

COLLATERAL STARDUST
True Tales of Love and Lust
With the Princes and Frogs of Hollywood
By Nikki Nash

Prologue

“Nash. Looking good,” Mitch said. Which meant I looked like crap. Maybe he’d never seen me without makeup. My hair was dark and parted in the middle. I was wearing platform shoes, corduroy pants, and a flowered polyester shirt. He had a mustache, feathered blond hair, and was wearing bellbottoms. We looked like we were going to a 1970s costume party. Except there was no party. And these weren’t costumes.

It was 1974.

We were at the Old World Restaurant in Beverly Hills, where Mitch was the manager and I was the hostess.

“Shut up. I think I broke my finger.” I’d injured my finger in a Judo class at the Y but that didn’t stop me from showing up to work. He handed me the cash drawer for the evening.

It was a warm Sunday evening in April. I was nineteen. People were talking about The Exorcist and wondering about Patty Hearst—a new member of the Symbionese Liberation Front who called herself Tania. Bennie and the Jets was the #1 song that spring, but what made me swoon was Joni Mitchell’s Help Me. I was always falling in love.

Although not with Mitch because he was a doofus.

The restaurant was usually slow on Sunday evenings, which was good, as I hadn't had a chance to shower or wash my hair or put on makeup at the Y due to the whole finger-injury thing. And I'd realized that, even though my shirt was clean, the armpits smelled like cilantro. Maybe something to do with the synthetic fabric holding old perspiration. Thinking about it just made me sweat more and I was sure Mitch would soon ask: "What's that smell?"

After leaving Mitch at the front to finish his paperwork, I went back to the bathroom where I pulled my hair back in a ponytail—awkwardly avoiding the use of my finger. I tried to mitigate the perspiration damage with paper towels and after surrendering to the cilantro smell, I went to the prep station and got a plastic glass used to serve water and filled it mostly with ice, stuck my index finger in, held the cup using my other fingers like a claw, and went up front to the register. I walked around like that for a while, seating a few people. No one asked me about the glass I was carrying around with one finger submerged. It became second nature and I forgot about it.

When it slowed down I went to the bathroom with my glass, I re-slicked back my hair into a ponytail, pinched my cheeks like someone from the 1920s, and came out of the bathroom. Mitch had gotten himself a coffee shake and Randy, one of the night waiters, was getting tea for a customer. He stepped in beside me as we walked.

"Your boyfriend's up front," he said.

I was about to blurt out "Peter's here?" Peter had been a waiter at the Old World and when our shifts coincided, we made out in his yellow VW. But then he quit. I realized Mitch didn't know about him so it probably wasn't Peter.

“George?” I asked. All the waiters thought George was a mobster as he worked in greyhound racing or something. He had a crush on me—it seemed strictly platonic if it is possible to have a platonic crush—so he wouldn’t care what I looked like. George was always nice to me.

Mitch and I walked to the front of the restaurant. I grabbed a menu with my left hand, holding the glass in my right, finger submerged, and turned to the table in the corner.

And there was Warren Beatty.

I froze.

Dammit! Why tonight?

He was reading a newspaper he’d folded into a smaller rectangle as if he was focused on something important. Or maybe he was tidy and didn’t like a lot of paper flapping around. Or maybe he wanted people to see his face. I sure wanted to see his face. He was beautiful.

Trying to will myself into invisibility, I placed the menu on the table. As quietly as I could.

“Your waiter will be right with you,” I said blandly.

He looked up. “Thank you.” That voice. I was hearing that voice fifteen inches away from my face. More like my torso as I was standing and he was sitting. But he was expelling sounds and molecules in my direction and they warmed me. Until I remembered I looked like crap.

He smiled. I half-smiled and turned to walk away. My brain was misfiring all over the place: that’s him, I’m holding this stupid glass, he talked to me, what was he reading

in the paper? What had I said to him? And why now? After six years of having one obsession—to know Warren Beatty—it had to be tonight?

I would go upstairs and hide. I'd let Mitch handle things.

This was NOT the way I wanted to meet Warren Beatty. This had not been Step One of my plan: dirty hair, no makeup, smelly armpits. I prayed he had already forgotten me. I almost made it out of the front room and out of his sight.

“Excuse me, Miss?” That voice shivered down my back.

Could I just keep walking?

Let me just keep walking.

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