

fading starlight

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*Dedicated to those in the industry who have
supported me from the beginning:*

*Carrie Padgett, Julie Carobini, Michael Berrier, and Shawn
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James Scott Bell—mentor, teacher, and friend

*Dave Long and the entire Bethany House team—words cannot
express what a blessing you have been to me over the past decade*

one

At this very moment, Lauren Summers’s professional future was draped across the bony frame of a high-strung seventeen-year-old. The living room air seemed to crackle along with the television static as the swirl of pink and silver filled the ancient screen. Lauren grabbed the hands on each side of her—her best friend, Chloe, on the right and Chloe’s mother, Rhonda, on the left—and they all waited.

The big moment had finally arrived.

“Oh man, she looks *amazing*.” Chloe jumped up and made for the TV, planting herself only inches from the oversized box. “This is so incredible. Isn’t this incredible?”

Lauren normally would laugh at her best friend’s over-the-top enthusiasm—but not this time. Tonight, she waited for reactions along the red carpet.

Rhonda swatted the air. “Chloe, will you please sit down? The rest of us would like to see this, too.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Mom, no talking. We need to hear this.”

“And *see* it. Sit down so Lauren can watch her big moment.”

Chloe let out an exaggerated sigh, but she did come back to sit beside Lauren. She retook her hand and squeezed. Hard. “It’s not every day your best friend’s dress is on the red carpet at the VMAs.”

“It’s not *my* dress.” Lauren was finding it hard to breathe. There it was, right there for the whole world to see, every camera focused directly on it.

Another dismissive gesture from Chloe. “‘Course it is your dress. We all know who did all the work.”

Marisa Remington was posing for the cameras. She turned sideways and stuck out her left leg, barely managing to push her high-heeled sandal through the demure slit created by the wrap design of the dress.

“She did that on purpose, didn’t she? Stuck her leg out to show some skin, trying to be sexy?” Chloe was quickly shushed again by her mother.

Lauren would have nodded an affirmative answer—because the speculation was indeed true—but she didn’t want to encourage further conversation. She wanted to hear this. Every word.

Renee Ross, the red carpet host for the evening, approached Marisa, microphone in hand. “Marisa, your dress is simply darling. Who are you wearing?”

Simply darling. The word choice was not lost on Lauren, nor would it be lost on Marisa. These awards, more than most, were filled with ultra-sexy, barely there dresses worn by megastars who wanted to display all their assets to the absolute fullest. Marisa had left no doubt to anyone concerned that she did not want to go to this event looking like a little girl. Since Marisa was the up-and-coming star of the newest preteen television phenomenon, Marisa’s handlers were obsessive about

a squeaky-clean image for their protégée. Lauren understood their concern, given the fall of some of the previous bubblegum queens who had come before. Marisa, however, most certainly did not understand. In fact, she did everything in her power to thwart any and all efforts to make her appear young and innocent.

Her mother had brought her to *Deb Couture* and demanded a dress that demonstrated a clear awareness of high fashion but also an appropriate sense of modesty. Marisa had other ideas. The ensuing months had been little short of a bloodbath.

Now, Marisa smiled sweetly toward the camera. “I’m wearing *Deb Couture*.” She twisted and turned, showing off the dress to full effect. She spun with a little extra vigor in the direction that allowed the wrap to swing slightly open.

“You look absolutely adorable. Are you excited about your first awards show?”

There was no disguising the look of displeasure in Marisa’s eyes, in spite of the perfectly white, toothy smile she displayed for the camera. “I’m thrilled. I’m just so humbled to be here among so many great artists whose work I admire.”

“Yeah, right.” Chloe at least had the wherewithal to whisper under her breath this time.

Marisa moved down the walkway toward the next stop, and Renee Ross looked toward the camera. “The amazing twin-sister duo of the fashion world strikes gold once again. Elyse and Rose Debowesky demonstrate their amazing versatility, from Rihanna’s daring number to Marisa’s sweeter-than-sugar pop confection.”

“Woot! Woot! Did you hear that?” Chloe jumped up and pumped her fist. Lauren released the breath that she just now realized she’d been holding. “Too bad that reporter doesn’t

know who actually did all the work. The twin sisters are getting credit that should be pointed elsewhere.”

While there was, once again, more than a little truth in what Chloe was saying, the fashion world didn’t work that way, and everyone understood that fact. Someone like Lauren had to pay her dues, work hard, and pray that she would be given bigger and better chances along the way. “Chloe, I did not do everything.”

“Most of it, then. You did the sketch. You did the last-minute details. You are the one who came up with that silver net sash when the powers that be decided the dress was too clingy and sexy. That swath of metallic glimmer around her waist was just the right touch to make sure she still looked innocent, and the netted texture makes it look edgy at the same time.” Chloe looked toward her mother. “Lauren’s been putting in a massive amount of hours making sure this dress was perfect, and she was up all night last night working on last-minute details.”

In fact, Lauren had been up most of last night steaming out anything that even looked like it might wrinkle, adding one more sequin here or there, and double-checking the hem stitching. Knowing that Marisa did not like the direction her handlers had chosen, Lauren had gone out of her way to make her as happy as possible.

“Well done, Lauren.” Rhonda clapped her hands. “That dress is amazing. And to think that my heart-daughter was part of the process.” Rhonda Inglehart was indeed a “mother-of-the-heart” to Lauren, and Lauren was so thankful to have her.

A commercial for the latest and greatest nationwide calling plan filled the screen, and Chloe said, “Mom, did Lauren tell you that they’ve already asked her to get started designing Marisa’s dress for the next awards show?”

“No, she did not. Lauren, that is amazing.”

“Actually, I was the only one left in the entire process that Marisa would speak to by the time it was all said and done. They’re using me less because of my talent and more because I have managed to avoid offending Marisa.” Lauren shook her head, thinking back to some of the all-out screamfests she’d witnessed between Marisa and her team.

Lauren had managed to stay in Marisa’s good graces because she’d truly tried to help the teen star realize her own vision in a way that also stayed true to the aim of her handlers. The little things were what Marisa seemed to appreciate. Lauren could still remember her face when she’d shown her the little hidden pocket inside the sash. It was just the right size for the lucky penny Marisa carried with her everywhere. Marisa had hugged her and said, “I’m glad someone here actually cares what I think.” That moment was when all the work became worthwhile. All the sleepless nights. All the hours spent trying to get the exact right look to the dress. That little bit of appreciation had made it all bearable.

“Don’t be so modest,” Chloe told Lauren. “Her dress is beautiful, and you know it. That’s why you got the next job.”

“Exactly right.” Rhonda stood up and made for the small kitchen in the apartment. “Time to bring out the banquet?” She pulled open the refrigerator, wafting the smell of hot salsa, quiche lorraine, and meatballs across the counter and into the tiny living room.

The three women had prepared several platters of finger foods to munch on while they watched the awards show. Lauren and Chloe walked into the kitchen to help put everything out, but Rhonda shooed them away.

“I’ll get this. Why don’t the two of you do whatever else you need to do to get ready for your guests?” She set a platter on

the counter and swatted toward the girls. “Go on now, I’ve got it. I’ll just put these in the microwave.”

“Guests?” Lauren looked toward Chloe, eyebrows raised.

Chloe tapped her chin and stared just above Lauren’s head, as if in deep thought. “Oh, didn’t I mention it to you? Jasper’s coming over.” Jasper was Chloe’s fiancé, and he stopped by Chloe and Lauren’s apartment on his way home from work almost every night.

“Do we need to do something to get ready for Jasper?” Lauren looked at Rhonda, waiting for an explanation.

Rhonda’s eyes had grown large. She looked toward Chloe with an obvious SOS expression.

Chloe picked up a mini quiche. “Well, he might have also invited Cody, the new guy at his work, to come join us.” Her voice was as innocent as her actions were guilty. “Didn’t I mention it?”

“No. No, you didn’t mention it, as a matter of fact.” Lauren glared at her friend. “Chloe, you did not just set me up with a blind date again, especially on tonight of all nights, did you? You promised after the last time that you’d stop meddling in my love life . . . remember?”

Chloe shrugged. “It’s not a blind date. We just told him to come over and hang out with us, eat some food, and meet our soon-to-be-famous friend.” There was a knock at the front door, and Chloe moved toward it, still turned toward Lauren. “The two of you just had to meet. I knew it the first time I saw him.”

“Oh really? And how did you know that?”

“Come on, we needed a crowd here to celebrate your big night.”

“You could have warned me.”

“Oops.” Chloe smiled and shrugged, both hands extended.

“Must have slipped my mind.” Somehow, Chloe could pull off that kind of insincere apology and come across as more lovable than annoying. It was hard to fault a girl who faced the world with such hope and exuberance.

Lauren looked around at the small living room, which was tidy enough but could use a good vacuuming and a round with a duster, the kinds of things she would have done if she’d known they were having company that wasn’t “family.” She looked down at her pink V-neck T-shirt and jeans, which were fine, but again, it would have been nice to know there were going to be strangers about, even if it wasn’t a date.

Chloe led the two men into the living room while Rhonda arranged the platters on the Ikea coffee table. There was plenty of food, no doubt about that. At least they could just eat if the conversation got awkward.

Jasper came into Lauren’s view, followed by a tall, broad-shouldered guy. His hair was short and brown, and he had just a hint of stubble across his jaw.

Jasper introduced him. “Lauren, meet Cody. Cody, Lauren.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Cody had a slight Southern drawl—not twangy country boy, but every word seemed extra slow and drawn out, as if he should be out on the veranda drinking sweet tea. His faded blue T-shirt and well-worn jeans looked more laid-back preppy than sloppy and seemed to confirm his Southern-boy status. Nothing about him appeared to fit with the uptight Los Angeles real estate agency where Jasper—and presumably Cody—worked. Of course, Jasper didn’t seem to fit that mold, either.

“Nice to meet you, as well,” Lauren said, suddenly wishing she had bothered just a little more with her hair that morning.

Chloe gestured toward the coffee table, which was rapidly

filling with finger food under Rhonda's deft hands. "We're just planning to munch our way through the awards show, so eat whatever and whenever you like. The dress that Lauren designed has already made its way down the red carpet, but it will be on stage shortly."

"Your dress is presenting?" Cody's accent was charming.

Lauren laughed. "No. Marisa Remington is wearing a dress I did some work on. Somehow, Chloe has given that a bit more significance than it deserves."

"Lauren beat out over a thousand applicants for one of the three intern positions at *Deb Couture*. Then she was so good at what she does, she actually helped design Marisa's dress, and she was the one they had doing all the last-minute alterations."

Jasper looked toward Cody and shrugged. "I told you there might be a fair amount of girl talk."

"You saw one of the early pictures of the dress. It was beautiful, right? And that was before Lauren came up with the sash idea." Chloe folded her arms across her chest and waited for Jasper's response.

"It was beautiful, yeah"—he cast a nervous glance toward Chloe—"and . . . uh . . . that sash was a really nice touch."

Lauren rolled her eyes at him. "Like you even know what a sash is."

"Sure I do. It's a belt thingy. Kind of looks like a big ribbon or something."

Chloe giggled, then took Cody by the arm. "Let me tell you all about it." She began expounding in great detail the wonders of Lauren's dress.

"I'm going to kill her," Lauren whispered toward Jasper. "She didn't mention anything to me about you guys coming over."

Jasper leaned closer. "Don't be too mad. This one may be

mostly my fault. Cody's new in town, plus I just thought an evening of fashion-watching might be a little more tolerable if there was another male in the room." His face was pure innocence.

Lauren burst out laughing. "For your sake, I'm going to acknowledge that there is probably some truth to that, and I will allow her to live. This time. Next time, no promises."

"What's happening next time?" Chloe was looking at them, still with a firm grip on Cody's arm.

"Lauren's going to make a dress for me. With a sash and everything." Jasper spread both hands wide and gestured around his waist.

Everyone in the room burst into laughter. Chloe turned her attention back to Cody. "Did I mention that Lauren made my wedding gown? Not many people have their dresses made by a world-famous designer."

"Especially people on our budget. Good thing we have an inside connection—it seems my fiancée knows the designer personally." Jasper nudged Lauren.

"Someday, when she's world famous, we'll be able to tell everyone that my wedding dress was her very first one." Chloe let go of Cody's arm but didn't move away. "You'll come, right? To the wedding, I mean. It's just a small affair, a couple dozen people and nothing fancy, but we'd love it if you could make it."

Cody reached up to rub the back of his neck. "I don't . . . I mean, it sounds pretty intimate. I'm sure you don't want someone you've just met . . ."

"Of course we do. Please, we would consider it an honor if you'd come. Four weeks from yesterday in Mom and Dad's backyard. Nothing too fancy—even my designer dress has purposely been made low-key."

“Well, I . . . I mean . . . sure. If you’re sure.”

“Of course I am. Now, let’s eat.”

They all gathered around the table, small paper plates in hand, and began piling on the meatballs, mini quiches, and other dishes that Chloe, Rhonda, and Lauren had spent the afternoon preparing.

Cody sat on the couch beside Lauren. “I don’t know much about fashion, but I do know it is impressive that, as an intern, you were allowed to work on a dress for a big occasion like this. Good for you.”

Lauren felt her cheeks heat. “It’s mainly because they were so busy with the more established divas that no one had time for the newbie kid.”

“Mom, we’re needing one of your quotes here,” Chloe called across the room. “Lauren is being entirely too modest. Help me out a little.”

Rhonda squinted, nodded slowly, then said, “‘The secret of success in life is for a man to be ready for his opportunity when it comes.’ Benjamin Disraeli.”

“See. You had the opportunity, and you were ready for it. Now you’re having success because of it.” Chloe flipped her wavy blond hair over her shoulder in victory. “Quit belittling your achievement here.”

Lauren would throttle Chloe later. For now, she decided just to continue the conversation as if this interruption hadn’t happened. “My real interest is in fashion history, not the avant-garde stuff that’s on the carpet tonight. Marisa’s people wanted something sweeter, more old-fashioned, for lack of a better term, and no one else was particularly excited about doing it.”

“I like sweet and old-fashioned.” Cody looked straight into her eyes and smiled, causing the corners of his eyes to crinkle

just slightly, then he popped a mini quiche into his mouth, still grinning as he chewed.

More stars made their way up the red carpet, with Renee Ross oohing and ahing over each outfit. Lauren took a sip of Diet Coke and shook her head. “I’m glad I won’t be spending tomorrow anywhere near Marisa. She’s going to be livid over Renee’s *darling* and *adorable* adjectives for her dress.”

“I don’t get it. That’s what they asked for, right?” Jasper had leaned back against the couch, his arm across the back loosely, Chloe close by his side.

“It’s exactly what her mother, her manager, and her agent asked for. She, however”—Lauren made an exaggerated shudder—“well, let’s just say that she had other ideas.”

“A regular femme fatale, huh?” Cody leaned just a little closer to Lauren, bringing the full effect of his handsome grin into close-up view.

“So she would like to believe.” Lauren smiled back for just a moment, before turning her attention back to her plate, which was empty. She reached for a couple of strawberries.

On the screen, the lights went down in the auditorium and Taylor Swift opened the show with her newest single. Lauren put her plate on the coffee table and leaned forward. “Here we go. Marisa’s the first presenter.”

As the applause for Taylor Swift began to wind down, the voice-over announcer said, “To present the award for Best Female Video, please welcome Marisa Remington and Charles Baker, stars of the DTN Channel hit *Missy’s World*.”

The auditorium filled with applause once again as Marisa and Charles made their way to the podium. Marisa took a step, seemed to trip on the end of the silver sash, and suddenly, the wrapped portion of her dress pulled loose and fell open.

Wide open. As she was facing the camera. Directly. The screen filled with Marisa in her lacy black bra and bikini panties. She grabbed the loose sides of her dress and folded it closed. She looked toward Charles Baker and pulled one hand over her mouth, which was clearly open in shock. The entire room had gone silent. She finally pulled her hand away from her lips and began to fan her face. She said simply, “Oh my.”

The crowd remained quiet as Charles put an arm around her, pulled her close in a protective way, and leaned over and kissed the top of her head. He edged toward the microphone. “On the bright side, I have to say that you’ve got some assets I never suspected.” The crowd sort of laughed, still embarrassed for her, but they began to applaud in a show of support and solidarity.

Marisa gave a half smile. “Well, thanks, Charles. If I’m going to be embarrassed in front of the entire world, I’m glad to know that I meet your approval just the same.” Everyone laughed outright and then applauded all the more, until it became a full-on standing ovation. Marisa nodded an acknowledgment to the crowd, then whispered something to Charles Baker.

He stepped back toward the microphone, and they continued on to present the award, Marisa holding her dress closed with her left arm snugged tight against her middle.

Lauren had no idea who won. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. Her cell phone vibrated on the table. It was a text from her boss at *Deb Couture*.

You needn’t bother to show up tomorrow.

Or ever again.

“You know what? I’ve got a bit of a headache. I think I need to go lie down.” Numbly, Lauren walked toward the back of

the apartment before she remembered some semblance of her manners. She turned. “It was nice to have met you, Cody.”

She closed the door behind her and sank to her knees. She didn’t cry. She couldn’t manage a single coherent thought. She just knelt. And prayed—or as close as she could get to a prayer. “Help. Please help.”