

WOMAN ON FIRE



ALSO BY LISA BARR

The Unbreakables

Fugitive Colors



WOMAN ON
FIRE

A NOVEL

LISA BARR

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

HARPER

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**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.*



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



WOMAN ON FIRE



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

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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 bank 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 art-

ists' 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,

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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

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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 hap-

pening 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?