

## PORTRAIT OF A LADY

The evening gala began at 7 P.M. Julianne stood beneath the hand-carved, Gothic arch and relished the peaceful prelude before the quiet storm. Many moments had passed since first she arrived, cold and unwilling to move. Julianne drifted in dreaming. The shadows of dusk stretched and faded into evening silhouettes. At an unfortunate 8:15, she entered the grand room, tardy and dismayed. Quietly, her presence commanded the astute attention of those who could appreciate or reject authentic beauty.

Briefly, Julianne surveyed the amiable atmosphere of women pretending not to see her and discreet glances of their attached escorts. Between dark eyebrows and high cheek bones, her vibrant, violet eyes peered cautiously. Supple lips and a rosy-rouge, elegant hue complimented the natural charm of her lovely, flawless face. Wavy, raven-red locks of hair fell evenly from Julianne's soft, bare shoulders.

With a graceful sweep of her index finger, she brushed back stray, curly strands. Nervously, Julianne strummed slender, manicured fingers on a small, shimmering purse. Anxiously, she scanned the room searching for her husband. Julianne did not see him. Panicked and frustrated, she felt beads of perspiration begin to crack the light foundation of her pale, porcelain skin. She decided to descend into the lions' den of dainty denizens and surly suitors.

Julianne's long legs carried her down the splendid, ornate staircase while occasionally revealing the pointed toe of finely designed high heels. She wore a glittering, teal evening gown with an ice-gray bodice, beaded satin sash and bow. Fire-red eyes

flickered from an emerald-winged dragonfly brooch that clung clumsily to the plush fur of her mink stole. On this surreal night, Julianne chose to wear an exquisite diamond necklace. The gift, commissioned by her often absent and neglectful husband, seemed an oddly appropriate accessory.

Julianne's curved hips swayed as she continued, conscious of the eyes upon her but only contemplating the wrath of tardiness. The silk train of her gown flowed in an effortless cascade down the marble steps. Her gliding grace recalled a sailing vessel on a cool day. She moved like a water dancer among the winding weeds and jagged edges of pretentious partygoers. The rainbow light of her waterfall dispersed evenly in the pond of prickly people. The scent of her sweet perfume lingered like whisking wind in the meandering mist.

The prudish peons stared and the boorish bats balked as Julianne slipped by their criticism and scrutiny. She smiled, politely passing her well-dressed, well-coifed observers. There were no familiar faces. The enviable were moved, including those resisting the ethereal essence of her touch. Julianne nodded and issued parting glances to distinguished gentlemen and courteous couples, careful to avoid convenient conversation.

Julianne spotted her husband, eyes bull red and flushed face frowning. Indignant, he raised his eyebrows and scowled when she sat at the table. Angered and inebriated several drinks ago, the burly bully quickly raised his large, firm hand. Julianne shuddered and recoiled. He thought of his image in society and chose to make a gesture

to the waiter. Her eyes glazed as tears swelled but did not fall. Julianne regained her composure as she sipped champagne. Tonight would be different, no more tears