

# *Still-Life With It-Girl*

A Novel

by

Steven B. Orkin

## Chapter 4

It worked like a charm.

Granted, she had near-frantic text and voice messages from both Carl and Staci within minutes, but by that time Toni Lanston was chomping on a Rolaids and zooming up Motor Parkway for the LIE in her top-down Mustang. She'd text everyone when she got into Bay Shore. Or not. They knew where she was going.

Staci would deal, but Carl would be pissed. He was extremely good at what he did, but there was no way he could have anticipated being given the slip by his own employer. This probably would be the only time she'd ever get away with it. Later, he'd hand her her head for her little stunt, but she was okay with that. The Opportunist Manifesto dictated it was always easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission.

Despite this pragmatic assessment, however, she couldn't help but admit with a heart-deep tug of regret that Carl wouldn't be just pissed. He'd be hurt. And worried. He was intensely protective of her, to the extent that she had no problem believing he'd take a bullet for her if the situation ever warranted it. Further, his linebacker physique and stoic demeanor belied his compassionate nature. He'd given her a shoulder to cry on a lot more than one occasion over the last five years. She was a lot more than a gig to him.

Even so, she knew he'd get it. Instead of barging into the Boulton making a commotion, he'd hang around somewhere nearby, ready to make himself known if circumstances demanded it, which was exactly what she wanted him to do. Carl was good with cues; she didn't need to explain much to him.

It would be about 7:45 by the time she'd finish dinner, leaving her just enough time to walk

down to the Boulton, get her ticket, and slip into her seat as the lights went down.

The street was already lined with cars, and she doubted she had the skill to parallel park anyway, so she left the Mustang in a semi-public lot between Third and Fourth Avenues. Walking up Third and making a right on Main, she came upon a little restaurant called Tula Kitchen. It had a sort of bohemian feel and was dark and cozy enough for her to disappear in without much risk of being recognized. She considered going in with the Yankees cap and glasses but decided that would draw more attention than her natural appearance. Further, she could utilize her acting talents to subtly deflect attention if necessary. Given her current state of teetering emotional stability, it could well be the greatest acting challenge of her life, but she felt she could pull it off if she had to.

Though her initial inclination had been to withdraw under scrutiny, she felt this would communicate the idea that she had something to hide, and as with the cap and glasses, would prove counter-productive. She wanted to project the impression she was content to be alone but not to the exclusion of all else. To that end, the star smiled at anyone who caught her eye but directed the bulk of her attention to the book of Ann Beattie stories she'd started on the flight from LA. Toni had never read her before but found them so enjoyable, she'd already started making notes in the margins on adapting one for a film project. God, it felt so good to just sit in a café and read. How long had it been since she'd done that? A year? Two? Five?

Toni dug into a promptly delivered grilled salmon salad with a tangy sesame dressing. She didn't want to risk overeating, but the salad was excellent, and she had to consciously slow herself down to savor it. The thought of a glass of wine with dinner held a great deal of appeal, but given her recent inclination toward over-indulgence, she (and LMP for that matter) decided against it. Further, though the antacid she'd grabbed from the front desk on the way out seemed to have

helped, her stomach was still bothering her. On the plus side, the book did a great job distracting her, and a thoroughly satisfying hour quickly passed.

The only hitch came as she waited for the check and two twenty-something women approached her table. Glancing at each other in silent negotiation, the blonde on the right said, “Excuse me, but are you Toni Lanston?”

And there it was. Toni had a sensation of a vast amount of data being processed in her mind. If she didn’t answer in the next second or two, her hesitation would reveal her identity. But was that a problem? She felt a momentary warmth inside her, like Amaretto flowing down her throat. Sweet. Thick. Sensual. The singular satisfaction of recognition, of being ‘Toni Lanston’.

“Yes,” she almost said. *“I am Toni Lanston. How you girls doing tonight?”*

She could imagine their faces lighting up, their schoolgirl squeals of delight at meeting someone famous, someone they might even look to as a role model of sorts. Despite her personal difficulties, she’d held up reasonably well in the press, with the general sentiment trending slightly more toward concern than ghoulish anticipation, as with Sara Sinclair (though there was plenty of that, too). Maybe she should just give it up, go with the flow. She could chase a good deal of her own anxiety away (or at least keep it at bay for a while) with the endorphin charge of their good will.

Instead, she flashed her multimillion dollar smile and modulated her voice, inflection, and syntax to disguise her pleasing alto. Though her instinct was to go with something obvious like Southern twang, English crisp, or even local Long Island patois, she needed something more subtle to make this work. Maybe Long Island light with a hint of Midwest; Michigan or something. Plausible.

“I’ll bet you’re not surprised I get that a lot,” she told them in her new voice. “People tell

me I ought to go to Hollywood and be an impersonator. I tell them no way. I don't even want to pretend to have that girl's life."

Offering her hand, she went on, "Kate Hudson. And no, I'm not her, either."

The girls laughed, and the illusion was complete. The Kate Hudson thing was a nice touch, providing further distraction from their initial suspicion by providing them with the harmless coincidence of an entirely different actress. They'd giggle about the whole encounter later on, playfully castigating each other over how dumb they'd been. Of course it hadn't been Toni Lanston. What would she be doing in a place like that all by herself? Yeah, and you know, the hair really wasn't right; darker than Toni's. And the voice was way off...

Toni got the ball rolling. The girls would take care of the rest themselves.

Even so, she received a few curious looks after that, but no one had the gumption to pursue the matter and she didn't hang around long enough to invite further inquiry. She was out the door ten minutes later. Toni silently thanked herself for having the wherewithal to bring plenty of cash with her, though the act of locating and entering a bank to obtain it before leaving LA had been quite the anxiety-inducer. She'd taken a shot in the dark to find the right one by looking at the bank name on her Visa card. This prevented her from having to use the credit card and thereby confirm her identity.

Toni suspected the waitress knew who she was regardless of her ruse with the girls. It wasn't all that much of a leap considering she'd grown up less than five miles from there, and Long Islanders tended to be quite passionate (and knowledgeable) about their hometown celebrities. She'd kept her mouth shut, though, for which Toni mentally thanked her. Still, she once again felt that bizarre tug of war inside her: grateful the waitress and the two girls hadn't outed her, yet hurt she'd gone unnoticed.

“First day with the new bipolarization?” Miss Priss asked rhetorically.

Dinner totaled \$20.00 and change. Toni started to tug a fifty from her wallet, then reconsidered and drew forth a hundred instead, folding it inside the bill and placing them under her empty water glass. On a napkin, she wrote, ‘*Thanks for keeping my secret! ☺ Toni Lanston*’, and tucked that under the glass as well. She took a final glance around, making a note to herself to send an autographed photo with a personal message indicating how much she liked the place, then stepped outside the café and turned right, walking up Main Street toward the Boulton.

Breathing in the late summer night air, Toni’s heart sang in her chest, spirit soaring. For the first time in close to ten years, she felt like a completely normal person; just another nobody strolling down Main Street.

Though the bad economy had resulted in a few deserted store fronts and office spaces along the main drag, the general state of downtown Bay Shore had vastly improved over the course of the last decade or so. Run-down buildings, seedy shops, and bars had been renovated and populated by more upscale businesses. There were still a couple of bars; the one across the street, called ‘The Nutty Irishman,’ looked pretty classy, outside of the goofy name. Back on her side, another bar, ‘*Changing Times*’ struck a metaphorical chord in her soul. On the corner of Fourth Ave she passed a trendy-looking Japanese restaurant called Mitsui and a chocolatier called ‘*Serious Chocolate.*’ ‘*Smokin’ Al’s BBQ Joint*’ streamed fusion jazz from external speakers. Glancing inside, Toni thought it looked like a lively, fun place to share a meal with friends. Maybe she’d take the team here for dinner one night later that week.

As the Boulton’s marquis loomed into view, the star chuckled as she remembered that it used to be a porn theater. The Regent. Yes, that had been it. She’d snuck in there once at age fourteen, shortly before it had closed, mesmerized by the explicit carnality on the screen. She

considered the possibility that this toxic exposure had somehow tipped her already tenuous mental stability more steeply toward promiscuity following sexual abuse at the hands of her uncle at age thirteen. It hummed through her mind with a steady, even tone.

*“That’s it,” Miss Priss offered sardonically. “Blame it on the porn.”*

Thinking about it now, it had been an incredibly stupid and dangerous thing to do. She’d been lucky she hadn’t been victimized. She’d looked older than her age and carried herself with more self-confidence. And God knew her actual age would have been quite the candy shop treat for more than one twisted soul.

*“Buzzkill alert,” Miss Priss announced. “Next topic, please.”*

Toni nodded in agreement and consciously shifted her mind back to the now. After the concert, she’d have dessert at Milk & Sugar, the coffee bar two doors down from the theater. And if someone outed her there, so what? It would be okay, maybe even fun, to hang out at a local nightspot surrounded by the good will of her hometown fans. Then, instead of returning to her hotel, she’d go right to Cassequa, spend the night there. She probably still had some old clothes in the basement, and she was pretty sure she’d still fit into them. If she could remember how the washing machine worked, she could probably scrounge up at least a pair of sweats and a tee for the following day until Carl and Staci could bring her stuff over.

In the morning, she’d have them (and Hank, if he was still around) come over for breakfast. She’d buy a dozen unparalleled, fresh Long Island bagels from Bagels on the Bay over on Montauk Highway, cook up some bad scrambled eggs, brew some equally bad coffee, and have an exquisitely uneventful day.

Even as the elation of these more whimsical thoughts tinkled in her mind like seashell wind chimes, Toni found herself glancing over her shoulder as she walked toward the Boulton. She’d

had three stalkers, one of whom the cops classified as actively dangerous. Though he hadn't crossed the line in terms of actually trying to harm her, they'd assured her it was only a matter of time. Guys like Robert Gorso didn't take no for an answer for long. In any case, he'd spooked her badly enough with his subtly creepy emails and unnerving ability to obtain her phone numbers to warrant an order of protection. It bothered her to have to bring the legal system to bear on what she saw as a personal matter, but she had no way of knowing what he would do and didn't want to risk finding out. Where did he live now? Maybe that didn't matter. Maybe he'd moved from Wisconsin or Colorado or California or wherever to Long Island to be closer to her in spirit since the restraining order prevented him from being anywhere near her physically. Maybe he'd been squatting in the Cassequa home, praying for her return. Maybe it had worked. Maybe preternatural forces had drawn her into an inexorable wave of fate which would break upon the shores of death later that night. 'Toni Lanston: Raped & Beaten to Death by Obsessed Fan at Childhood Home. Story at eleven.'

Maybe nothing so elaborate. Maybe some lucky predator just happened to spot an attractive woman walking alone at night. Maybe he was following her right now, waiting for her to cross a dark alcove where he could snatch her from view. He'd clamp a hand on her throat to keep her from screaming, knock the wind out of her with a gut punch, and she'd be at his mercy despite her excellent physical condition. How satisfied he'd be when he examined the contents of her purse and realized he'd assaulted and robbed a movie star; a nice, sexy prop to kick around with the posse.

"Stop it," she demanded. "Stop it, stop it, STOP IT!!"

Her outburst shocked the three or four people walking alongside her. Looking away, they accelerated their pace. Fortunately, the street was dim at this point, so she could forego the 'Toni

Freaks Out!' headlines that would result from recognition. For the moment, anyway.

In her peripheral vision, she saw that an older couple had stopped where she had frozen on the sidewalk.

“You all right, Miss?” the man asked tentatively but earnestly.

Possible answers sizzled through her neurons. Should she fumble for her cell and chalk it up to a phone call gone bad? Screw it; no time.

“Fine, thank you. Too many thoughts for one little head.”

She summoned a disarming smile and gestured to the theater.

“Going to the show?”

“Yep,” the man replied. “You?”

“As you can tell by my public meltdown, I don’t get out much, but yes, I am.”

“All alone? Lovely young lady like you ought to have a dashing gentleman accompanying you.”

The man’s wife gave him a well-practiced nudge to the arm.

“Ed, leave the poor girl alone. You’ll have to excuse him, dear. He’s old.”

Toni laughed and said, “But quite charming.”

The couple laughed as well, and the woman hugged closer to him.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Quite charming. Enjoy the show, dear.”

“Same to you,” Toni replied as they moved on. “And thank you for stopping.”

Ed looked back, wagging an index finger over his shoulder at her.

“No more thinking for you, young lady,” he said playfully as his wife ushered him into the theater lobby.

“*You heard the man,*” Miss Priss concurred.

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Toni slipped into the Boulton at three minutes to eight, stopping at the box office window to her left just inside the glass entry doors. The eyes of the woman behind the glass went wide as she instantly recognized her. After fumbling for words for a few seconds, she managed, “Hi.”

The star smiled and said, “Hi yourself. I’ve got a ticket waiting under Frederica Bulsara.”

This name, Toni’s most commonly used nom de plume, was a variation of Farrokh Bulsara, the birth name of Freddie Mercury, deceased lead singer of the rock band, Queen. She’d read quite a lot about him and had seen the recent biopic about him three times. She remained humbled by his astonishing creativity and talent, as well as the courage he’d exhibited toward the end of his life, recording an album he knew he’d never live to see released. He’d been so weakened by his AIDS-related illness by that point, he could often only sing a handful of bars at a time. Anyway, the name thing was a silly homage, but a powerful one just the same. She suspected the flamboyant showman would have approved. The band’s music, as well as Mercury’s solo work, took up a respectable chunk of her digital music collection.

The Boulton rep, a rail-thin woman of about sixty-five, slid a tiny, ticket-sized white envelope under the glass to her, but held onto it as Toni made to take it off the counter.

“I’m sorry to be a bother, Miss Lanston, but could I ask you for an autograph? I would truly appreciate it.”

Toni pursed her lips, paralyzed by indecision. She rarely gave autographs. The idea that the physical result of signing her name to a piece of paper was viewed as valuable seemed ludicrous, and she hated the idea of it ending up on eBay or in some memorabilia dealer’s shop or online store, selling for hundreds of dollars. She once heard that in lieu of autographs, Steve Martin gave out business cards that said, *‘Congratulations! You just met Steve Martin!’* Toni had no idea

whether that was true, but it seemed consistent with Martin's urbane wit, and she found it amusing in any case. Maybe she'd print up some cards of her own to help mitigate the awkward confrontation of turning people down.

She generally made exceptions for any kids that asked – not that that was her prime demographic – and though she was far from a monument to 'family values', she took their regard seriously and tried to be as positive a role model as she could.

*"How's that been working out for you, lately?"* Miss Priss asked unpleasantly.

*"Can you do me a favor?"* Toni replied. *"Cut me some slack, here. I'm trying."*

The only other exceptions she made regarding autographs were for charity events or on a couple of occasions, when she received special requests from someone ill.

How to proceed?

"Yes," the star replied at last. "On one condition. That you don't tell anyone about it or show it to anyone until tomorrow. Fair enough?"

The woman looked disappointed, and Toni had to use all her self-control to suppress a sneer of irritation and accompanying, *"You know what? Take it or leave it, bitch. It's the best deal you're gonna get out of me."*

"Of course," the woman said, sliding a piece of paper and a pen under the glass after releasing the ticket. "Thank you very much, Miss Lanston. It's for my granddaughter, actually. Her name is Emily. She just loves you."

Toni sighed in relief at not having cut loose on the woman and wrote, *'Dear Emily, Thanks for being such a big fan! I really appreciate it! Love, Toni Lanston'*. She slid the paper and pen back and grinned as the woman's face lit with pleasure at the personal message. Slipping her ticket free of the envelope, Toni strode off through the lobby.

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The Boulton Theater seemed smaller than it should have been, with stadium-style seating running up fairly close to the relatively low stage, giving it an understated intimacy. The flip-down, movie theater-style red and black seats were comfortable, and though not exactly roomy, they weren't cramped either.

Toni peeked inside and scouted out her seat before walking over to avoid having to ask an usher or invite scrutiny by searching for it. Fortunately, it was the only one in the front row not filled, so no worries there. The usher who'd taken her ticket, who looked like he'd just graduated high school, hovered nearby, fidgeting with both excitement and anxiety at being so close to her. He wore a white, button-down dress shirt, black Dockers, and black sneakers, looking as much like an off-duty busboy as a theater usher.

“Do you want me to take you to your seat, Miss L—”

“Bulsara,” Toni finished. “The less my name is tossed around the better. And no, thank you, I can see it from here. Listen, I just want to sit in the dark and watch the concert. I’m not here to make a public appearance, okay? Do you think you can keep my being here on the down low for tonight? It would really make my life simpler.”

“Oh, um, sure. Okay. Yeah, I can do that.”

Toni turned to him, flashing her killer smile.

“That would be so awesome. Thank you. What’s your name?”

“B-Bobby. Bobby Blair.”

“I’ll tell you what, Bobby. Let me see your phone.”

Bobby looked confused, but handed it over. Toni examined it for a moment, then stepped next to him, putting an arm around his shoulder and aiming the phone’s camera at them with her

free hand. The kid was nearly trembling, the mayor of Hormone City. She seemed to be having quite the effect on him.

“There you go,” she said, handing back the phone. “Now you can prove you met me.”

Bobby looked at the phone pic and his face lit up.

“Wow! Thanks!”

“Please, please, *please* don’t show it to anyone until AFTER the show, okay? I’ll be seriously pissed if I get mobbed at intermission. Happy Toni good. Pissed Toni veeerrrry bad. You feel me?”

Bobby nodded soberly, “Yeah. Okay. No problem.”

Toni offered her hand and shook his firmly.

“Thank you so much, Bobby. I really, really appreciate it.”

He was probably going to post the fucking thing to Facebook or Instagram the second she turned her back, but she couldn’t do anything about that. As she readied herself to enter the theater, a bolt of irritation struck through her as her stomach sent another harsh jab through her lower abdomen. Goddamn thing felt worse now than it had earlier in the day, even with the Rolaids she’d been popping. If that restaurant had food-poisoned her, they were going to be getting correspondence decidedly different from the autographed photo she’d decided on earlier; correspondence with the name Alan J. Canto, Esq. at the top.

“*Don’t be a bitch,*” Miss Priss intervened. “*You’re on high-anxiety alert. Your stomach’s been acting up all day. You’ve got more acid rumbling around in there than Dom DeLouise after a hard morning at the breakfast buffet. Pop some more Rolaids and lighten up.*”

Toni nodded in cold toleration of her mental houseguest’s penchant for hard truths and crossed the front row as the lights dimmed and the emcee introduced the evening’s performer.

As it turned out, Toni Lanston ended up needing a hell of a lot more than Rolaids.