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Star Shining Brightly



A NOVEL

Marcia Mickelson

Star Shining
Brightly



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Marcia Argueta Mickelson

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Dedication

To my husband, Nolan, and my sons, Omar, Diego, and Ruben. The four of you make me want to be a better person.



Acknowledgments

Thank you to everyone at Cedar Fort.

A big thanks goes to my husband, Nolan, who has supported me through my writing endeavors. Thank you for being a devoted husband and father. I think the reason I take pleasure in writing love stories is because I can think of no better emotion to feel in this life. That I owe to you. I love you.

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Mark drove through the security gate and down the long road that led to the back of the mansion. The colossal Cape Cod with its sleepy gabled roof and dormer windows on the third floor announced that he was stepping into a new world. A trim boxwood hedge surrounded a velvety green lawn, and camellia bushes and tea roses filled the planting beds alongside the brick terrace. On the other side of the garden, an Olympic-size swimming pool stretched toward the horizon. He had never been near a home of this dimension. Parking his Nissan outside the three-car garage, he then glared at the dented rear door he couldn't afford to fix.

He carried a box of books up the narrow stairs that led to the studio apartment over his new employer's garage. Working

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for a famous actress like Lauren Olsen would be a dramatic shift from clerking at the law firm. He'd worked as a clerk for Pittman and Jacobs since his freshman year at UCLA. He was now in his final year of law school, and his law advisor had warned him against working the long hours his job demanded. Mark couldn't afford to quit working, and was grateful to have found this job opportunity.

Charlie, Mark's home teaching companion, had been Lauren Olsen's chauffeur for several years. When Charlie had needed to cut his hours back in order to care for his sick wife, Lauren had agreed to Charlie's recommendation and had hired Mark. He hadn't met her yet, having completed the job interview and hiring process through her personal assistant, Kim. He'd been required to sign a confidentiality agreement, promising not to sell any of Lauren's personal information to the media. Kim had also given him the keys to the garage apartment.

He was quite satisfied with the arrangement. He would be working part-time in the evenings; his days would still be free for attending classes, and with living accommodations included, rent would no longer be a concern. Charlie had explained that Mark would have a lot of time to read or study while in the car when he waited for Ms. Olsen. With all that was required of him during his final year of law school, he would not have been able to work his thirty-hour schedule at the law firm. Having to work so many hours during his college and law school years had extended the time it took to earn his degree past the usual eight years. With ten years of school and a two-year mission, he would be over thirty-one by the time he began his career.

After accommodating some of his belongings and bringing up the rest of his suitcases, Mark readied himself for his first night of work. He looked at his watch, and it was almost time to meet Ms. Olsen up front. He grabbed his Advanced Criminal Law textbook and raced down the stairs to wait for her.

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Lauren took one last look in the full-length mirror, shrugging slightly. Not her best look, but it would have to do. Her blonde hair hung lightly on her shoulders. She applied a plum-colored shade of lipstick and enhanced her dark lashes with mascara. Her strapless black dress was a little shorter than she was comfortable with, just hanging below her upper thigh, but it was absolutely necessary tonight.

Julian would be at Tony's party, and she was not going to neglect the chance of letting him know what he was missing out on. It had been nearly two weeks since Julian broke up with her, and she was still hurting. Thankfully, John had agreed to escort her to the party. Although John was only a friend, he was by far the most handsome man she knew, and seeing her with him was bound to drive Julian crazy. She slipped on her Manolo Blahnik heels and went down the hallway.

She entered the upstairs family room where Danny and Sophie were eating popcorn out of a big bowl with Tara, who had been their nanny for nearly a year now. Lauren had spent the better part of the evening with them, sharing a pizza they had ordered and later bathing and dressing them. Now in their pajamas, with half an hour before bedtime, they were enjoying *Finding Nemo* for probably the twentieth time since they'd bought the DVD.

Lauren smiled and bent down to give each of them a kiss before she left for the night. "You guys be good and go to bed when Tara tells you to." They both nodded and agreed almost too quickly.

"Good night, Mommy. You really look pretty," Sophie said before stuffing a handful of popcorn in her mouth. The five-year-old looked like a younger version of Lauren—the same light complexion and blue eyes.

"Bye, Mom," echoed six-year-old Danny.

"Thanks for everything, Tara. I'll see you tomorrow. I'll pick them up from school. I should be done early."

"Okay. You have a good time. You really do look nice," Tara said.

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As she walked down the hallway to the stairs, Lauren thought about how blessed she was. Tara was a wonderful nanny who really loved Lauren's children. She was also a member of the Church, which made Lauren trust her all the more. Although it had been years since Lauren had gone to church, she made it a point to hire only members of the Church to work in her household. She had utilized the Church employment service in hiring Meredith, the housekeeper and cook; Fernando, the groundskeeper; and Charlie, her driver who had recently cut back his hours. Lauren felt secure having surrounded herself and her children with members of the Church whom she trusted.

In Hollywood, it was difficult to find people who could be trusted. Lauren had found that out the hard way. She had met her husband on a movie set. They had been costars, and it had been difficult to deny the chemistry between them. Lauren married Victor after only three months. Their marriage lasted a little over a year, which was not bad by Hollywood standards. In fact, their marriage would have probably lasted another year if she hadn't become pregnant with Danny. Victor had insisted she have an abortion; he hadn't wanted a baby to cramp their lifestyle or affect their careers. Lauren had abandoned many of the standards she had grown up with, but abortion was not something she would have ever considered. Even thinking about that now made her shudder. Danny was the best thing that had ever happened to her until Sophie came along. She couldn't imagine not having them in her life.

Victor had no desire to be a father and had never met his son. In fact, Lauren couldn't remember having seen him since the divorce except on film. After Victor, there had been many others. Then she married Trevor, who was Sophie's father and did a better job of keeping in touch than Victor ever did. Trevor visited Sophie on occasion and tried to maintain a relationship with his daughter, but the relationship between Lauren and him had never worked out. More recently, there was Julian, whom she had also met on a movie set. Although

he was a minor character in the movie she had starred in, they hit it off right away. It was only when Julian landed a few leading roles that he began thinking he was too good for Lauren. Their relationship was now over, but Lauren wanted to even the score a little with him first. Thankfully, her good friend, cover model John Prentiss had agreed to be her date that evening.

Lauren stepped out into the warm September night. The silver Mercedes was parked out in front, and Lauren could see the faint shadow of a man in the driver's seat. She figured it was the new driver, Mark, but became annoyed when he remained inside the car. Hadn't Charlie told him he was supposed to open the door for her? Waiting only a moment before she approached the car, Lauren noticed the man hurriedly exiting the car and coming around to her side.

"I'm sorry," he said, opening the door for her. "I was distracted. I didn't see you come out."

Lauren gave him a cursory glance and entered the car, sitting back against the smooth leather interior. He came around to the driver's side and, sitting behind the wheel, he tossed a book he had obviously been reading over to the passenger side.

He turned around to face Lauren. "It's nice to meet you, Ms. Olsen. I'm Mark. Where should I take you this evening?"

"I'm picking up a friend at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes, ma'am," Mark said, starting the car. He drove down the long driveway that led to the front gate and Stone Canyon Road.

"Don't call me ma'am. You can call me Lauren. All the staff does."

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, Lauren."

Silence encompassed the car for the next few minutes as Mark drove to the appointed destination. Lauren's cell phone rang and she answered with an impatient, "What?

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“Hon, it’s me. I’m sorry, but I won’t be making it tonight.”
From the sound of John’s voice, it was obvious he had been using.

“You’re wasted! How could you do this to me?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Tonight of all nights. I needed you, John. What am I supposed to do now? One night—you couldn’t go one night without getting wasted?”

“I thought I’d be okay, but there is no way I can make it out the door.”

Lauren held the phone tightly in her hand, wanting to throw it against the window. “Fine, just take care of yourself. You owe me, John. You owe me big.”

“Sorry, hon,” he slurred as he hung up the phone.

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Would you stop the car, please?”

Mark pulled the car over as instructed. She sat quietly for a minute, thinking about what to do. She couldn’t miss the party; Julian would think it was because she couldn’t face him. Lauren was not about to let him win another battle, but she couldn’t show up by herself. That would be worse. She spontaneously got out of the car and opened the front door, sliding in next to Mark.

“May I ask you a huge favor?”

Mark furrowed his brow, looking at her curiously. “What is it?”

“My date just canceled on me and I cannot show up to this party by myself. I know it’s asking a lot, but would you please just go in with me? We don’t have to stay long, maybe an hour—I don’t know—but not long. Please, just say yes.”

“I guess I can do that, but what kind of party is it?”

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s above board. I mean, there will be people drinking, but no drugs or anything bad like that.”

Mark looked at her dubiously. “I don’t know.”

“Please.”

“I guess so,” he said, seeming like he still wasn’t sure about the idea.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” Lauren said, realizing for the first time that Mark was very handsome himself. With sandy brown hair, a freshly shaved face, green eyes, and tall trim body, Mark was just the man to produce a little jealousy on Julian’s face. She gave him the address of the party and as they drove, she went over in her mind how she wanted the evening to go.

As they approached the club where Tony was throwing his latest party, Lauren started getting nervous. What if everyone saw right through her façade? She winced at Mark’s choice of wardrobe, but figured black dress pants and a crisp white shirt could pass. “Just pull up to the valet. Here’s some money to tip him,” she said, stuffing several twenties into his shirt pocket.

Mark pulled the car in front of the club and a valet attendant quickly opened his door. After climbing out, he came around and opened Lauren’s door. She took his arm and held her chin up, smiling broadly for the paparazzi that almost always surrounded any of Tony’s parties. As they walked in, loud music blared from seemingly every direction. She could tell that Mark was completely out of his element and felt a little bad for having dragged him into the situation. They mingled with several people that Lauren knew and she introduced Mark as a friend.

At the bar, Lauren chose a glass of Merlot, and asked Mark if he wanted a drink.

“I don’t drink. I think you know that,” he said.

“They serve nonalcoholic stuff too. They have root beer or Sprite, whatever you want.”

Mark shook his head. “I guess I’ll have a Sprite.”

They sipped on their drinks in silence for a few minutes as Lauren studied the crowds, looking for Julian. She finally spotted him seated at a small table near the back. It irked her to notice that he looked better than ever. His dark locks framed his handsome tanned face, bringing out his best features: the strong jaw, deep-set brown eyes, and that perfect nose are what had first attracted Lauren.

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Seated with him was a voluptuous blonde wearing the skimpiest dress Lauren had ever seen—and she had seen skimpy many times before. Julian and the blonde looked very cozy at their table and Lauren winced at the thought of him with the woman, who looked ten years younger than Lauren herself. When she saw Julian and the blonde stand up to walk toward the dance floor, Lauren talked Mark into walking in their direction. Pretending she hadn't noticed Julian, Lauren walked right past him until he reached for her arm, stopping her in midstep.

“Hi, Lauren. I haven't seen you around lately.”

“Oh, well. I've been rather busy. How are you?”

Julian gave her one of his famous smiles. “Very good,” he said, putting his arm around the blonde woman. “This is Brittany.”

Lauren forced a fake smile. “Nice to meet you. And this is Mark,” she said, taking his arm.

Julian raised an eyebrow. “Good to meet you,” he said, extending a hand.

Mark took his hand. “You too.”

“It was good to see you again, Lauren,” Julian said, smiling as he led Brittany away.

Lauren waved as they walked past her. Inside, she felt like screaming. Julian was so polite, devoid of any emotion. Did it not hurt him in the least to see her with someone else? Did he not care for her at all? Could he move on that easily? She drank the rest of her wine with one gulp and angrily walked away toward a small table adjacent to the dance floor. Mark followed her and sat down next to her. For the next twenty minutes, Lauren watched as Julian and Brittany danced. It made her sick to watch him. How could she have ever cared for such a vacuous, self-centered man? She could feel Mark's eyes on her and turned toward him.

“So, who is that man?”

“My ex-boyfriend.”

“Ah, and I take it that's his new girlfriend?”

Lauren nodded.

Mark turned toward Julian and Brittany, studying them for a moment. “What is she wearing? Do all women in Hollywood dress like that?”

Lauren turned to look at Brittany and then looked down at the dress she herself was wearing. “Some do.”

Lauren greeted a few friends and acquaintances she had met on various film sets or other events. Several people stopped by the table to talk to her. She introduced Mark as a friend and tried to keep the conversation light and impersonal.

A former costar, Ryan Trenton, and his date stopped by to talk for a few minutes and then continued toward the dance floor.

Mark’s eyes widened after they left. “Wow, wasn’t he in that big action film that came out this summer?”

“Yeah, *Flames of Thunder*.”

The excitement in Mark’s eyes dimmed as he thought for a moment. “I thought I saw an interview with him. Isn’t he married?”

Lauren nodded. “He is.”

“But that wasn’t his wife, was it?”

“No.”

“So, is he divorced now?”

“No.”

Mark shook his head. “So, is that how it is in Hollywood?”

“Sometimes, not always,” Lauren said, turning her head away from him. He did the same, probably scanning the party to find some other fault with her Hollywood lifestyle. Lauren’s eyes followed Julian and Brittany as they took a break from dancing and returned to their table and drinks.

Seated at the small table, Lauren caught a glimpse of Julian with his arm around Brittany. He gave Lauren an amused grin, which instantly angered her. She wondered if Julian had figured everything out about Mark. How could he? Lauren scooted herself a little closer to Mark who was quietly sipping his Sprite. Before she could think twice about it, she slid her

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hand behind his neck and pulled his face close to hers.

“Please don’t be mad,” she whispered as she reached her lips to his and kissed him. After only an instant, they both pulled away. “I’m sorry.”

“Why did you do that?” he asked.

“I guess that was part of the big favor I was asking you for. Julian was watching and I’m trying to make him jealous. I’m really sorry. I know I’m using you and I definitely crossed the line between employer and employee, and it will never happen again. I just couldn’t let the opportunity pass. He was staring right at us.”

“I think I’d like to go now if that’s okay.”

“We can leave now if you want to. I think I got the reaction I wanted.”

Mark turned to look at where Julian sat with Brittany. “I think you’re right,” he said, noticing the anger in Julian’s eyes.

They stood to leave and walked past Julian’s table. After the valet pulled the Mercedes around, Mark paid the valet attendant and they were on their way home. He silently handed the change back to her.

“No, you keep that in exchange for doing me such a huge favor.”

“Oh, no. You don’t pay people for doing you a favor. Besides, if you pay me for having kissed you then what does that look like?”

“I guess you’re right,” she said taking the money and placing it back in her Prada handbag.

Lauren Olsen, a popular actress who has long since abandoned the beliefs and standards of her Mormon upbringing, is on the verge of winning an Academy Award. Her coveted Hollywood career includes a mansion, several servants, and all the accolades that come with stardom. It also includes two failed marriages and a drinking problem, which prompt Lauren to take a close look at her life.

Lauren's new chauffeur, Mark Ellege, considers Lauren an indulgent, worldly woman. However, as he spends time with her, he begins to see her more as a loving single mother of two children than as a big Hollywood star.

Aided by her children's gentle push, Lauren looks to Mark for an opportunity to reinvent her life and forge a path back to the Church. First, however, she must sacrifice her lifestyle and the Hollywood clout that comes with an Oscar. Mark, meanwhile, must decide whether his affection for Lauren and her children is strong enough to overcome his judgments about her past.

Star Shining Brightly is a moving tale about a woman who finds an unlikely love when she chooses the redemption that leads to eternal happiness.

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