected chuckle. “Gutsy. I like it. So you’re the one, huh.”

“I’m the one.”

“They won a Pulitzer.”

“Yes . . . they did.”

She detects the near-invisible but faintly impressed smile, so she keeps going. “You ignored me once. Do you really want to make that mistake twice, Dan? I’ve wanted to work for you since I was a teenager. I have followed your career since you were a war reporter.”

“You were in diapers,” he asserts correctly.

“I’m exaggerating to make a point,” she counters. “Look, you take on the stories that no one else can break and you break them. I will work for free for the first three months, though I prefer to be paid.” She squares her shoulders and waits.

And that’s when Dan laughs—actually cackles in her face. She feels the red splotches spreading across her cheeks, but she does not budge. She waits out the laughter. Eventually, he stops, cocks his head, and assesses her, only this time with genuine interest. She sees her reflection in his gaze: a serious young woman who doesn’t wear makeup because she has more important things on her mind. She can tell by the pursed lips and the folded arms that she was not wrong to ambush him. She knows people, reads expressions and body language. Her delivery started off shaky, but the wrap-up clearly caught his attention.

Dan’s phone rings, suspending the moment. “What?” he shouts into the receiver. “When? How many? Jesus Christ. Yes, I’m on it. We’ll send our people over.”

Jules freezes. Dan hangs up the phone, moves past her as though she were furniture, leaving her in his office. But she follows him as he enters the newsroom, where only a few stragglers are still working at their desks. “Where is everyone?” he yells. “There’s a shoot-out going on right now in Englewood. Four people are dead. A coked-up sniper with an AR-15 is holding the building’s residents hostage—threatening to shoot more of them. I need reporters. Where the hell are Barb and Alan?”

Someone responds—an invisible voice from a random carrel. “They went home.”

Dan throws up his arms. “Home? Are you kidding me! Am I the only one who works past five o’clock in this amateur shithole?” He pivots angrily on his heel and sees Jules standing in the corner with a pen and a pad that she grabbed from his assistant’s desk just in case. “You—Anonymous. Make yourself useful. Come to my office now. I’m going to give you a list of names and you’re going to make calls and get me what I need. Can you do that?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer. Jules follows him back into his office, feeling the rush of adrenaline, the internal ticktock heat of pumping out a story.

Dan doesn’t waste a beat. He’s pacing while on the phone, shouting at her like a short-order cook. Three televisions are blaring at once like a dysfunctional Greek chorus, simultaneously telling the same breaking story three different ways.

“Get a list from the police department,” he barks at her. “Tell them it’s for me. Find out who is alive and who is dead. Contact the families. Find out who lives in that damn building. I need reactions. It’s the worst part of the job, believe me. Lesson one: It’s not about the attack—it’s about the people. Readers don’t want stats; they want faces. They want to know who died, who was left behind—the autistic child who just lost his mother. Find out whatever you can. I’m going to look into the shooter and who’s behind all this.” Dan begins to cough but talks through it. “Can you do that, Jules? And why aren’t you writing this down?” He stares at her yellow pad, which she hasn’t touched.

“I got it all.” She taps the pen to her head, as though she has a microchip implanted inside.

“How’s your typing?”

She saw Dan typing when she walked in earlier. Her fingers could outrun his pace by a mile.

“Good enough,” she says.

“I want fifteen inches on my desk in two hours.”

“Done.” Their eyes meet. No further conversation is needed. The job is hers.