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QUEENS



Victoria Marshal

Bookended By

Beauty Queens

Victoria Marshal



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ISBN: 978-0-9837137-2-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012932454

Cover Designs by Jeff

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For my Grandma G. who is as feisty
as Angie's.

For my sister Jennifer the ultimate
Beauty Queen inside and out

I love you both.

Chapter One

“I was book-ended by beauty queens; one older sister and one younger. I, on the other hand, had a lazy eye and cowlicks which made my hair stick out in a corona all over my head. So, I buried myself in books. I got smarter, and they got prettier. High school was a painful experience. They got crowned, and I got zits.”

Angie Palmer ran her hands over the leather arms of the easy chair. The texture of the leather tickled her palms.

“I can see where that would give you a fuck you attitude. Forgive my bluntness.”

Pete had been her therapist for two months. Angie’s comfort level with him had finally reached the point where Pete no longer needed to pry information from her.

“If you weren’t blunt, I wouldn’t pay you a hundred and fifty dollars an hour. Sorry, I mean fifty-minutes.”

“If I charged you less you wouldn’t respect me.”

“Yeah and I’d pay you more if you could prescribe Prozac.”

“You don’t need Prozac or any other meds.” He scratched at a spot over his left eyebrow. “I shouldn’t even be treating you, it’s unethical.”

“Give me a break Pete, it was one date. We weren’t married. I’ll pay you for that night if you want me to.” Angie patted him on the knee. “You’re such a good listener.”

“I lose more dates that way.” He leaned back in his chair and gave a half smile, more of a grimace. “We need to end.”

Angie retrieved her checkbook from her purse, scrawled out a check, and handed it to him. Pete had a hesitant way of receiving a check, as if you were handing him a dirty condom instead of filthy lucre. Angie believed that on one of her visits he might refuse payment all together.

Maybe that’s why things between them hadn’t clicked on their fateful date. Pete was too reserved and Angie found herself inexplicably drawn to bold men. Too bad half of the bold men she dated also turned out to be complete sociopaths.

“Next week?” He said.

“Same bat time, same bat channel.” Angie slung her book bag over her shoulder. The weight of the bag pulled down on her shoulder so hard she needed to bend to the other side to remain standing. Eventually she’d need to hire a Sherpa to get her work home at night.

“Angie, you don’t need a therapist. What you need is a girlfriend. You know like other women have. You have to leave your hours more often. Go shopping, share secrets, or what have you.”

Angie shivered her body all over. “That is the worst prescription any doctor has ever given me.”

She pushed past him toward the door to his waiting area. “I don’t do girlfriends, remember? I have two sisters. That’s enough trauma for one life.”

“Friends are different from sisters. Friends accept you and allow you a space to be open and honest, which you struggle with when it comes to your sisters.” He leaned against the doorjamb and rubbed at the corner of his eyes.

“You know sisters and friends differ from experience?”

That was one of the things Angie remembered from their date, Pete had no siblings. Each time she found out that someone was an only child she felt a pang of envy.

“Don’t side step the issue.”

“The only thing I’m side stepping is this shabby coffee table.” She pointed to a tattered table that held copies of Newsweek and People magazine. “Why are there never any other patients in the waiting area? Are you that bad of a therapist?”

Pete pursed his lips and then smiled. “No, you’re always my last patient of the day. After one of our sessions, I need a break, so I can get a drink.”

Angie tugged open the door. A faint chime sounded in Pete’s office. “A drink. Pete, that is the best prescription any doctor has ever given me.”

Angie turned the key in the lock, and then hip checked the door to release it from the sticky frame. She stumbled into the narrow entryway and dropped her keys into the bowl on the entry table. The door slammed shut when Angie leaned against it. She closed her eyes, grateful to be home. Home was her bliss. At

the end of every day, Angie raced to get home even a few minutes earlier than usual.

She'd been lucky to get this three-bedroom brownstone in Brooklyn. Normally you had to read months of obituaries to score a place like this. She got lucky when the senior editor at Maverick Books had retired, and decided to move to Maine with his wife to open a Bed and Breakfast. Gabe had been Angie's mentor. He knew she'd loved the place, and wanted to invest in property.

He'd made her a fair deal, and with the second floor converted into a rental unit a few years ago to help offset the mortgage, she couldn't pass up the opportunity to be a genuine homeowner. At the moment, the rental stood empty and had for the last two months, since her renter had followed her musician boyfriend to California, in a midnight moving company maneuver. The damage deposit had covered the first month of vacancy. If she didn't find another renter soon, she'd have to dip into savings to cover the monthly payments.

Angie dead-bolted the door, racked the chain, and then dropped her bag on the floor.

Relief! She arched her back to ease the ache that came from carrying the enormous bag, and then headed down the hall to the kitchen, intent of fulfilling Pete's drink prescription posthaste.

Angie punched play on her answering machine as she breezed past it in the hallway.

"You have one new message."

Angie brightened. *See, I have friends.*

"Hi Ang, it's your sister." Jessica's saccharine voice chirped from the machine.

Angie groaned and thumped her head on the freezer door twice.

"I need you to call me. We're having a family meeting about a little—" Jess hesitated. "Issue. Just call me, okay. Thanks. Bye."

Oh shit. What fresh hell is this?

The last little issue that called for a family meeting had been when her parents decided to sell their childhood home. Jessica and Shay had gone nuclear at the thought. During that meeting, Angie sat mute and listened to her sister's tearful pleas to their Mom and Dad not to throw away their cherished childhood memories.

When Angie's turn to speak came, she'd agreed with her parent's decision to sell the house. After all, it was an enormous suburban split-level that was made for a family and now that it was just the two of them all the extra rooms didn't make much sense. Jessica and Shay hadn't spoken to her much since then.

Angie tugged open the fridge and perused the wine list.

"To hell with it." She opened the freezer and pulled out a bottle of Belvedere Vodka. "If I have to call Jess, I might as well be numb."

Maybe I should get a friend. Someone to complain to about my sisters, besides Pete. Then again maybe I should light my hair on fire. That might be fun too.

Next to the bottle of vodka was one last Lean Cuisine frozen dinner. Tomorrow she'd either have to eat out, order in, or go grocery shopping. She grabbed the meal, tore off the end, dumped the little black tray into the microwave, and switched it on without poking

vent-holes in the protective cover. Then she dumped a handful of ice into a martini-glass. When the glass was sufficiently chilled, she poured the vodka over four green olives. Jess could wait until after dinner and at least two drinks.

The microwave beeped. Angie draped a dishtowel over her forearm and balanced the hot tray on top. She held her martini glass between her index and middle finger and then retrieved her bag from the entry. Taking more than one trip to bring everything into the living room was out of the question. She'd learned the art of balancing full trays years ago when she worked as a waitress, and now she was a one trip wonder.

Angie sprawled out on the couch. The plan for the evening was to get through some of the manuscripts that were threatening to cover the last bit of free space in her office. Of course, that was the plan every night, but she could usually find something to distract her from her good intentions.

The first fork-full of ginger chicken (a perennial favorite) hadn't even grazed her lips when the phone rang.

"Damn, I'm popular for having no friends." She lifted the living room extension from its cradle and pressed it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Where have you been?" Jess decided to forgo the pleasantries. "I tried your office, and they said you left hours ago, then I left a message on your cell, and then at your house, and you weren't anywhere."

Leave it to Jess to believe that if she couldn't get in touch with you, you weren't anywhere. Angie was convinced that when Jessica closed her eyes the rest of the world didn't exist.

"I had an appointment after work today, Jess." Angie located her cell phone in her purse. Sure enough, the display showed one missed call. She turned the ringer volume to medium high.

"Well, you should have taken my call, your hair can wait." Jess gave an exaggerated sigh. "We have a family crisis."

Leave it to Jess to assume the appointment would be beauty related.

"What's the crisis?" Angie shoveled a fork full of chicken into her mouth.

"I'll tell you about it at the meeting tomorrow. Be at my place by five-thirty."

"I usually don't leave work until after five-thirty, Jess."

"Make time, Ang."

Angie bristled. Jessica knew how much Angie hated to have her name abbreviated, and when she added the perfect derisive tone, Jess knew she could get under Angie's skin.

"We're family," Jess said. "We're all you have."

A sinking feeling landed in the pit of her stomach at the thought that her sisters were all she had in this lonely world. She shuttered as a chill went up her spine. The thought was shunted to the back of her mind.

"Aren't Mom and Dad still in Africa?"

"Yes."

"So by family meeting you mean?" Angie asked in a practiced, even tone.

"You, me, and Shay."

"Of course, the big three of the family." Angie took a swig of vodka.

“Don’t be snide, Angie. It’s not like your job is saving the world. Sneak out early, and be at my house tomorrow at five-thirty.” Jess hung up without waiting for an acknowledgement.

In order to get across town to Jessica’s house on time, Angie would need to leave work at least an hour early, which would put her a day behind at work. Work that was already weeks behind.

Angie wished, and not for the first time, that her parents were in town. They provided a buffer between her and the twin tiaras. Dad was on her side at least. Mom leaned toward her sisters.

Dad had joined *Doctor’s Without Borders* after retirement and Mom went with him. Angie was proud of the work they were doing. When they left Angie felt their absence like having a limb removed.

Even after months without them, she still felt the urge to phone her parents or stop by to see how they were. Instead, she’d had to settle for the infrequent satellite phone calls from wherever her parents were currently deployed. Dad remained cagy about their location because he didn’t want his girls to worry. His vagueness only made Angie worry more.

Angie would have to suck it up and deal with her sisters alone, whatever the crisis.

Author Notes

Thank you to my husband for always having my back.

Thank you to my children mommy loves you with all my heart.

Thank you to my parents. It couldn't have been easy raising me. I hope I'm half the parent you two were to me. I love you both so much.

Thank you to my Grandmothers for being such strong role models.

Thank you to my sister who believed in this book more than I did at times. Thank you for being my cheerleader, my advocate, and my biggest fan. You are the Ultimate Beauty Queen.

For my Queens and Honorary Queens: Nancy, Catherine, Joanna, Christine, Brenda, Missy, Tony, Jim, Tony, Brian, and Mark.

Thank you to you, dear reader! I am so grateful that you picked Bookended By Beauty Queens to help you pass some time.

THANK YOU!

About the Author

Victoria Marshal lives in northern Minnesota with her husband and children. Bookended By Beauty Queens is her first book.

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